

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP, Secretary of State for Education  
Department for Education  
Sanctuary Buildings  
20 Great Smith Street  
Westminster  
SW1P 3BT

Dear Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP,

We are writing to you publicly because we are concerned about how the situation surrounding the pandemic has exacerbated the existing barriers to literacy achievement for the most disadvantaged young people. We know that you share this concern and welcome the appointment of the Education Recovery Commissioner and the financial commitment to address learning loss.

However, we should guard against the catch-up agenda being driven by the need for schools to 'get children through' external assessments. Teaching practice heavily focused on assessment outcomes that does not recognise the value of a wider literary experience, language development and the importance of communication is especially troubling, given the gap in literacy achievement of disadvantaged groups.

**To ensure that we are delivering a fair education for all we are calling for long term, sustained funding for resources, interventions and experiences for all children and young people, helping them to build the key literacy and comprehension skills to thrive in school and throughout their lives.**

Our collective work and a well evidenced body of research shows that literacy skills are so much more than the tools of decoding and transcribing. These are important, but they do not, by themselves, enable children to take advantage of these skills to enhance their knowledge, prosperity and cultural capital. To achieve this, a more holistic approach is needed.

Covid-19 has given us the opportunity to rethink what we are doing. Now is the time to enrich the English curriculum and to ensure that schools have the freedom to build programmes of learning that are based on the core needs of their pupils, backed by a robust and diverse evidence base.

The Fair Education Alliance is a coalition of approximately 200 of the UK's leading organisations from business, education and the third sector. These organisations have come together to create a fair and equitable education system, ending the persistent achievement gap between young people from the poorest communities and their wealthier peers.

**We believe that it is key that all children have access to the best literacy provision as part of the Government's levelling-up strategy. We have come together to recommend the following:**

- **All young people need to have access to the broadest English curriculum**

We want to see an emphasis on the importance of a rich literacy curriculum from the Government and Ofsted, as well as a guarantee that the more easily assessed skills such as decoding, transcribing and written comprehension will not be the only place that catch-up funding is directed. A collaboration between literacy charities, writers, publishers, cultural organisations, schools, and government will ensure that England's literacy provision is world leading.

- **The government should incentivise schools to reinstate cultural experiences and provide the necessary support and guidance to embed this into their curriculum**

Although we recognise the current difficulties, rich literary knowledge comes from a range of experiences and cultural opportunities. Studying the work of and working directly with the creators of our literary heritage and reading for pleasure cannot be underestimated. Schools must be supported and incentivised to enable these experiences in a safe and appropriate way for the current context.

- **We are calling for investment in professional development for teachers to ensure they are equipped to meet the needs of all pupils**

Investment needs to be made in the ongoing professional development of educators not just now, but for the long-term. Developing professional knowledge must be prioritised as a key resource to support educators to meet the needs of all young people, helping them to 'catch up' both in terms of functional skills and also the broader cultural and creative experiences they have missed out on during the time of the pandemic.

**Focussing on these three areas will dramatically improve not only the academic outcomes of young people, but also their overall wellbeing and ability to effectively share their thoughts, intellect, and creativity with the world in ways in which people will listen.**

We look forward to hearing from you, and we would be delighted to talk to you, your Ministers, and your officials about this further if this would be helpful.

Yours sincerely,

Louise Johns-Shepherd, Chief Executive, Centre for Literacy in Primary Education

Antonia Byatt, Chief Executive, First Story

Christopher Rossiter, Chief Executive, Driver Youth Trust

Sam Butters and Gina Cicerone, Co-CEO's, The Fair Education Alliance

Professor Dame Alison Peacock, Chief Executive, Chartered College of Teaching

Jonathan Douglas, Director, National Literacy Trust

Diana Gerald, Chief Executive, BookTrust





FIRST STORY



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