Secretary of State
Department for Education

31 August 2021

Dear Secretary of State,

A proposal for education recovery

As you know the pandemic has had a profound impact on schools and colleges and the lives of pupils. Two lengthy periods of closure have left many students behind where they should be. We welcome the £3 billion the Government has committed over the past two years, particularly for tuition and teacher professional development, but as you have said yourself, this won't be enough to deal with the scale of the challenge left by Covid.

We know that public finances are squeezed but choosing not to invest in the future of young people, at this crucial moment, will only lead to greater costs down the line. We cannot afford a lower skilled economy. Nor can we afford the cost of ever worsening mental health challenges or the social costs of school dropout.

There is a growing evidence base showing that the problem of "learning loss" is concentrated amongst those disadvantaged families who were already most at risk and in particular in those parts of the country that the Government is most keen to "level up". Spreading limited resources too thinly will not work, so in the attached note, we set out a proposal for an additional £5.8 bn spending over the next three years that closely targets these most affected groups. It is important that nurseries, schools and colleges have flexibility over how to use this resource, as they know their students best, but also that they have regard to the best available evidence from the EEF, and that they are held accountable for closing the gaps that have grown due to Covid.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these proposals with you and Treasury Colleagues over the coming weeks. We see them as the minimum required to avoid serious long-term damage,

Yours sincerely,

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A proposal for education recovery

Introduction

The pandemic has caused a level of disruption to English schools and colleges unparalleled since the introduction of mass education. The average 2-4 months of learning loss caused by the first lockdown reduced somewhat during the Autumn term but the second school closure in January seems to have seen it go back to this level.

Moreover, the average hides a very significant gap between rich and poor and North vs South. While it is likely that wealthier pupils will catch up without much additional support, we do not believe the same can be said for their more disadvantaged peers. Nor is this limited to academic impact. We are seeing a crisis in the children's mental health system that was already struggling before the pandemic. Bluntly, many students will not fully recover from the effects of the pandemic without considerable support.

The Department for Education's own findings on learning loss make clear there has been an impact on young people[1]. Studies from elsewhere in the world confirm this and make clear that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have experienced the biggest losses.[2]

We are proposing a £5.8bn package over three years as a starting point on the road to recovery. For early years, schools, and post-16 institutions we propose additional payments tightly targeted on those who need it most. We also propose a significant investment in mental health support teams, above and beyond current plans. This is not an exhaustive package, and we would welcome, for instance, additional support around extracurricular activities, but we think it is the minimum required to divert serious negative consequences.

We are also recommending a series of measures to ensure adequate monitoring of potential problems that we fear may emerge, particularly around young people attending university following two years of disrupted schooling, and a potential increase in permanent dropout from education.

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[1] Department for Education, (2020a), *Understanding Progress in the 2020/21 Academic Year: Complete findings from the Autumn term*; Department for Education (2020b), *Understanding Progress in the 2020/2021 Academic Year: Initial Findings from the spring term*.

[2] Engzell, P., Frey, A., & Verhagen, M. D. (2020). Learning Loss Due to School Closures During the COVID-19 Pandemic. https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/ve4z7; Maldonado, Joana & De Witte, Kristof. (2020). The effect of school closures on standardised student test outcomes. British Educational Research Journal. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3754.

Funding recommendations	Annual cost per annum
Increase in hours for disadvantaged two-year olds	£150m
Pilot for better funded nurseries in disadvantaged areas	£30m
"Catch-up" Premium for persistently disadvantaged students	£1.2bn
A post-16 Premium (via doubling low prior attainment block)	£300m
National coverage from mental health support teams	£250m
Total	**£1.930bn**
	Total for 3 years:
	£5.790bn

Other Recommendations:

- Unique Pupil Numbers to be extended to early years to allow for better research

- HE Institutions to provide plans to support young people with learning loss

- Local Authorities to monitor persistent absence and given additional support as required

Additional funding for those who need it most

The pandemic has hit the most disadvantaged students the hardest. During periods of school and college closure they were less likely to have access to the technology to support home learning; less likely to have quiet space needed for study; and more likely to have parents working in jobs outside the home. As noted above, the emerging evidence strongly indicates that the scale of learning loss is greater for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

While the education sector does need additional resource to help young people recover learning loss, across the board funding increases are expensive, and at a time when national coffers are depleted, risk being spread too thinly. We propose that additional Covid recovery funding be tightly targeted to those who need it the most at each stage of the education system.

1. Early Years

For the youngest age groups, we propose focusing on improving the offer to disadvantaged two-year olds. Through the pandemic we have seen a substantial drop in take-up amongst two-year olds eligible for fifteen free hours. Latest figures show just 62% of families are now taking up the offer.[3] This is partly due to families choosing to make less use of childcare during the pandemic but also because low rates make it economically unviable to provide places in poorer areas, where top-up funding from parents cannot be used to cross-subsidise. 232 nurseries closed in the last year, a 35% increase from the year before.[4]

It is well established that early years is a critical phase of a child's life. During this period, the brain develops at an unprecedented rate with 80% of brain development taking place by age three and 85% of our language estimated to be in place by the age of five.[5] It has, therefore, never been more important for two-year olds to have access to high quality childcare given the lack of opportunities for socialisation during the pandemic. The best way to increase take up is by funding providers in the most disadvantaged areas properly so that they can offer more places and engage in community outreach work to support more families.

The current hourly rate for two-year olds averages £5.56 nationally. Ceeda, the respected Early Years research organization [right description?], estimate the actual hourly cost is £7.22. Raising funding to this level would only cost around £150m more than current spending and would only take the overall spending envelope back to where it was in 2014/15 when the two-year old offer was first introduced (as take up was expected to be higher).

We would also like to see a pilot scheme that included higher rates for disadvantaged three and four-year olds in low-income areas. It is very hard to set up high quality provision in these communities at the moment as few parents can afford the top up fees that subsidise nurseries in wealthier parts of the community. This pilot would see institutions given enough funding to hire fully qualified staff; cover some enrichment activities for children and engage in family support work. We estimate a pilot of 200 such institutions would cost £30m a year for three years to assess impact and viability. To assess the impact of the pilot, as well as other

[3] https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/substantial-drop-in-take-up-of-funded-places-fuels-concern-for-early-years-sector

[4] https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/more-than-11-000-childcare-places-lost-through-nursery-closures-research

[5] Spencer, Clegg, Stackhouse and Rush (2017) Contribution of spoken language and socio-economic background to adolescents' educational achievement at age 16 years. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*

Early Years interventions we propose that Unique Pupil Numbers are extended to early years to assist research in this critical area.

2. Schools

The pupil premium has proved valuable over the past decade in reducing the gap between the wealthiest and the most disadvantaged. A recent study showed primary school attainment for the poorest pupils increased significantly during the first few years of the pupil premium.[6]

This shows the value of targeted funding but also the benefits of allowing schools freedom to choose how to spend this money, alongside clear guidance on what works best, and accountability for outcomes. It may be that schools think a longer school day for some, or all pupils would be beneficial, but they may prefer to focus on small group tuition, recruiting more experienced teachers.

We propose that a temporary, additional "catch-up premium", be put in place, alongside the Pupil Premium, for three years to acknowledge the particular difficulties that the most disadvantaged families have faced during the pandemic. This "catch-up premium" should be allocated according to persistent disadvantage, defined as those who have been on free school meals for over 80% of their time at school, rather than on the basis of the current pupil premium formula. It is these pupils whose futures have been put most at risk by the pandemic. Even before Covid, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) showed that children with a high persistence of poverty have a learning gap of 22.7 months – twice that of children with a low persistence of poverty (those on free school meals for less than 20 per cent of their time at school). Despite the impact that the pupil premium has had on closing the achievement gap, progress has been slowest for pupils with a high persistence of poverty, it has barely shifted in almost a decade.[7]

A "catch-up premium" based on persistent disadvantage would also help those parts of the country most affected by the pandemic. EPI analysis shows that local authorities in the North East and North West have the highest proportionate of persistently disadvantaged pupils relative to those who currently qualify for the pupil premium. The local authorities hit hardest by Covid would be the biggest beneficiaries of this extra funding.

EPI data shows just under 10% of England's 8.3 million state educated pupils are persistently disadvantaged. A slight adjustment to the EPI methodology would be required to ensure persistently disadvantaged children in the first few years of primary were eligible. An additional premium of £1,250 per pupil, for primary and secondary, would, therefore, cost around £1.2 billion a year.

Schools are already held accountable for the size of the gap between pupil premium pupils and other students in their school by Ofsted, so there is already a mechanism to check that the funding has an impact. In addition, we propose that the EEF reformulate their tiered approach to school planning to provide a clear guide to the most effective ways to spend additional funding and a list of interventions with proven outcomes. Governing boards and trust boards would be expected to publish their three-year plan for using additional resources. The DfE could check a sample of these to ensure the money was being spent in line with the best evidence, while still giving schools autonomy over how to use resources, given they know their student needs best.

[6] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02671522.2021.1907775
[7] https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/School_funding_CRED_EPI.pdf

3. Post-16 education

Catch-up support is most urgent for older students who have the least time left in the formal education system. A survey of colleges conducted by the Association of Colleges earlier this year found this group of young people, especially those with lower prior attainment had been particularly badly hit by the pandemic. Their data showed that 77% of colleges think 16 to 18-year-olds are performing below normal expectations and that 81% of colleges think students are on average one to six months behind where they should be.[8]

The funding system works differently post-16. There is no pupil premium (apart from a small pilot next year for looked after children and care leavers). Instead funding for disadvantage is allocated in two blocks. The first of these is a complex formula based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. The second is based on the number of students an institution has with low prior attainment (below grade 4) in English and/or Maths.

We propose a three-year Post-16 Premium based around doubling this second prior attainment block. Post-16 it makes sense to target young people who we know are struggling the most. Moreover, as there will be fewer students with lower grades due to the grade inflation this year, if there is no uplift then institutions will actually see a reduction in funding. The students that are still in this low attainment bracket will be the ones who are mostly likely to have been negatively affected by school closures, and most at risk of dropout.

The cost of doubling "block 2" funding will depend on the exact numbers who do not achieve a grade 4 in English and Maths but based on the numbers who received an additional payment in 2020 we estimate that this would cost £300m a year for three years.[9]

4. Mental health support teams

Prior to the pandemic, schools and colleges were already finding worsening mental health amongst young people a serious challenge. The problem has grown steadily across the past two decades: in 2017, one in nine school-aged children was diagnosed with a mental health problem; this was up from one in ten in 2004. As of 2020, it was one in six.[10] This increase was already recognised by schools – in 2018, 94 per cent of teachers who had taught for more than five years had seen an increase in pupils presenting with mental health problems.[11]

Initial evidence suggests the pandemic has worsened this situation. Findings from survey of young people aged 13-25 show majority of young people experienced worsening of mental health during lockdowns, particularly anxiety and loneliness. 67% believed the pandemic would have a long-term impact on their mental health[12]. Referrals of young people have more than doubled in the past year.[13] In many cases a return to school and relative normality will be enough to help young

[8] https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/Report%20-%20College%20Catch-up%20Funding%20and%20Remote%20Education%20-%20April%202021.pdf

[9] https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-03-09/165465

[10] NHS Digital (2020), Mental *Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020: Wave 1 follow up to the 2017 survey* [Online].

[11] The British Psychological Society (BPS) Briefing Paper (2019), *Mental Health Support Teams: How to maximise the impact of the new workforce for children and young people*

[12] Young Minds (2021), *Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs, Survey 4: February 2021*.

[13] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jul/15/young-mental-health-referrals-double-in-england-after-lockdowns

people recover their wellbeing. However, we are also seeing an increase in more serious cases, and early support is critical to avoid this problem getting worse.

The government is aware of this challenge. In December 2017, the *Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision* green paper[14] introduced a new policy to create Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) to work with children and staff in education settings. These are intended to provide early intervention on some mental health and emotional wellbeing issues, such as mild to moderate anxiety, as well as helping staff within a school or college setting to provide a 'whole school approach' to mental health and wellbeing. The teams act as a link with local children and young people's mental health services and be supervised by NHS staff. The first MHSTs were announced in December 2018[15]. By May 2020, over 180 MHSTs were either operational or in development.[16]

We endorse the role of MHSTs and propose their expansion across the country is the best way of embedding effective mental health support for young people, before it gets to the point of requiring more serious intervention. Health Education England estimates that expanding MHSTs to all areas of the country would require around 8,000 additional mental health staff,[17] so clearly a realistic time scale for recruiting and training that workforce is necessary.

We therefore propose the government commit to at least two MHSTs in every local authority by 2025, at a cost of £250 million per year once all teams are established.[18]

Monitoring and Support
We know the system needs resourcing to recover learning loss and deal with the mental health challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. We are conscious, though, that other issues may emerge over the coming years where investment will also be required. These are areas that need to be closely monitored so additional support can be allocated where necessary.

5. Support for the 2020 and 2021 school leaving cohorts
Necessarily, much of the focus of educational recovery will focus on those still in compulsory schooling. However, young people who left their school, college or further education setting for work or university in 2020 and 2021 were also deeply affected by the events of the pandemic. As well as their own learning loss, many have qualifications granted without the normal processes, due to the abandonment of exams.

Given both their own learning loss and the indisputable evidence of "grade inflation" in both 2020 and 2021, many students may now be studying on university courses that, had exams gone ahead, they would not have qualified for and for which they may lack essential prior knowledge. Moreover, the big increase

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[14] Department for Health, Department for Education (2017), *Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision: a Green Paper*

[15] NHS, New mental health support in schools and colleges and faster access to NHS care, Retrieved from https://www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/cyp/trailblazers/. Accessed: 11 Aug 2021.

[16] Ellins, J., Singh, K., Al-Haboubi, M., Newbould, J., Hocking, L., Bousfield, J., McKenna, G., Fenton, S.J. and Mays, N., (2020), *Early evaluation of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Trailblazer programme*.

[17] Health Education England, Children and young peoples' mental health services

[18] Although initially the government funded MHSTs at different levels depending on Trailblazers' bids, there is now a set basic funding of £360,000 per team per year, with the scope for additional funds for "higher cost areas" (Mind (2020), A review of mental health services for children and young people).

in mental health problems amongst this age group may make it even harder to adjust.

The risk that young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, may fall out of further or higher education having made an inappropriate choice of destination post-results is higher for these cohorts, and their participation should be monitored carefully.

We propose that government and regulators require from all higher education institutions a detailed plan for support for those of its students who are members of the 2020 and 2021 cohort. This should detail both their own plans for education recovery for these young people, as well as support services which will be available to young people above and beyond their normal provision.

6. <u>Persistent non-attenders</u>
Since the return to compulsory schooling for all young people, there has been growing concern about the amount of young people who are continuing to miss lessons. Of course, many pupils have been required to isolate due to Covid precautions, but we are concerned that a small but growing group of students are now persistently missing school for other reasons. Moreover, such students are disproportionately likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN).[19]

Prior to the pandemic, 10.9% of those enrolled in English schools were identified as persistent absentees, down from 11.2% the year before[20]. However, in Autumn 2020—the last term for which the Department for Education have released the data—13% of pupils were persistently absent, a growth driven entirely by secondary schools (primary and special schools in fact saw a reduction in persistent absenteeism).[21]

It is too early to make definite conclusion about this trend, its causes or its consequences, but if we are seeing a real increase persistent absenteeism amongst secondary-age students, it is clearly a cause for concern. In the first instance we propose a task force of local authorities and MATs be established to review the scale of the problem and, depending on their findings, this may require additional support to help LAs and MATs engage in outreach to reengage students with school or college.

Conclusion
The proposals set out in this paper would cost £5.8 billion over three years. We see this as the bare minimum required to stave off the serious long-term negative effects of Covid for young people. It is certainly not an exhaustive list. We would also welcome, for instance, consideration of funding for extracurricular activities that young people have missed out in over the past two years, and of permanent funding for food during holidays for those on free school meals.

However, what is most needed are additional resources for those disadvantaged pupils who have been most negatively affected by the pandemic, both in terms of learning loss and mental health. Meeting this cost now may seem expensive but it will be a far smaller bill than the one we receive in the future if we do not invest

[19] https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2021/07/how-much-school-did-year-11-miss-this-year/;
https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2021/07/covid-cases-and-secondary-school-absence-surge-in-the-north-east/
[20] Department for Education (2020c), Pupil absence in schools in England: 2018 to 2019
[21] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term