

Education Secretary statement to Parliament on national lockdown

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement regarding schools in national lockdown.

The last thing any Education Secretary wants to do is announce that schools will close and this is not a decision that the government ever wanted to take.

I would like to reassure everyone that our schools have not suddenly become unsafe, but limiting the number of people who attend them is essential when the COVID rates are climbing as they are now. We must curb the escalating cases of COVID throughout the country and prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed. That is why today I am setting out the contingency plans I had prepared but had hoped to never have to implement.

I would like to thank all our teachers, all our education staff and social workers for all they have been doing to keep children and young people safe and learning.

During lockdown, early years settings remain open nationally to all, providing vital early education and childcare. Schools will be open too for vulnerable children and children of critical workers.

Those at university will predominantly study online, although there are a small number of exceptions including those studying medicine, healthcare and education.

Unwelcome though this latest lockdown is, and I am very conscious of the real challenges parents are facing with their children at home, we are far better placed to cope with it than we were last March. We are now better prepared to deliver online learning. This is an important step forward in supporting children to make the progress they so desperately need and we will also do what we can to help their parents. I would like to say thank you to all those parents and carers who are having to step up once more to take on the challenges of home learning.

We have set out clear, legally binding requirements for schools to provide high-quality remote education. This is mandatory for ALL state-funded schools and will be enforced by Ofsted. We expect schools to provide between three and five teaching hours a day, depending on a child's age.

If parents feel their child's school is not providing suitable remote education they should first raise their concerns with the teacher or headteacher and failing that, report the matter to Ofsted.

Ofsted will inspect schools – of any grade – where it has serious concerns about the quality of remote education being provided.

We have also been significantly stepping up the digital support we are providing to schools and parents. The fantastic Oak National Academy continues to provide video lessons for all ages across all subjects and yesterday the BBC announced it will be delivering the biggest push on education in its history, bringing 14 weeks of educational programmes and lessons to every household in the country.

Our delivery of laptops and tablets continues apace. We have purchased more than one million laptops and tablets and have already delivered over 560,000 of these to schools and local authorities, with an extra 100,000 this week alone. By the end of next week we will have delivered three quarters of a million devices.

We are also working with all the UK's leading mobile network operators, to provide free data for key educational sites. We are very grateful to EE, Three, Tesco Mobile, Smarty, Sky Mobile, Virgin Mobile, O2 and Vodafone for supporting this offer. We have also been delivering 4G routers to families who need to access the internet.

Another area where we have learned lessons is on exams. Last year, all four nations of the UK found their arrangements for awarding grades did not deliver what they needed, with the impact felt painfully by students and their parents. Although exams are the fairest way we have of assessing what a student knows, the impact of this pandemic now means that it is not possible to have these exams this year. I can confirm that GCSEs and A and AS Level exams will not go ahead this summer. This year we are going to put our trust in teachers rather than algorithms.

The department and Ofqual had already worked up a range of contingency options. While the details will need to be fine-tuned in consultation with Ofqual, the exam boards and teaching representatives, I can confirm now that I wish to use a form of teacher-assessed grades, with training and support provided to ensure these are awarded fairly and consistently.

I know students and staff have worked hard to prepare for the January exams and assessments of vocational and technical qualifications, and we want to allow schools and colleges to continue with these assessments where they judge it is right to do so. No college should feel pressured to offer these and we will ensure all students are able to progress fairly, just as we will with VTQs in the summer.

I know there is, understandably, concern about free school meals. We are going to provide extra funding to support schools to provide food parcels or meals to eligible children. Where schools cannot offer food parcels or use local solutions, we will ensure a national voucher scheme is in place so that every eligible child can access free school meals while their school remains closed.

Finally I would like to turn to our programme of testing for the virus. There has been a brilliant, concerted effort in secondary schools and colleges to deliver testing for the start of this term and none of the work done to roll this out is going to be wasted. Regular testing will take place of staff and

students in school and, in due course, help us to reopen schools as soon as possible. Testing is going to be the centre of our plans to return children back to school back to the classroom and back to college as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker, I never wanted to be in a position where we had to close schools again. I believe that schools should always have their gates open welcoming children and always being at the heart of their community. The moment that the virus permits, all our children will be back in school with their teachers and their friends. But until then, we have put in place the measures we need to make sure that they continue to progress and for this reason I commend this statement to the House.