

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson)

18 March 2020

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement regarding changes to the operations of educational settings as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

We are facing increasingly difficult challenges, and I would like to once again express my extraordinary gratitude to staff in all our schools, colleges, nurseries and universities who have been doing so much. I know that the situation has become increasingly challenging. I said before that if the science and the advice changed, such that keeping schools open would no longer be in the best interests of children and teachers, we would act. We are now at that stage.

The spike of the virus is increasing at a faster pace than anticipated, and it is crucial that we continue to consider the right measures to arrest this increase and relieve the pressure on the health system. The public health benefits of schools remaining open as normal are shifting. It is also clear that schools are finding it increasingly difficult to continue as normal, as illness and self-isolation impact on staffing levels and pupil attendance. I want to provide parents, students and staff with the certainty they need.

After schools shut their gates on Friday afternoon, they will remain closed until further notice. That will be for all children except those of key workers and the children who are most vulnerable. The scientific advice shows that these settings are safe for this small number of children to continue attending, but asking others to stay away will help us to slow the spread of this virus. Examples of key workers include NHS staff, police and delivery

drivers who need to be able to go to work. Vulnerable children include those who have a social worker and those with education, health and care plans. Looking after these children will enable schools to support the country through this extremely challenging time. We are expecting early years providers, sixth forms and further education colleges to do the same. We are working with Her Majesty's Treasury on the financial support that will be required. I am also asking that independent schools and boarding schools follow the same approach.

We will give schools the flexibility to provide meals or vouchers to children eligible for free school meals. Some schools are already doing this, and we will reimburse the costs. As soon as possible, we will put in place a national voucher system for every child who is eligible for free school meals. I know that all of this will not be easy. I am asking nurseries, schools and colleges to be at the forefront of our national response to this crisis.

Given the unprecedented asks that we are making of all those who are working in educational settings at this time, I recognise that we are asking so much of them. We will be asking them to provide for these settings to be open to children of key workers and to vulnerable children during the Easter holidays as well.

I recognise that what schools will be doing in these circumstances will look very different from the normal state of affairs, and will ensure that leaders have the flexibility that they need to face this challenge. In order to allow schools and other settings to focus on this new operational model and the support they can give to these young people, we are removing various duties. Ofsted has ceased all routine inspection of early years, schools, colleges and children's social care services. I can confirm that we will not go ahead with assessments or exams, and that we will not be publishing

performance tables for this academic year. We will work with the sector and Ofqual to ensure that children get the qualifications that they need.

My Department is working closely with local authorities, representatives of early years, schools and headteachers, regional school commissioners and bodies such as Ofsted and Ofqual about how to deliver this change as effectively as possible. We will do whatever is necessary to support local authorities, schools and teachers through the weeks and months ahead.

I know that many universities and other higher education institutions are already taking necessary steps to keep their staff and students safe and, where possible, keep providing education. I am confident that vice-chancellors are making the right decisions and my Department continues to support them in doing so.

This is a testing time for the whole nation, but by asking schools and other settings to look after the children of key workers and the most vulnerable, we will be directly saving people's lives. Whether a parent or a teacher, I want people to know that their wellbeing and that of their children is the absolute priority for me and my Department. We are completely committed to ensuring that every child receives the best education possible, and we will be working with the BBC and others to provide resources for children to access at home.

I am deeply grateful for the civic spirit and selfless dedication that has been, and continues to be, shown by teachers and other school workers every single day. I am committed to giving my full support throughout every stage of this crisis to those who are doing so much for all of us. I know that our teachers and those working in education have the full support of the House and that hon. Members will do what they can to support schools and other providers in their own constituencies through this period of change. I

wish to thank them in advance for the work that they will do. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the Opposition, particularly the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), for their co-operation, advice and thoughts at this time.

Our headteachers and teachers are central to the country's response to the current crisis. I am reassured by their readiness to step up and to take the lead in supporting families through this most incredibly difficult time. All of those who work in our schools, colleges and universities rightly take their place next to our NHS staff and other key workers as central to our efforts as a country in battling the virus, and I thank them from the bottom of my heart for all of their support and all they do. I commend the statement to the House.