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## Speech

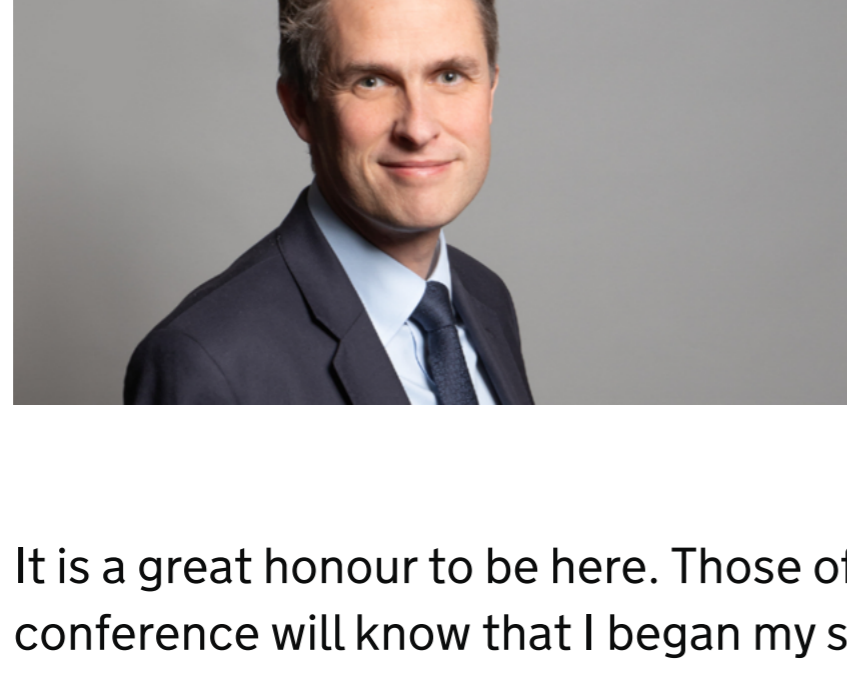
# Education Secretary addresses ASCL conference

Speaking at the Association of School and College Leaders 2021 annual conference, Gavin Williamson thanked teachers and staff for their work during the pandemic.

From: [Department for Education](#) and [The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP](#)

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It is a great honour to be here. Those of you who attended last year’s conference will know that I began my speech by thanking you for the resilience you had all shown in the face of what was then a new virus. At that time, I mentioned that 600 cases had been diagnosed so far.

I don’t think any of us could have foreseen the unprecedented demands that would be made of school and college leaders like yourselves and how much your communities would depend on your calm leadership as we battled what went on to become one of the biggest challenges that this country has faced since the second world war.

I have made no secret of my admiration – or my gratitude – for everything you have done to keep children and young people learning and as safe as they possibly can be each time they have returned to school or college after lockdowns, but also making sure you have been supporting them when they have been at home so they have had the opportunity to learn.

And I am not forgetting even in the darkest days we have seen during this pandemic that you have always been open for vulnerable children and those of key workers, who have so continued to need the support school has offered in order for them to be able to go on doing their jobs or protect those children most likely to be at harm.

I think as we come out of this pandemic, everyone in the country now has a far greater and deeper appreciation of the teaching profession as a result of your efforts, and hold the profession in far greater admiration than they have ever done before.

The Prime Minister has outlined the roadmap out of lockdown - this is the certainty we have been waiting for as we begin taking the next cautious steps back to normality.

And this week all our schools and colleges were once more full of children and young people.

I know that many of you will have had many additional challenges in making this happen safely and smoothly. It is vital that we have a robust testing regime in place to break the chains of Covid infection and I know that you have all gone to such huge efforts to put this in place.

Your staff and you have worked so hard to get testing sites up and running and to become familiar with supervising them.

I’ve now seen pupils taking lateral flow tests under supervision and they said the process was quick and straightforward. I’d like to thank all staff who are testing themselves regularly at home and who will be encouraging pupils to do the same after their three tests at school or college.

And I know that school and college staff will continue to respond superbly to the ongoing challenges, including where close contacts need to continue to receive learning at home after a student tests positive. The work that has been undertaken has been phenomenal, but we are seeing the results in literally millions of tests being completed over the last few days, more tests than have ever been completed before. And that’s been down to the efforts of school leaders, school staff, who have gone so far and done so much, whether that has been setting up the testing sites or giving children and parents reassurance that it is something they need to do and benefits them and helps keep children and school staff safe, but also ensures it is keeping families and communities safe as well.

And as we move ahead towards awarding qualifications, that theme of trusting teachers remains core to our approach.

Which is why this year we will be trusting teachers, not algorithms, and ensuring that the professionals who know our children’s academic performance best will be able to determine the fair grade that they deserve.

I know we all share the same ambition for students who were due to take exams, that they have the best possible chance to show what they know and can do, and to have the vital opportunity to progress onto the next stage, either in education, training or the workplace.

That’s why I trust your professional judgements when you assess them – they’ll receive a grade determined by you on what they have been taught and not what they’ve missed.

Ofqual and the exam boards will support you in doing this, with grade descriptors, guidance and a range of evidence that you can use including coursework, in-class tests, and optional questions provided by exam boards as well as mock exams.

It’s about your judgement, not about a magic formula, and the essential moderation and auditing to ensure fairness will rely on human judgement and not software.

I’ve spoken before about the importance of discipline and behaviour. We all know just how important a disciplined, orderly environment will be in helping children to readjust to the structures and routines of being in school every day.

And even before the pandemic we knew the effect of misbehaviour on lost learning time was significant and that it affected disadvantaged pupils more than any other.

That’s why I applaud the steps schools and colleges are taking at the moment to create a disciplined and calm environment, in which a strong behaviour culture is embedded in every school and where students are taught how to behave well and are clear about the consistent expectations placed on them.

As we said in our manifesto, I will always back you to take the measures that need to be taken, because you know your schools and what’s best for them better than anyone else.

Crucially though, getting children and young people back to school and college is only the start of our recovery plan. We have seen the single greatest disruption to our education system since the Second World War. And we all know that many children and young people are going to need longer term support if they are to make the educational progress they need to.

Not just academically, but in terms of their wider development to ensure we’re stimulating and enriching the child’s life as a whole.

We must never underestimate the importance of friendship and how important it is for children to be back in the classroom, not just with their teachers, but also the support of their friends.

Our children have lost so much of their childhood, and we have to make that up to them.

You already know about the £1.7 billion we have already committed to recovery, including the National Tutoring Programme, a recovery premium paid directly to schools and £200 million for summer schools. But I know that this only scratches the surface.

I am delighted that Sir Kevan Collins has come on board as our Education Recovery Commissioner. He and I are working closely together to consider a wide variety of possible measures including changes to the school day and term dates.

A key part of our long-term plans will be to ensure teachers get the best possible support available at the start of their careers. The Early Career Framework reforms, developed with support from ASCL, will launch nationally this September and will directly support those who will be educating our children for years to come.

Alongside this, our Mental Health in Education Action Group is looking at how we can do more to give schools and colleges extra support, not just for students but for staff wellbeing as well.

And today I want to emphasise two things to you.

Firstly, that whatever we do, we want to develop it in partnership with schools and colleges, as part of a genuine dialogue that will deliver what’s best for our children.

We must deliver a solution that works for children and young people, works for parents and that absolutely must work for school and college staff, who will be on the front lines of delivering this for our children.

And secondly, that we will never lose sight of the need for wider enrichment.

While any reforms will always cleave to our core principle of a knowledge-rich education, bound with rigour and accountability, we know that we must also create more space for music, for sport and for the arts: for our children to develop not just intellectually, but emotionally and spiritually as well.

The past 12 months and have tested us in ways we could not have foreseen. The resilience and adaptability you have demonstrated over and over again throughout the past 12 months have shown that you were more than equal to the task.

It is thanks to you that we are able to plan for the future with confidence.

It is thanks to you that all our children and young people are now back where they need to be, learning face to face with their teachers again - ready to start reclaiming the education and childhood that has been put on hold.

You have been such an essential part in helping children during this time. The work you have done over the past weeks to get schools ready to welcome children back - we’ve all seen the delight and joy on children’s faces as they’ve come through the doors back into school.

I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done. I know it has been one of the most challenging years any of us could have expected to see, but at every single stage you’ve stepped up and done so much, always focusing on the child and always knowing it is their interests we are all here to serve.

Thank you for that.

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