

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP  
The Secretary of State for Education  
Department for Education  
Sanctuary Buildings  
London  
SW1P 3BT

9 October 2013

Dear Secretary of State

I am writing on behalf of the Leading Edge programme, which represents almost 300 high-performing secondary schools and academies, to express concern at the recent announcements about changes to school performance data – in terms of performance tables, RAISEonline and the information that will be provided to Ofsted.

Whilst we recognise and support the need to ensure that the examination system is rigorous, consistent and fair, we are extremely concerned about the way this announcement has been managed and the impact that these changes could have on our students, particularly those currently in year 11. Every single secondary school that we have contact with feels that it is inappropriate to be informed of a substantial change to the way schools' performance will be measured through a leaked document in a newspaper and ahead of the publication of the outcome of the DfE consultation on accountability.

It also seems that there has been some misunderstanding around the issue of early entry.

Firstly it is important that a distinction is drawn between “game-playing” and the judicious use of the examination system, planned from the point at which pupils embark upon their GCSE studies to support achievement. Many high-performing schools use early entry, not as a means of ‘gaming’ the system, but in order carefully to personalise provision for different students. For example, early entry is frequently used with lower attaining and vulnerable students to boost confidence and build resilience. Rather than putting a ceiling on their achievement, this experience often enables students to go on and achieve a higher grade still when re-taking their exam in a later examination session by the end of their Key Stage 4 programme. Offering lower-ability, vulnerable and middle-attaining students more than one opportunity to pass an examination is not about “cheating” but about genuinely seeking to maximise life chances – enabling as many students as possible to achieve the standard which will open doors to further education and employment opportunities.

Early entry is also frequently used with highly able students, where teachers are confident that the student can achieve an A\*/A during an earlier examination session. This can enable highly able students to access AS courses earlier, maintaining challenge and rigour and enabling them to access greater breadth in their level three courses. We fully support your belief that students' chances of achieving a top grade should not be compromised by early entry and for this reason we would always re-enter any student who did not achieve an A/A\* as predicted during a later examination session. Most high-performing schools in our programme ensure that students continue to study a subject for the duration of Key Stage 4 irrespective of whether they have taken an examination early.

The timing of this announcement presents students and schools with some significant difficulties. In many cases, students have been working towards sitting their examinations in November for over a year. With weeks to go before the next examination session, schools are faced with making a decision very rapidly and then communicating that to students and their parents. Additionally, some of the practical implications of this announcement have not yet been clarified – for example, the difficulties implicit in sitting a linear examination for a course that was designed to be modular and the implications for schools that have decided to enter students for IGCSEs.

It really does not seem acceptable to make significant changes to courses that students are already part way through; it creates substantial anxiety amongst students and their parents and jeopardises students' chances of success. For this reason, most schools have indicated that they will continue as planned with the November examination session, even though this may have a detrimental effect on their standing in the 2014 performance tables. School leaders are being put in an extremely difficult situation – in effect being asked to choose between what they know to be best for their students and what will be best for their school. Surely we want to ensure that the interests of pupils are identical to the interests of schools?

We ask that you at the very least postpone the introduction of these changes for a year, to enable the current cohort of year 11 students to complete their courses without uncertainty and disruption. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss changes to Key Stage 4 examinations with you. School leaders are open to change and keen to support ongoing improvements in the examination system. However meaningful consultation with school leaders and a carefully structured mechanism for implementation is essential to ensure that students' are not adversely affected in the process.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Munday  
Executive Headteacher, Comberton Academy Trust  
O/b **SSAT Leading Edge Headteachers' Steering Group**

## **Leading Edge Steering Group 2013-14**

Stephen Munday, Executive Headteacher, Comberton Academy Trust (Chair)  
Ani Magill, Headteacher, St John The Baptist School (Vice-Chair)  
Steve Allen, Principal, The De Ferrers Academy  
Janet Bridges, Principal, Castle View Enterprise Academy  
Andy Daly, Principal, Swavesey Village College  
Russel Ellicott, Headteacher, Pate's Grammar School  
Haydn Evans, Headteacher, Sir John Cass's Foundation and Redcoat Church of England  
Secondary School  
Alan Grey, Headteacher, Sandringham School  
Iain Hulland, Executive Headteacher, Alder Grange Community Technology School and  
Sixth Form  
Andy Johnson, Headteacher, Springwood High School  
Sylvia Jones, Headteacher, Valentines High School  
Catherine McCormack, Headteacher, South Wirral High School  
Pank Patel, Headteacher, Wood Green High School  
Lynn Rowlands, Headteacher, Canons High School  
Mark Smallwood, Headteacher, Sale Grammar School  
Robert Sykes, Headteacher, Thornden School  
Michael Whitworth, Principal, Wren Academy  
Martin Williams, Headteacher, The Corsham School  
Alan Yellup, Executive Principal, Wakefield City Academy