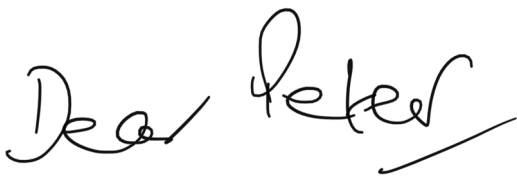


Private.Office@education-ni.gov.uk

Mr Peter Weir MLA
Minister of Education
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
Rathgill
Bangor
BT19 7PR

20 August 2020



On behalf of the Association of School and College Leaders, I am writing to formally request that the Department of Education commissions an independent review as a matter of urgency to understand what went wrong in the process for awarding grades in GCSEs, AS levels and A levels in Northern Ireland this summer. This is in line with a similar request by ASCL to the Secretary of State for Education in England. I note that the Minister for Education in Wales has already set out her intention for an independent review.

As you know, we accepted and supported the principle of standardisation of centre assessment grades, and made constructive proposals to Department of Education officials, the Education Committee and CCEA, but the model that was applied appears to have created far too many anomalous results, such that standardisation has had to be abandoned and centre assessment grades reverted to in many cases. That is the fairest possible solution in these circumstances, but has come only after many students were left distraught following last week's A-level results, chaos over university places, and with public confidence in the Department of Education and CCEA badly damaged.

The ASCL Northern Ireland Executive believes the scale of these issues necessitates full transparency over why the standardisation model worked so poorly in practice, why this was not foreseen, and what processes were followed by CCEA and the Department of Education to test that it was fit for purpose. This would be best served by commissioning an immediate independent review to rapidly investigate and ascertain exactly what has happened, and for the Department of Education to commit to publishing its findings and recommendations in full.

We would also seek a full explanation as to why the Northern Ireland cohort of GCSE candidates is being treated differently to their peers in England and Wales, where centre assessment grades or standardised grades, whichever is the higher, are being awarded.

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Most importantly, a review is needed to learn the lessons from what has happened this year, in case we are in a similar position next summer. ASCL has voiced concern on several occasions that there appears to be no contingency planning for exams in 2021 in the event that they are widely disrupted because of coronavirus. This seems to us to be a very serious omission in light of the unpredictable nature of the virus and the possibility of infection spikes before and during next summer's exams.

The last thing we want is to have another exercise in which grades have to be assessed, but if such a situation was to arise, we must understand what is the best approach, and not make the same mistakes which have been made this year. You will be aware that, as an Association, we have been urging CCEA and your department for clarity on changes to content and assessment for 2021 in light of the huge disruption to learning this year, and in line with public health arrangements and the fact that our Year 12 and 14 students return to school on Monday 24 August. I note your reference to this in your letter to principals of 19 August and your commitment to 'make things better for young people and teachers'.

I am sure you will understand the importance to our members of the issues I have raised in this letter, and I am therefore going to share this letter with them, and your response. It will also be available on our website. I say this only so that you are fully aware of how it will be used.

As you know, ASCL has endeavoured to be very supportive of the process followed this summer, and we provided a great deal of support and guidance to our members, who worked very hard to provide students with fair and accurate grades in line with CCEA guidance. They, and we, feel shattered by the events which have unfolded, both personally and on behalf of the many young people who have had such a traumatic experience. Please do let me know if you would like to discuss any matters raised in this letter with me or any members of our ASCL Northern Ireland Executive.

Yours,
Geoff Barton

Geoff Barton | General Secretary

130 Regent Road, Leicester LE1 7PG

0116 299 1122 | geoff.barton@ascl.org.uk | www.ascl.org.uk