

Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Chair, Education Select Committee
House of Commons
London
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Thursday 11 April 2019

Dear Robert

I was interested to see your response to the letter from the Secretary of State regarding your recent oral evidence session on knife crime and exclusions. Like you, we are extremely concerned about the rising incidence of knife crime. However, we are also concerned that some misconceptions appear to have arisen which require clarification.

As you accept in your letter, there is no evidence of a causal link between exclusions and knife crime. Indeed, as the Secretary of State pointed out in his letter to you, most knife crime offences are carried out not by school-aged children, excluded or otherwise, but by adults aged 18 or over. The causes of the rise in knife crime are clearly complex, but it is important that we focus our resources and energies as a society on factors that are proven to be linked to knife crime, rather than blaming schools for an issue which they have not caused.

We agree with you that education has a vital role to play in addressing gang violence. Indeed, schools have been doing this for many years under existing safeguarding legislation which requires them to refer children who show signs of being drawn into anti-social or criminal behaviour to social care. The biggest challenge in recent years has been the fact that local authority support services and police forces have been heavily cut back because of government spending cuts. This means there is less support for vulnerable families and children, and fewer police officers available.

It is important not to overstate the issue of exclusions. While the rate of permanent exclusions has increased in recent years, it still remains low at around 20 pupils per 10,000 in secondary schools, according to the most recent government statistics from 2016-17. This is lower than the rate 10 years previously in 2006-07. This reflects the fact that schools take the decision to exclude extremely seriously, only after much thought and consideration, and in the interests of other children who have a right to learn in a safe and orderly environment.

The procedures which schools must follow when they exclude a pupil are laid down in detailed guidance, and include the right to an independent review. Exclusion rates in individual schools are already scrutinised by Ofsted. It is difficult to see what would be achieved by giving local authorities more power to monitor exclusions, and how this would work in practice.

Like you, we are concerned about any rise in exclusions. Our firm view is that this is driven by significant cuts in real-term funding to schools over the past few years. We know that this has made it more difficult for schools to provide early intervention which prevents behaviour issues escalating to the point of a permanent exclusion. We feel this is another pressing reason why the level of school funding must be improved as a matter of urgency.

It is a shame that the press release which accompanies your letter refers to concerns about “the poor quality of alternative provision for excluded pupils.” I know you are aware that over 80% of alternative provision is rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted, and there is fantastic work being done by many providers to support young people with complex needs. We fully support any measures to further improve alternative provision, particularly in respect of ensuring that there is high-quality provision in all areas of the country, but we think it is important to recognise that most alternative provision is already high quality.

We would be very happy to discuss any of these matters further, and to provide evidence to the committee, if you feel that would be helpful.

Yours faithfully



Geoff Barton
General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders