

Rt Hon David Laws MP
Minister of State for Schools
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
Westminster
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SW1P 3BT

28th November 2014

Dear Mr Laws

I am writing in response to your letter of the 14th of November, drawing my attention to the new performance tables' rules as applied to English GCSE.

Firstly, I was fully aware of the Department's announcement regarding English GCSE first entry counting. This school has never agreed with accelerated early entry or multiple entries for core subjects. We believe it is educationally sound to allow children time to develop and grasp the whole subject over an adequate period of time. We welcomed the move away from a resit culture and also the perverse incentive to 'race to the C'. Despite reservations regarding haste of change, we have been a supporter of the reform to Level 2 qualifications and the Progress 8 measure. It is therefore ironic that our commitment to one summer entry served to do our children first and foremost and secondly our 'league table position' an injustice when Ofqual took their decision to hike up the June English C pass rate in 2012. Had we taken the 'game-playing' approach that your government has suggested other schools have, our children would have been in a much better position.

In the summer of 2014, we took the decision to enter a small cohort of students for an *extra* English qualification, the Cambridge Literature GCSE. This was at their request and was provided as an extra-curricular enrichment opportunity. The results were excellent and the students benefitted a great deal from the opportunity. As a result of this, several of the students are now studying A level Literature. The decision was not taken in any way to advantage the school in the performance tables and it was one which was checked with the board to ensure it did not in any way affect the discounting rules. AQA were clear that it did not. The students continued with their English Language and Literature AQA qualification as this was the pathway that they were already on. We did not see any contradiction in this decision and we still do not. Student learning and education was enhanced and there were no resits. Cambridge English Literature GCSE cannot be compared to the AQA combined English; it complements rather than replaces. If it did indeed replace, surely the qualification should count as the English grade in the performance tables in the way that it will in the Progress 8 measure?

You have gone to great pains in your letter to explain that the rules are about fairness and how it would be difficult to change the decision. I do not believe that this is the case. The Department announced last year (a year after children were already on their option pathway) that Drama and Dance could not be counted together and then later, quite rightly, changed

their mind. It would have been wholly possible to do the same for this situation, particularly as the rule has only come into play because by coincidence, the summer Cambridge Literature exam came first. The many schools (I do not concur that it is a few) who I have been in contact with have, like me, taken the decision that adding extra Literature was not about trying to play the system, it was about enhancing children's education.

I do not expect that my letter will make any difference to you or your department's thinking, given your unwillingness to listen to professional organisations such as ASCL and SSAT. In a general election year, you may be interested to know however, that I have yet to meet a school leader or parent who does not believe that your approach to education is at best misguided, at worst punitive. Personally, I have never felt so politically disenfranchised in my entire career and I look back fondly to the days when I felt the Department and school leaders worked in partnership for the good of everyone.

Fortunately, unlike the 2012 'English Fiasco', your decision has had no negative impact on my students. Whilst I do not believe punishing schools by undermining their reputation is acceptable, ultimately, education is first and foremost about children's' learning, not performance tables.

Where the two things which should be inextricably linked are separated for political reasons, I will always consider a high-quality education and children's learning first. As such, whatever the reasons for your shifting performance table rules, I am satisfied that my decision was educationally responsible and benefitted the students and parents whom I believe I am here first and foremost to serve.

Thank you for advising me to share your letter with my Chair of Governors and for sending a copy to my sponsor. I am wholeheartedly supported by both and they understand that this situation has nothing to do with early entry or so-called game- playing. I will, like many other educational leaders, be publishing my own data so that parents can understand the real performance of my students.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Watson', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Shirley Watson
Principal