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**The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP**  
Secretary of State for Education

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Alice Barnard  
Chief Executive, Edge Foundation  
By email: [ABarnard@edge.co.uk](mailto:ABarnard@edge.co.uk)

21 November 2022

*Dear Alice,*

Thank you so much for your letter of 9 September, outlining ideas on how to transform England's education system. I would be grateful if you could share my response with your co-signatories.

There are now more than 465,500 full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers working in state-funded schools across the country to inspire the next generation of young people. Over 37,000 new trainee teachers were recruited to start training in 2021/22. However, we recognise that there is more to do to make sure that teaching remains an attractive, high-status profession and to recruit and retain the best teachers in key subjects and areas. Our reforms are aimed not only at increasing teacher recruitment through an attractive pay offer and financial incentives such as bursaries, but also at making sure that teachers stay and thrive in the profession.

We are taking action to enable teachers to succeed through transforming their training and support. We will deliver 500,000 teacher training and development opportunities by 2024, giving all teachers and school leaders access to world-class, evidence-based training and professional development at every stage of their career. We have launched the Early Career Framework, providing the solid foundations for a successful career in teaching and backed by over £130 million a year in funding when fully rolled out.

Teacher retention is key to effective teacher supply and quality, and we are taking action to support teachers. The department has published a range of resources to help address teacher workload and wellbeing as well as to support schools to introduce flexible working practices.

We know there is further to go to improve recruitment in some subjects. That is why we have introduced a range of measures, including bursaries worth £24,000 tax-free and scholarships worth £26,000 tax-free, to encourage talented trainees into key subjects such as chemistry, computing, mathematics, and physics.

Additionally, we have announced a levelling up premium worth up to £3,000 tax-free for maths, physics, chemistry, and computing teachers who choose to work in disadvantaged schools, including in Education Investment Areas in the first five years of their careers.

This will support recruitment and retention of specialist teachers in these subjects and in the schools and areas that need them most.

The national curriculum focuses on the essential knowledge which pupils should be taught and encompasses both knowledge and skills. A knowledge-rich curriculum means that all pupils have fair access to the acquisition of knowledge, the basic building block of education, which stimulates critical thinking and enquiry skills which can only be taught in the context of solid subject content. A knowledge-rich curriculum does not teach skills without knowledge but understands that skills consist of applied knowledge.

The published programmes of study for national curriculum subjects demonstrate how knowledge and skills are intertwined by outlining examples of both knowledge and the skills, matters, and processes that are to be taught at each key stage. Unpicking knowledge and skills as separate entities does not reflect the large body of evidence that shows that fluency of knowledge acts as the building block for the development of skills. Teachers can use their professional judgement to decide how best to ensure that their pupils develop skills, as part of a broad and balanced school curriculum which encompasses, but is not limited by, the national curriculum.

As stated in the Schools White Paper, we believe it is crucial that every school has a well-designed and well-sequenced curriculum that includes the teaching of skills, to help children to build knowledge in a broad range of subjects before going on to specialise after the age of 16 and develop skills needed for further education and training.

Careers guidance in schools and colleges is underpinned by the eight Gatsby Benchmarks, a world-class standard based on rigorous national and international research. Gatsby benchmark one, a stable careers programme, makes it clear that every school should have an embedded programme of careers education and guidance that is known and understood by students, parents, teachers, governors, and employers. Gatsby benchmark four expects all teachers to link curriculum learning with careers.

Additionally, the careers statutory guidance requires schools in England to provide opportunities for pupils to develop entrepreneurial skills for employment. This helps pupils to gain the confidence to compete in the labour market by providing opportunities to gain the practical know-how and attributes that are relevant for employment.

There are no plans for wholesale reform of GCSEs and A levels – these are internationally respected and enjoy high levels of public support. Exams provide a shared understanding of what students know and can do – an even playing field with everyone being assessed on the same thing at the same time. We also know that exams, and the preparation leading up to them, can be motivating and lead to improved learning. The government is clear that young people should be able to access a broad and balanced, knowledge-rich curriculum up to the age of 16. GCSEs provide the basis for a knowledge-rich curriculum from 14-16 and our ambition is that by 2025, 90% of pupils will sit a core set of academic GCSEs, known as the EBacc.

Whilst GCSEs rigorously assess the knowledge acquired by pupils during key stage 4, they also develop a whole range of skills. Knowledge and skills combined are what help young people to achieve in a wide range of academic or vocational pathways at school and beyond. Teachers are encouraged to use their professional judgement to teach around the GCSE content and develop the key skills depending on the needs of their pupils.

We have taken steps to make sure that pupils can study high quality vocational and technical qualifications at 14 to 16. We have improved the quality of non-GCSE qualifications at key stage 4 by introducing a new approvals process for Technical Awards. Only those meeting our stretching requirements and reviewed by Ofqual, will be recognised in key stage 4 performance tables alongside academic qualifications. With this broad grounding, all students – regardless of background – are then prepared to fulfil their aspirations post-16. Pupils can specialise, choosing from the range of high quality academic and technical qualifications and routes that then become open to them.

I am pleased that you welcome the introduction of T Levels, and I was delighted to see the first cohort of students complete their courses this summer with a pass rate of 92%. T Levels will provide a platform for raising the standard of technical education and putting it on a par with our world-class academic route. Our aim is for T Levels to be the technical qualification of choice for 16-19-year-olds, but we recognise that other options should be available in certain areas. For example, we will continue to fund some qualifications similar to Applied Generals in future that can be taken as mixed programmes with A levels as well as a smaller number of large alternatives to A levels. These qualifications will continue to play an important role for 16- to 19-year-olds and adults as they do now.

The purpose of reforms to technical education are to make sure that people across the country can gain high-quality skills that employers demand. We are reviewing all existing qualifications at Level 3 and are clear that any qualifications we fund in future must be high quality and lead to good outcomes and that all students leave education with the skills most needed by industry. Removing funding approval for qualifications that overlap with T Levels will give T Levels the space needed to flourish and reduce complexity for learners and employers.

Our reform timetable is rightly ambitious. Employers are facing a skills shortage that we must act to address – we must close the gap between what people study and the needs of employers. Yet we know that we would be wrong to push too hard and risk compromising quality. An extra year to prepare will give all schools and colleges at least a year teaching T Levels before any overlapping qualifications are removed.

We publish in performance tables a wide range of school level metrics providing information on attainment, progress, subjects entered, and pupil destinations. We also show information on attendance and the proportion of pupils in a school with special education needs, for whom English is an additional language, and who have received free school meals in the last six years.

Ofsted inspection provides key and trusted information for parents – 70% feel that Ofsted reports are a reliable source of information on their child's school. Inspection also gives recognition and validation to effective practice where it is seen and prompts self-improvement. It provides a rounded assessment – not just on standards, but also on pastoral matters and the ethos of the school. It provides assurance not just to parents but also to the wider community, and triggers intervention where necessary.

Ofsted's post-inspection survey shows that nine in ten schools are satisfied with the way their inspection was carried out, and a similar proportion agree that the inspection will help them improve further.

Many universities make learning opportunities available to their staff through workshops, taught programmes, and Higher Education (HE) Academy-accredited training provision.

Advance HE also operates a fellowship scheme that requires fellows to demonstrate a personal and institutional commitment to professionalism in learning and teaching in higher education. The scheme also recognises individuals for their practice, impact, and leadership of teaching and learning.

I was grateful to receive your kind request for a meeting. My office is aware of your request and will be in touch if I am able to do so in the near future.

Thank you for taking the time to write to me on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gillian Keegan', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

**The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP  
Secretary of State for Education**