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Prime Minister (1)

Des have agreed to the  
deletions I have suggested  
on page 3.  
Content?

Des

T J Flesher Esq  
Private Secretary  
10 Downing Street  
London SW1

Your reference

19/6

Our reference

Date

19 June 1984

Rec  
Des  
20/6

Dear Tim,

mf

**REFORM OF EXAMINATIONS AT 16+ - PROPOSED MINISTERIAL STATEMENT**

My Secretary of State sent a minute to the Prime Minister on 12 June about this proposed reform. Because of its importance, especially in the context of the Government's manifesto commitment to improving the public examination system and to maintaining 'O' level standards, the Secretary of State would like to make an oral statement in the House tomorrow, Wednesday 20 June; that date has already been agreed with the Leader of the House's Office. The Secretary of State would also like it to be repeated by the Government's education spokesman, the Earl of Swinton, in the House of Lords.

I now attach a draft of the statement agreed with the Secretary of State for Wales. It follows the line of the proposals which were approved by other colleagues in H Committee yesterday.

I should be grateful for your agreement today to our proceeding along these lines.

Copies of this letter and draft statement go to the Private Secretaries of the Leader of the House, the Lord President of the Council, the Secretary of State for Wales, the Chief Whip (Commons), the Chief Whip (Lords), the Secretary of the Cabinet and to the Chief Press Secretary, No 10.

Yours,  
Aram Thompson

A B THOMPSON  
Parliamentary Clerk

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DRAFT STATEMENT

Reform of 16+ examinations

1. With permission, I wish to make a statement about the action which my RHF the Secretary of State for Wales and I are taking to reform the current system of public examinations at 16+. Our objectives are to improve the examination courses and to raise the standard of performance of all candidates. Four measures are needed to this end.

- First, the 20 Examinations Boards need to come together in 5 groups - 4 in England and 1 in Wales. This will reduce the excessive number of examining bodies, syllabuses and subject titles, which are now a source of confusion.
- Second, all syllabuses need to be governed by national criteria now in preparation: in order to improve their coverage and content, and to ensure that all courses achieve a proper balance between acquiring knowledge and acquiring skills and understanding, and between theoretical and practical work.
- Third, there is a need for differentiated papers or questions in every subject, so that each subject may be taught and examined in a way that reflects the widely differing abilities of candidates more effectively.
- Fourth, examination grades should have a clearer meaning and pupils and teachers need clearer goals. We accordingly need grade-related criteria which will specify the knowledge, understanding and skills expected for the award of particular grades.

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2. We have decided that this programme will be implemented most quickly and effectively through a single system of examinations, to be known as the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). Such a system has been recommended to us by the Secondary Examinations Council and the great majority of organisations within the education service and outside it. We are therefore today inviting the Examinations Boards to confirm their support for national criteria which will incorporate both a requirement for differentiated papers or questions for each subject and grade-related criteria as these come to be developed. Given that confirmation the new system will be introduced for courses beginning in the autumn of 1986 with the first awards in the summer of 1988. I will, with permission, circulate in the Official Report a copy of my letter to the Boards: copies are also available in the Vote Office.

3. The GCSE will be a system of examinations, not a single examination. It will have the 4 features essential for higher standards - fewer examining groups, national criteria, differentiated papers or questions, and grade-related criteria. Certificates will be awarded ~~in a common form~~ by each examining group, with a 7-point scale of grades denoted by the letters A to G. Candidates who do not demonstrate the required minimum level of performance will fail. Within the examining groups, the GCE Boards will have a special responsibility for the 3 top grades, A to C, and <sup>who</sup> will be required to give specific assurances to my RHF and myself about the standard of these grades. When one of these grades is awarded, this will be shown distinctively on the certificate. The examinations will be supervised by the Secondary Examinations Council, reporting as necessary to my RHF and myself.

4. We propose an additional step to encourage the ablest pupils to pursue broad and balanced courses in the 4th and 5th years of secondary education. We shall invite the Secondary Examinations Council and the Examinations Board to co-operate in the introduction of Distinction Certificates for candidates achieving good grades in a broad range of key subjects.

5. The new system of examinations will build on the strengths

Grades A to C will embody standards at least as high as the corresponding O level grades A to C now do. They will be clearly distinguished from grades D to G in that,

sole responsibility for setting and maintaining these standards will rest with

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of O levels and will do more than O levels to stretch the ablest pupils; it will do more than CSE to motivate other pupils. It will more effectively promote worthwhile knowledge, understanding and skills. It will grade candidates by their performance better than now, on the basis of what they themselves know and can do and without regard to the performance of others. It will be clearer to candidates, their parents and employers than is the present system, and it will be more cost-effective. A single system with the features and safeguards on which the Government insists will be a powerful instrument for raising standards of performance at every level of ability.

June 1984

EDUCATION : Future Policy  
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