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Policy Unit pps

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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

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FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE

Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street  
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17 November 1984

Jean Margaret,

In my letter of 10 April, I explained to you the action I had set in hand in connection with Caroline Cox and John Marks and their research. The Department's two studies have now been completed and I attach a copy of the further statement which I am making to the House in today's debate.

As you will see, I have decided against providing funds for more research along the lines of the Department's studies, which were based on one of the statistical approaches that Caroline and John have used in the past. I am however going to look at proposals for research ranging more widely and Caroline and John (as well as others) will be able to consider whether they are able to prepare a suitable research application on this basis.

I am writing to Caroline to put her in the picture.

Yours ever,

Neil



## DRAFT PARLIAMENTARY STATEMENT

I announced in the House on 1 March 1984 (Hansard column 270) that I had asked the Department to undertake two studies before considering the potential for further research in this area. I have now received reports on the two studies and these will be published shortly. Copies are being placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

2. The first of these studies extends the earlier analysis by the Department (published as Statistical Bulletin 16/83) of factors affecting examination results in different local education authority areas. It shows an even higher correlation (over 70 per cent) than the earlier analysis between examination achievements at school and social background factors, probably reflecting the more recent information available for these factors. I explained in my earlier statement that it was expected that the extended study would provide limited insight into the effect of other factors on examination results. In the event, after taking account of the effect of social background, it shows no more than a slight relationship at local authority level between pupils' examination achievements and the level of resources (including teaching resources) available to their schools, and a similarly slight statistical relationship with the proportion of pupils in grammar schools.

3. The second study was designed to examine the scope for carrying out further research on these relationships at the level of individual schools or groups of schools. This study also shows a strong statistical relationship between examination results and social background factors, and again does not show a very substantial relationship with other factors such as the level of resources available to the schools. It also demonstrates the difficulty of extracting suitable data on social background factors from census material. Difficulties over the use and



Interpretation of data relevant to social background are also indicated by research commissioned by the Department and undertaken by the University of Leeds which examined, inter alia, the development of suitable measures of home background. A report on this research is being prepared.

4. The two studies carried out by the Department thus show a strong relationship between school pupils' examination results and socio-economic background, but they shed little light on the influence of other factors on school pupils' performance, or on the wide variation in examination achievements among pupils from similar socio-economic backgrounds. I believe that it would now be research into the factors giving rise to this wide variation, which may be factors related to the way the school carries out its work rather than external to the school, which is likely to be most relevant to the development of the Government's policies for improving standards in schools, particularly if the research also includes other measures of pupil performance.

5. I have concluded that I would not be justified in providing funds for more research along the lines of the Department's recent studies. I am however willing to consider proposals for research ranging more widely and exploring the relationship between the social background of pupils collected at the level of individual pupils, a range of school outputs including public examinations, and a range of school inputs such as resources, the achievements of pupils on entry to secondary schools, teaching quality, the organisation of the school and its internal practices including teacher expectations, curriculum continuity and homework. Such research would be complex and expensive and could not be expected to yield results in less than three years. I shall want the Department to discuss any proposals in detail with the applicants before I decide on financial support.