

E. R.

PRIME MINISTER

OK
over the wife
Shelley.

G.C.S.E.

You thought you might have a word with Baroness Cox about this, before speaking to Sir Keith.

Would you like me to make arrangements for you to have a word with her on the telephone, and to set up a meeting with Sir Keith in the near future?

As you know, time is quite short.

Julie Bowers

Yes please not

PP MARK ADDISON
10 March 1986

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PRIME MINISTER

7 March 1986

GCSE

The note from the Secretary of State about the new GCSE courses is full of the very highest sounding phrases - "rigour", "stretching", "interesting", "relevant", and "usable learning for life". The fundamental issue, however, is whether it will lead to a fall in standards.

GCSE is primarily an attempt to make secondary school courses more relevant and interesting for the middle grades. It will be assessed in 7 grades. The assumption is that grades A, B and C will be "at least as high as the present 'O' Level", and that standards elsewhere throughout the system will be raised.

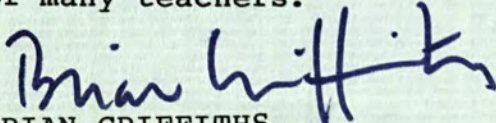
I am sceptical of the DES proposals for the following reasons:

1. It greatly devalues CSE: CSE is and should be different from GCE; it is less academic, more practical and technology-oriented. It is something which needs to be built on, not discarded.
2. GCSE is an exam nobody will fail: it is wide and non-selective in character. GCSE does little for the lowest 30% of students. How can one have a useful assessment which encompasses such variety?

3. In terms of timescale, it is far too ambitious to think that it can be implemented in September 1986 - especially in view of the disruptions of the past year.
4. It will hit the selective schools far more than large comprehensives, because the range of options in the syllabi will be more difficult to satisfy.
5. The increased emphasis on project work course assessment is a bias towards certain kinds of parents: it is also open to great abuse from committed Left-wing teachers.
6. Teachers in the end will teach to the standards set by examinations. The most uncertain aspect of the new GCSE is how, given the greater breadth, relevance and awareness which the courses should produce, one will be able to examine such courses in a rigorous and objective manner.

Recommendations

These fears are shared by many teachers. Arrangements for GCSE to be implemented are already at an advanced stage, but implementation by September 1986 is hopelessly unrealistic. It is too late for major changes. Nevertheless, we recommend that you ask Keith Joseph to postpone implementation until he is sure the new system is workable, and can meet the worries of many teachers.


BRIAN GRIFFITHS

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PRIME MINISTER

G.C.S.E.

The Secretary of State for Education has written to you (attached) explaining why he believes the GCSE is the right way forward.

Also attached is a note from Brian Griffiths which questions Sir Keith's view and proposes holding up the introduction of the new exam.

His proposals for the new GCSE were set out in the White Paper "Better Schools", and Sir Keith has publicly committed himself on several occasions, and recently, to introduction of the new exam in September. Postponing the date would be a very major step to take. I think you could only do so after speaking to Sir Keith.

The notes from the Secretary of State and from Brian Griffiths leave unclear a number of questions about the new exam (for instance how easy will it be for pupils to swop levels half way through a course) and I think Sir Keith would vigorously challenge some of the claims in Brian's note.

You may prefer to let the matter rest here for now and raise it with Sir Keith at some convenient moment in the future.

Agree?

Mark Addison

MARK ADDISON

7 March 1986

SL2AFM

No - there is an awful lot of high language - rather jargon - and repetition in the paper. I really think we should discuss it - but perhaps I will consult Caroline later first not

You expressed concern about standards in the new GCSE. With respect, I think that you are misleading yourself. Of course there will be elements that will need improving but I am quite certain that the new examination is more and potentially very much more stretching than the O levels and CSEs it replaces.

2. GCSE is based on differentiation - testing each pupil to the limit of his or her ability: it will thus require differentiated teaching - selection within schools even where there is no selection between schools.

3. Because it stretches at all levels of ability and because it therefore involves differentiated teaching it is the very linchpin of our "Better Schools" policy for secondary education.

4. All papers in the examination, and all examining, must satisfy the national criteria guidelines approved by me and Nicholas Edwards: we have never had such guidelines before. The guidelines require much more emphasis on understanding and on the application of knowledge as well as on the orderly recall of memorised material. For example, the examination, including moderated assessment for a part of the courses, will assess:

- practical, experimental work in science;
- applied mathematics;
- oral ability in foreign languages;
- competence in speaking and listening in English;
- practical problem-solving in craft, design, technology;
- a grasp of risk and enterprise in business studies and economics.

5. All examinations will be on a differentiated basis - with separate papers, separate questions or stepped questions - so that each range of ability will face tests that will be stretching but within reach.

6. Our aim is that 80-90% of pupils should reach or exceed the standards of attainment now reached by the average: the GCSE will stretch pupils of all levels of ability, and both the ablest and the less able will be challenged to show positive achievement. The Secondary Examinations Council (Chairman Sir Wilfred Cockcroft) will have the job of scrutinising syllabuses and assessment.

7. The ablest will be challenged across a wider range of understanding and skills than now. I intend moreover to press ahead with the objective to be served by the proposed Distinction and Merit certificates for abler candidates despite much criticism.

but the choice is already for wide and substituted subjects

8. Grades A to C of the GCSE will embody standards at least as high as O level - and much more challenging to the ablest - and the present GCE Boards (now responsible for O and A levels) will retain responsibility for the standards of these A to C grades.

9. At lower levels the examination will be far more motivating than now - because stretching though within grasp - and will be taken by a far larger proportion of the age-group than are now O and CSE.

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10. The GCSE starts off as a norm-referenced system - putting pupils in groups ranked in order. But each pupil ought to be tested against the levels of understanding, skills and knowledge to be expected of a pupil of that ability and aptitude.

by politically motivated teachers?

How? By whom?

11. So the full development of the GCSE will come only over the next few years as we move towards use of the crucial grade-criteria (already in first draft in 10 subjects). These grade-criteria will broadly define the levels of understanding, skills and knowledge which a pupil must show to earn different grades - A-G. These definitions will give pupils, parents, teachers and employers a clear picture of what must be mastered or have been mastered for any grade awarded.

12. The new examination will then be quite unlike the present norm-referenced O and CSE where pupils are simply ranked in merit order, with little regard to how much or how little pupils understand, know and can do.

This is not a correct

judgment of the present examination system. We were laughed at 50 years ago. not

13. The new GCSE embodies disciplines which I am sure, contrary to your fears, will inject more rigour, more stretching, more effective, interesting, relevant and use-able learning for life, for work and for individual development than we have ever experienced. I believe that it will be widely copied overseas. It is because it is a key instrument for improving standards that I have made it clear that the GCSE courses will begin as planned in September 1986.

14. The GCSE will reinforce a more demanding curriculum for all pupils and will thus exert, in ways that the present O level and CSE do not, beneficial pressures on what is taught and how it is taught. There are bound to be shortcomings to be corrected but in general I ask you to recognise that this is not only a new examination but is a powerful instrument designed to shape an effective schooling, differentiated but stretching for each level of ability.

K.J.

6 March 1986

KJ

Department of Education and Science

