

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

10 March 2021

Dear Gavin Williamson,

As the leading national organisations representing Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) people in the UK, we urge you to ensure that GRT children are supported to return to school after a year's disruption to their education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While we welcome the announcement of additional funding for the catch-up programme and the prioritisation of support for disadvantaged pupils, we encourage you to take this opportunity to work with schools and parents on closing the pre-existing attainment gap for GRT children.

Children from these communities are already disadvantaged in their education; they have the highest rates of school exclusion of all minority ethnic groups, along with the lowest attainment rates and the poorest educational outcomes. Before the pandemic, an Education Policy Institute report found that Gypsy/Roma pupils were 34 months behind their peers at the end of secondary school¹.

In the past year, many GRT children will have fallen even further behind due to school closures, a rise in elective home education and a lack of educational support and resources. Although digital exclusion is common for GRT families, many children have not had access to the equipment they need or a quiet space to study in. Many GRT parents do not feel confident in their digital and literacy skills to support their children in home learning, and Roma parents face an additional language barrier.

We are also concerned that the rise in elective home education over this period will result in many children not returning to school. As you know, Ofsted is particularly concerned about children being removed from school rolls in circumstances where it is not in the interests of the child.

We are asking you as a matter of urgency to ensure that GRT children are supported at this critical time to progress in their education, and suggest a combination of approaches to make returning to school easier for children and their families:

- Reach out to GRT parents to address concerns about the risk of virus transmission in a school setting and put plans in place for pupils to return.
- Ensure access to the National Tutoring Programme for all GRT children who need support, and make targeted efforts to promote take-up of the programme in the GRT community.
- Remove further barriers for disadvantaged and marginalised children by suspending attendance fines for the rest of this academic year, and confirming offers of school places made before the pandemic.
- Mandate any schools which have GRT children who have been removed from the roll for any reason over the last year (other than phase transfer) to reach out to those families and invite the children back.
- Ask local authorities to reach out to any year seven GRT children who were on the roll in year 6 but have not started at secondary school, with a view to helping them restart their education.
- Make Government funding available for a designated worker in every local authority to ensure that children are not missing out on their access to education.

¹<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-in-england-annual-report-2020/>

The return to classroom learning and the additional support provided for disadvantaged pupils presents an opportunity to focus on closing the attainment gap for GRT children. During the pandemic, Traveller Movement and Roma Support Group have supported children through small-scale tutoring projects such as the Tutors for GRT project and the RSG Aspiration programme, which show that specialised tutoring can make a significant difference. These initiatives alone will not close the attainment gap, but teachers and school leaders can certainly learn from their success.

We also remind you of the obligations on the Department for Education under the public sector equality duty to promote the participation of those with protected characteristics (in this case GRT children) who are underrepresented in public life – this is relevant to schools and also to the employment that can be accessed with a good education.

Beyond learning from individual projects and assessing gaps locally, a review is urgently needed of how to improve social inclusion and educational outcomes for children and young people. We urge the Department for Education to work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to implement without delay a funded cross-government strategy to address the inequalities experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people. Retaining a specialist GRT liaison role for Ofsted should be part of reaffirming the Government's commitment to progress in this area.

It is the responsibility of everyone in the education system to support Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children to return to school and ensure they do not face greater barriers to education than their classmates. We hope you will work with other Government departments and involve schools, parents, local authorities and community organisations to improve life chances for this group of children. We would be pleased to meet with you to discuss the issue further.

Co-signed by:

Roma Support Group
Friends, Families and Travellers
Traveller Movement
Luton Roma Trust
Granby Toxteth Development Trust

cc: Lord Greenhalgh, Minister for Communities, MHCLG
Sir Kevan Collins, Education Recovery Commissioner, DfE
Baroness Janet Whitaker and Martin Docherty-Hughes MP
(Co-chairs of the APPG for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma)
Kate Green MP, Shadow Education Secretary
Wes Streeting MP, Shadow Minister for Schools
Robert Halfon MP, Education Select Committee Chair

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