

Young people have made huge sacrifices to protect public health – their educational recovery needs to be nothing less than a national mission



The education recovery commissioner for England, Sir Kevan Collins, has recently resigned over the lack of COVID-19 catch-up funding. [Carl Cullinane](#) explains that saving money on education recovery will have a huge impact on a generation's skills and wellbeing, which will in turn have huge financial and social consequences in the long term.

The period since March 2020 has been a torrid one for children and young people. They have had to deal with school closures, cancelled activities, closed facilities, restrictions on seeing their friends, and being locked down in their home while many households suffered the health and financial impacts of the pandemic. All the while striving to keep their learning on track in the most trying of circumstances. Schools and pupils have [gone to great lengths](#) to do what they can, and deserve huge commendation for their adaptability and resilience.

At the same time, it cannot be avoided that this has been the greatest peacetime threat to education in living memory, and the scale of our response should reflect that. Young people can bounce back, but without providing the conditions for them to emerge from this crisis and flourish, we will be making a generational mistake. Young people have made huge sacrifices over the past year to protect public health, and educational recovery needs to be nothing less than a national mission.

That is why the resignation of Sir Kevan Collins, the government's Education Recovery Commissioner, has hit so hard. His appointment earlier this year was a sign that the government was taking the magnitude of this challenge seriously. Sir Kevan's expertise and experience is unimpeachable, and his commitment to doing everything within his power to make things better for young people never in doubt. The [information that has emerged](#) on his proposed recovery plan has served to confirm this. The plan, comprising of measures from early years to sixth form and college, driven by evidence and bold in scale, showed the right level of ambition to take on the challenge we face, and has been widely welcomed in the sector. While some elements of the plan have provoked debate more than others, the plan overall showed a commitment to seize the moment. No such plan, conceived in a situation where the interventions needed are both big and urgent, could possibly meet all the expectations of parents, teachers, headteachers and policymakers.

However, what eventually emerged this week has satisfied no one. The remnants of a viable plan are visible in the government's announcement, with a welcome focus on quality teaching and providing continuous professional development, both for teachers, and importantly, for early years practitioners, a sector in huge need of [investment in its workforce](#). The expansion of funding for tutoring is also right, given the [power of small group tutoring](#) to boost educational outcomes quickly. However this announcement will always be defined by what it [didn't include](#): a real plan for getting additional early years provision to the nursery-age children who need it most; a proper extension of targeted funding for less well-off students in post-16 education who have limited time remaining in school; funding for the extracurricular activities young people have so missed over the past year to boost their wellbeing and life skills; serious funding for mental health support in every school; and above all, providing schools themselves with adequate levels of targeted funding in order to serve their pupils in the ways that they know best.

Extending the school day is the issue that has drawn most attention and debate, but it was only ever a vehicle for delivering more for young people. More time to spend doing activities with their friends in after school or breakfast clubs, more time to receive the extra tutoring needed to get them back on track. While using the extra time on evidence-based interventions is important, extending the school day is not just about what is added, it is also about what is not taken away from other parts of the day. Allowing time for tutoring without impinging on normal lessons, and preventing music, drama, sport and extracurricular activities from being squeezed by the pressure on schools to catch up. While the [positive impact on attainment](#) of developing non-academic skills through such activities means a win-win situation, boosting wellbeing, physical health and cultural experiences are valid ends in themselves.

Extending the school day is something difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of in itself, with implementation key; the narrow approach the Treasury appears to have taken here does not fit the situation we find ourselves in. Kicking the can down the road until the autumn would mean there is little chance of changes being implemented in the next school year, and a huge opportunity missed. If we want to make a difference, one thing we do not have the luxury of is time.

As Sir Kevan points out in his [resignation letter](#), saving money on education recovery at this stage is a false economy. The impact of this failure on skills and wellbeing will have [huge financial consequences](#) in the long term, as well as social ones. The past year has seen fiscal largesse from the government unprecedented in modern times, from the furlough scheme to 'Eat Out to Help Out' to business support schemes. Now when it comes to investing in the futures of an entire generation of young people, the government has picked precisely the wrong time for the well to run dry.

About the Author

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