

Rachel Sylvester:

Hello and welcome to this Ark Talk on: What does education recovery mean? I'm Rachel Sylvester, I'm a columnist at The Times and chair of the Times' new education commission. And I can't think of a more important or timely conversation and topic for this first Ark Talk in what I think is going to be a fascinating series of debates.

Rachel Sylvester:

For months, at the beginning of the pandemic, the debate was all about the balance between lives and livelihoods, the economic impact and the health impact of the pandemic. But now, the attention's turning, rightly, to education, which was ignored for so long. And all the consequences are becoming clear: a growing attainment gap, exams canceled, children falling behind. And the government's appointed Kevan Connors, who's with us today, as a catch up tsar.

Rachel Sylvester:

Before I introduce the panel properly, there's a few practical points to mention. If you've got a question for the panel, please submit this using the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen, and please include your name and organization. Closed captions are available. To turn these on, just select the Closed Caption button at the bottom of your screen. You can't be seen or heard during the event. And finally, the session is being recorded.

Rachel Sylvester:

So our panel is brilliant. Sir Kevan Collins, recently, as I said, been appointed by the Prime Minister as the Government's Education Recovery Commissioner, or tsar as we like to say in journalism. Before that, he was Chief Executive Officer of the Education Endowment Foundation, a charity and think tank dedicated to challenging educational disadvantage.

Rachel Sylvester:

Lucy Heller is Chief Executive of Ark Schools, and I'm delighted to say is going to be a commissioner on the Times Education Commission. But first, we're going to hear from Becky Curtis, who's the Principal at Ark Elvin Academy in Wembley. It's a secondary school that joined Ark in 2014 and has shown massive improvements, but the last year can't have been easy.

Rachel Sylvester:

Becky, can you explain what the impact of the pandemic has been on staff and children?

Becky Curtis:

Thank you, Rachel. That's a huge question. I think it probably needs... I think for headteachers across the country, we all need a bit of an Easter break in order to let it all sink in and really reflect on everything that's happened over the last year. But we had our last day in school today of this spring term. So we had our celebration assemblies, and actually we felt like there was a huge amount for us to celebrate as a team, both the staff and the pupils. The resilience, the hard work, the adaptability, I think, that both staff and pupils have shown through everything that has been thrown at us over the last year has been impressive to say the least.

Becky Curtis:

And I guess it makes me feel fiercely defensive of this generation of children, really. I think in many ways we mustn't write them off as the COVID generation. They've shown so much more than that. And certainly, the children in our little corner of Brent in Wembley in North London have really done themselves really, really proud. We're really impressed with the way they've managed everything. Of course, it has been tough. And we're really seeing that now that children are back in the classroom.

Becky Curtis:

The vast majority of our children are delighted to be back in the classroom, and the best thing that we can do for them is just provide them with kind of just the normal reality of being back in the classroom, being with their teachers, and having time with great teachers delivering a fantastic curriculum. We know that that's what they need both socially and academically. And they've really risen to that challenge and come back really pleased to be back. And certainly, the staff have been delighted to be off Microsoft Teams and to be teaching in real life back in their classrooms as well.

Becky Curtis:

But of course, what we have seen, and we've seen this both in terms of the quality of the work the children are able to do in the lessons, and then also in just their own experiences and what they're sharing with us, is that there is a small but significant minority of children who have had a really tough time. And for them, the next few weeks, months, and possibly years are critical for them. There's no magic wand. I bet, I'm sure Kevan will agree, I wish there was, but there certainly isn't a magic wand that will suddenly fix the challenges that children have faced over the last few months.

Becky Curtis:

And those challenges and the barriers that children have faced to work hard over the last few months are not just academic. I think we need to be really clear that when we talk about catch up, it kind of can be quite a reductive approach to the challenge that we face. In fact, for us, the real challenges in Brent... Brent suffered some of the highest COVID rates in the country in the first wave, and so the bereavement that our community has experienced is significant. We have children who are coming back to school who have not just lost a parent, but they may have lost a parent and a grandparent. And these are the family members they live in the same household with. That's a difficult experience for a teenager to bounce aback from.

Becky Curtis:

And then beyond that immediate impact of COVID, of course, they've experienced really significant poverty. And what we saw returning from the first lockdown, and then this one as well, the second school closure, is a significant rise in the number of safeguarding disclosures, so staff sharing concerns about pupils, and pupils directly coming to us in the early days out of lockdown and sharing some of the experiences they've had.

Becky Curtis:

In some cases, these are families who have been struggling for some time; we knew that they were families who were vulnerable. In other cases, they're families who we haven't had any concerns about in the past, and who have just really struggled. They've been through very, very difficult times. And that poverty is not going to go away overnight. In fact, we know that as furlough ends, some of that will be even more challenging.

Becky Curtis:

And so I guess in many ways what we've seen... We serve a very diverse and disadvantaged community, but what we have seen, even with that in our own community, the vulnerable have just got a whole load more vulnerable. And the solutions to that are systemic and long-term.

Becky Curtis:

But I think one thing that we've felt really energized by at Elvin is... And I'm kind of hesitant in saying this, but I really think I do mean it, is that it's amazing how much we have been able to do. Through this year of lockdown and pandemic and all the rest of it, we've felt like we've been in a great position to really support our families and to work together as a team to try and address some of these issues. None of us thought we would be able to open mass testing centers and all the rest of it, and we were able to do that overnight.

Becky Curtis:

And I think that that actually suggests to us that there's actually more that schools can do to address some of these concerns than perhaps we've ever done before. Now, of course, our core business must be curriculum and teaching and learning, but I'm really interested now in ways in which we can use our position at the heart of our community to support the wider issues that families are facing, whether that's through having social services based in our school, our own school social worker, which is something we've always been thinking about.

Becky Curtis:

We've already expanded our counseling services in school. We have Place2Be in school now for four and a half days a week. We'd like to make that full-time and long-term. And also thinking about we should bring back school nurses. Let's have a school nurse here on site to really address some of the wider health issues that we're seeing as children come back out of lockdown, where they have been pretty inactive, and we see that. We see that in our classrooms.

Becky Curtis:

So I think the way forward for schools is... There's an element which is business as usual. The best we can do is provide the very best education to our children day in day out in the classrooms, and a lot of the intervention and supposed catch up needs to just happen in classrooms. But actually, it's interesting, I'd love to hear what the other panelists think about the wider work that schools, if they are well-resourced, can do at the heart of the community as we hopefully build back stronger as we come out of this pandemic.

Rachel Sylvester:

That's really fascinating. Thank you. Somebody said to me the other day that the economists talk about whether it's going to be a V recovery or a W recovery, and actually in terms of education it's going to be a K recovery. So some pupils are going to go up; some pupils are going to go down, though, and it's the most vulnerable who are the ones on that downward slope of the K.

Rachel Sylvester:

Kevan, I just wondered whether you could pick up on some of the things Becky was saying. And to what extent do you think... How do you define catch up? And is it enough... Is just a little bit of tutoring

enough? Do you have to now see this as a chance to really tackle some of those wider challenges? Is that possible? Or is that beyond your remit?

Kevan Collins:

No, not at all. And thank you very much for inviting me part of this. It's great to follow Becky, because the last time we were together I was in her school, and it was a wonderful opportunity to see a great school in action.

Kevan Collins:

I don't actually like the phrase catch up. To be honest, when I was asked to take on this role, I said if it was called 'Catch Up Commissioner', I wouldn't do it. If it was 'Catch Up Tsar', I'd run a million miles, I tell you. I much prefer, even though recovery is... I'm still not sure if that's quite the right word, but it's better than catch up. I think it's much more than that.

Kevan Collins:

The overwhelming sense for me, being in the role for five or six weeks and talking to lots of schools, lots of children, lots of parents, that's what I've been doing really, is to appreciate that what we've seen, as Becky was saying, the best and worst of the system, really. We've seen schools turn on a sixpence to develop ways of teaching which are just sensational.

Kevan Collins:

I think the step forward we've seen in, particularly, technology and the way parents are involved is something we want to capture. There's something remarkable happened there. Who would ever have a parent's evening again where you're trying to find a car parking space in the rain when you can actually do it in a really lovely way? So I think we've seen huge innovation, and it's been inspirational seeing schools in action in this country over this year.

Kevan Collins:

But we've also seen this variation. So some children have actually not had that kind of experience, they've had a pretty meager experience. So the legacy of COVID could easily be a widening gap in our system. Now, we already had the issue of inequality and disadvantage, but it could just be exacerbated, to your point Rachel, of the K recovery, and I think that would be the worst legacy, growing inequality in this country, generally.

Kevan Collins:

But in education, we've basically wiped out... On the current data we're looking at, we've already wiped out 10 years of progress to narrow the gap. We need to make sure we get back on track and narrow the gap, as we were one of the few industrial nations doing that, and I think we should have been proud of that.

Kevan Collins:

Equally, the average child has missed 115 days of 190 days. So while I completely respect this idea that some have shown remarkable resilience because they've been in great schools, we mustn't catastrophize this but we mustn't underestimate what's happened. This is a huge challenge, perhaps the challenge of our generation as educators.

Kevan Collins:

And I won't spend too long on it, but it seems to be in the work... When I agreed to come out of semi-retirement and take this on, which is just a great honor, there are three key principles for me. The recovery work must be fair. COVID, across the board, has not been an even kind of event. It has particularly hit the poor hardest. It's hit the elderly hardest. It's been unequal in the way it's distributed its kind of havoc. And so our attention must be... We must focus on where the greatest need is and the children have lost most, so it must be fair.

Kevan Collins:

It must be focused. I think we should identify a relatively small number of things that we can really implement well. We're not very good, actually, as a national system, at implementing change. We seem to think that a speech from a podium does it in education. In fact, it's the heart and soul of change right into the system. Not schools that are lucky to be in great organizations like Ark, but schools that stand alone that don't get the support. How do we make sure that everybody benefits from the recovery? We need to implement well.

Kevan Collins:

And finally, because of the scale of this, and it's a huge event, we must do a few fearless things. We must be ready for some bold stuff. And so you then move quickly, don't you? You say, "Well, what are the outcomes you would look for to know whether your recovery had been a success?" To the title of this event. And I've got three that I'll share, and we can talk about this and have a conversation. None of this is set. I don't know any more than anyone else.

Kevan Collins:

But I think the three are: attainment, we must return progress and attainment, we must get that back for all children, because that's still a great proxy indicator to a life of work and wellbeing. We must focus on the gap. As people know, my whole life's work wasn't EF. I spent most of my life working at DCS and teacher and headteacher in East London and Bradford. I'm absolutely obsessed with this failure we have to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged in education.

Kevan Collins:

And then we also, though, know, and what COVID's taught us, is that schools are much more than places, as Becky was talking about it, where children learn skills and knowledge. It's the place where children learn to be the human beings we want them and they want to be. So the wider outcomes for children must be one of the outcomes we look for, the social, emotional, physical development of children.

Kevan Collins:

So you've got the education, you've got the gap, and you've got these wider outcomes, something we haven't really addressed. We've all known in our hearts, we've all done it at our school level, but the system has never really recognized it and captured it as an outcome that we really value. So I'm convinced that this is a moment when we grab that and make that part of how the system assesses its response.

Kevan Collins:

The issue there, of course, is that this needs to be from the bottom up. Becky's story's really important. But we don't yet really know the impact of COVID, because it's going to be a story for every child, and that story hasn't yet been written. So we need to build this up from the bottom. Schools need to spend, as they are now, I think it's great, time with their children, assessing their children carefully, diagnostic assessment so they can think about the adjustments they'll make. But they're the big outcomes that I'd be looking for. But this needs to be worked out from the school up as we determine what the priorities are.

Kevan Collins:

And finally, you get to the question of what your inputs might be if they're your outcomes and you've got these kind of principles of fair, focused, and fearless. And the kind of things that I'm exploring that I think are worth considering are all informed by the evidence. And the first is, and this isn't particularly sexy, but it's hugely powerful: we must do everything we can to support our teachers to teach like they've never taught before.

Kevan Collins:

How do we do that? How do we empower teachers and support them? In Year Seven this year, there are going to be more young people arriving in Year Seven, on average and according to the evidence, who are still not reading at the level they would have been reading last year. Year Seven and Key Stage Three need to be ready and equipped to meet the needs of children who have literacy challenges, that they are not at the normal level of literacy in Year Seven. We need to support teachers to do that. So how do we support our teachers to meet the challenge for themselves?

Kevan Collins:

The second is that we do know that the targeted work from the evidence...

Kevan Collins:

And by the way, evidence is clear that investing in your teachers is the best investment ever in education, so we need to support our teaching workforce.

Kevan Collins:

Targeted work, tutoring, additional support for some children: very, very powerful. We've got tutoring now more widespread in the system; I think that should become a fixture and fitting of our system. I think tutoring is something which has for too long been the, if you like, privilege of those that already have privilege. We need to make tutoring now a widespread opportunity for more and more children, otherwise the arms race in education, the growing inequality is a risk. And how do we make that accessible and affordable for more children through schools? And that will require... All this requires resources, of course.

Kevan Collins:

And finally, and this is the one where the fearless bit comes in, we may need to ask ourselves about the amount of time children are spending in school. If we want children to extend the outcomes they have and have a broad and rich education experience, let's call it that, perhaps we should spend more time. You go to Becky's school in Brent, and it's one of the most beautiful assets around for children in that community. It needs to be fully used as often as possible for as much time as possible for children to

grow and thrive and learn. And I don't just mean more academic learning. I mean a broad education experience: art, culture, sport, all the things that build these wider outcomes that I'm passionate about. And that might make us think about, "Well, should we actually increase the amount of time children have opportunities to learn?" And of course, pay for that and build that into the provision.

Kevan Collins:

So there's some of my opening kind of, if you like, proposals and thoughts about: how do you create a response to what has been a huge shock to the system? I would just finish with two points: recovery, it's not an activity. Recovery is an outcome of a great education system, not an activity you bolt onto an education system. So it's the response of everything we do rather than bolting on a bit of recovery.

Kevan Collins:

And finally, the success of all of this will be that our system at the end is stronger and fairer, because our system wasn't strong enough and it wasn't fair enough. And so all of this should lead, I hope, to a stronger and fairer system, as well as a broad and rich recovery for all of our children.

Rachel Sylvester:

Really fascinating. Thank you. Lucy, what's your response to that? Do you think the government has the ambition and the commitment to this agenda to really drive through a recovery that lasts?

Lucy Heller:

I think if Kevan is able to get through the plans that he's talking about, it will be fantastically exciting. We will wait and see whether... I would guess in some cases... I'm sure that the Prime Minister is behind him, whether the Chancellor will agree to the ambition of some of those plans is another question.

Lucy Heller:

So I think one of the things I'm clear is that this is... We've all said, recovery is a long haul. It's a matter of years not months, and it's going to be a serious effort. We've got, at the same time, to make sure that we find the right call to arms. And I think Kevan was sort of covering some of that.

Lucy Heller:

But one of the things I worry about, I think people have had an exhausting year, I mean, across schools. And Becky was talking about how great it's been to have everybody back in school. I'd have to say I think many people in schools are also feeling quite excited at the prospect of the Easter break, because it's been such an exhausting time that I think for many, particularly school leaders, there's a real risk that we start losing people. And that too much talk, which I know Kevan and Becky are very careful to avoid, of the 'lost generation', the 'catch up', the kind of slightly miserabilist catastrophizing that goes on, is not calculated to make school leaders, teachers, and students feel, "Yay!"

Lucy Heller:

I don't want to think about the prospects of two, three years of recovery, of getting back to where we were, which we all recognize wasn't good enough. I think the exciting piece would be to think about how we accelerate beyond, and use this opportunity to get the resources particularly to the most vulnerable. Because to pick up the point that both Becky and Kevan have made, this has been a hugely varied experience. And that's not just region to region or even from school to school, it's within classrooms.

Lucy Heller:

And Becky talked about the children who have become even more vulnerable. I think there's a whole group of children who we're just discovering who have become vulnerable as a result of what's happened to them during the pandemic. So getting that right and making sure that we have the right focus on them and that we don't overload schools...

Lucy Heller:

I think the one danger and my one reservation on... I think I'm entirely with Kevan's three Ts: the time, teaching, and tutoring, but I do think on the time piece, it's really important that time is only valuable if it's used well. Schools are under huge pressure. It needs to be... You need to allow schools to make the decisions about how to use the time, what their particular intake needs, and where they find capacity.

Lucy Heller:

We've always been keen on a longer school week, and the sort of breadth of the curriculum is partly created by that. But I think we've seen over the years that it only makes sense if you have the capacity to deliver it all at high level. More time spent badly is useless. And one of the reasons, I guess, I'm optimistic in a sense about the recovery that we can do in a relatively short time is the realization that not all the time that children were spending before in classroom was being brilliantly used.

Lucy Heller:

I think children have the capacity to go much faster, which I think again takes us back to the other thing that Kevan was talking about, that it's about making students feel that they have this agency, the sort of personal, social, emotional skills that they need to take control of their own lives and their own education, and to feel that they're in charge on that. So we're working on many of those things.

Lucy Heller:

And I think in terms of the gaps, which is key to us, that's why Ark exists, sort of one piece is going to be our digital strategy. That, I think, it took us some time, as many schools, to get up to speed on remote learning. And one of the obvious blocks was that not every child had access either to any kind of device, or indeed to internet access. So from September every Ark student from Year Four up will have a Chromebook, will have the internet access. We're already doing that in a big way to provide for those who didn't have them. There's now a kind of universal provision.

Lucy Heller:

Thinking about how you use that interestingly to give students agency, control over their own learning, to give parents engagement is one of the other things that we're looking at. And that, I think, pick up a point... I think one of the few silver linings, if you like, of the pandemic has been both that increased sense from parents of the value of schools and the appreciation for the work that teachers do.

Lucy Heller:

But also it's been very good for developing relationships with parents, that actually the online remote parent meetings, that have been terrific, that have enabled us to get 100% attendance, that have enabled people to ask questions that they might not ask when they're in a meeting but feel comfortable about doing in the chat. We wouldn't want to go to a completely online relationship, but it's really opened up things.



Lucy Heller:

So there are some good things, and I think now we've got the sort of long haul ahead, but what I hope we can do is find that ambitious vision of the kind of sunlit uplands, it isn't just about getting us back to where we were, but feels, as I do, excited about the prospect of the next few years.

Rachel Sylvester:

That's really fascinating. Kevan, do you think that Boris Johnson and the Treasurer, Rishi Sunak, as Lucy says, understand that need for... They talk a lot about building back better, but do they really have the scale of ambition that's required in education? Both in terms of money but also in terms of actually going beyond? It's not just getting back to where we were because where we were wasn't working.

Kevan Collins:

It's very difficult, isn't it, to speak for people? So all I do at the moment is I see it as I find it. And I should declare, in terms of doing this role, I made the decision not to become part of the machine. I'm not a civil servant. I'm not being paid. I'm doing it on my own terms. And that's very good because that means that at this time of my life, I've literally got nothing to lose. I'm not defending an organization, I just come with whatever I come with. So it makes you feel very empowered, actually, to use that phrase.

Kevan Collins:

But the Prime Minister has now said a couple of times in public, and lots of times in private, that the education recovery, for him, is the number one priority of the issues we now face. And I'm willing to take that at face value. And I was given the challenge... I don't have executive authority but I have the responsibility to set down for him and for Gavin and other people, the Secretary of State here: how would you meet this challenge?

Kevan Collins:

So setting an ambitious program is my responsibility, and I think we do need to be ambitious, to Lucy's point. This is not a time to be timid. It's not a time to tinker. It's a time to say, "This is a huge issue we face." There's a group of young people, for example, in Year 13, I will answer your question directly, who've got less time to learn. So they're the young people who aren't going to A Level, they're not going to university, they're in FE colleges, about 40% of our cohort. And if you look at the labor market in the next couple of years for young people, it looks really, really difficult.

Kevan Collins:

And the last time we had a huge recession, the NEET figures rose to about 17.5%. Now that cost the country about 28 billion pounds, when you've got 17.5% NEET. So this isn't about spending, this is about investing. This is about ensuring... The estimates from the economists, people like [inaudible 00:28:05] and the IFS and others, are that the loss to our economy because of the education loss could be anywhere into the... The lowest estimate is 90 billion. The biggest estimate is at 360 billion.

Kevan Collins:

So Lucy's right, this link between families and children is important, but also this link between what we do as educators and how we actually are building the future of this country. And when you think about it in terms of our current economic state and where we now stand in the world, that's really important.

Kevan Collins:

So yes, they're ambitious. I've seen that. Will they come forward with the money when we actually lay this on the table? Lucy's right. I'm always optimistic and naïve, I guess. But as I say, I'm setting it out as I see it. Conversations like this really, really help to hold my reserve, and hold me to it, keep me honest, and remind me why it's so important. So I'm going at this optimistic but with eyes wide open.

Rachel Sylvester:

There's so many questions from the audience here. I'm going to start with a few of those. Becky, I wondered if you'd like to address this? Louisa Searle from First Give asks, "What role do you see social action, active citizenship, community action playing in our education recovery?" I thought that was relevant to some of the things you mentioned which I thought were interesting.

Becky Curtis:

Yeah. I think certainly in some of the work we've been doing with our pupils as they come back into school in our character development and our form time curriculum, we've been thinking a lot about how we give back to our communities and how we support our wider communities through the experiences that they're having, and the role that the children can play in that.

Becky Curtis:

And I think, in some ways, this generation experiencing such an extraordinary, international, life-changing event has politicized them and opened their eyes to a wide range of issues that perhaps other generations just aren't as aware of, because you haven't experienced something like this. And so I think there's definitely an opportunity for that.

Becky Curtis:

I think the pastoral programs, the PSHE type programs that exist within schools are really, really important in all of this. They mustn't be lost in any kind of manic catch up work, because it's the wider development of the child that we've been speaking about that can help them see their part and the role they play in building out of this experience. So I think there's definitely a part to play in that, yeah.

Rachel Sylvester:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Lucy, this is from Laka Sharma from Ark Oval Primary Academy, and she says, "How do we ensure the breadth of the curriculum whilst closing gaps that will have emerged?" It's that balance between sort of catching up and then still ensuring that the depth is there. What do you think heads should do?

Lucy Heller:

Well, I think it's a tough challenge for anyone. My general sense would be one... I guess, Kevan would say his three Ts answer that, that if you have the additional time... We hope that at Ark we have enough time in the curriculum to allow for the breadth and to allow for the focus on sort of core. I hope that we're going to be able to use, whether it's tutoring or it's just in-house sort of small group or one-to-one intervention. I think it needs the right focus on where the gaps are.

Lucy Heller:

I mean, I'm not sure that there is a silver bullet answer to that that says, "Here's how we resolve it." It's going to look different in every school. I hope that we've got probably at least the building blocks of that. We have generally slightly longer days than average. But using that time sort of well and efficiently.

Lucy Heller:

I hope again that the digital strategy makes some difference to that, that increasingly being able to personalize the learning, allowing students to have some agency about doing the catch up long-term is making use of some of the exciting developments with adaptive learning to enable kids to do some of the catch up themselves. But for now, it will be making sure that we have enough of the sort of small group intervention.

Rachel Sylvester:

Kevan, did you want to come in on that?

Kevan Collins:

Yeah. I think it's a really great question. And I agree with everything that Lucy said. But there's also a point when we're just going to have to call what we think's the most important things to teach. And talking, of course, to colleagues at Ark... I'm talking to the experts on notions like mastery, And we know that some learning is hierarchical, and so this attention to the curriculum is going to be really, really important.

Kevan Collins:

And sometimes it's content, it's knowledge that has to be secure before you move on. And I think with some children, you're going to have to cast your net wider and potentially go back to an earlier piece of learning and focus on it in order to build. Now, something might have to give to do that. You can't teach faster. You could teach more if you had more time. But some decisions are going to have to be made.

Kevan Collins:

And there's quite good evidence around the world where people have made the decision to adjust their curriculum and be adaptive, as Lucy said, and how that's supported children in the long run. I'm thinking of some of the evidence out of countries... Big study out of Pakistan with war-torn school loss. Whereas when people don't adjust, that has particularly negative effects for the disadvantaged children.

Kevan Collins:

Equally, rather than a curriculum area... I can see a question from Andrew that relates to this. If I was back teaching Year One, which I have taught in my time, I'd be thinking about the fact that children in Reception had missed some really crucial experiences around play, about being together, negotiating, falling out, making up, taking turns, all the things that do self-regulation, delayed gratification, all the stuff that is crucial in the Reception curriculum experience, I would have to know that you'd have to make some time for that to happen in Year One.

Kevan Collins:

And that will be an adjustment of the resources, of the materials, of the way I'm organizing, because I'm going to have to do that as well as get the core foundations of literacy in place. But of course, we know that oral language and all that kind of play is crucial to literacy development. So this is where this

investment in teaching is for me. We're going to have to make some quite difficult choices for some children about what we prioritize in the curriculum, particularly what we need to reach back in and pull forward, because it's a crucial building block as you move forward.

Rachel Sylvester:

Becky, do you want to come in on that question?

Becky Curtis:

Yeah. I mean, I can't talk about it for primary, but certainly in secondary, we have always looked at depth before breadth, but not instead of breadth, at Elvin, because on average our children join us at very low starting points and we have significant... Up to 50% of our pupils were not educated in this country for primary schools, so we're quite used to the work that needs to be done when children have had disrupted education. And so for some of our children, they may only do five GCSEs, but they're going to get some great grades with those five GCSEs.

Becky Curtis:

You have to make those decisions. And we prioritize English and maths, and we're very happy to do that, and it's right to do that. And for some children, that might mean that they have up to nine or ten hours of English a week taught by wonderful English teachers, a great curriculum, and that's what they need to make the progress and to get to where they can get to.

Becky Curtis:

And we've seen the most extraordinary progress. We were celebrating in our Year 12 assembly this morning a young lady, who was at a Grade One at the beginning of Year Nine, has just got a top distinction in her science BTEC in January this year in the middle of the pandemic. That progress is possible. We see it. And we see it all the time at our school.

Becky Curtis:

But you do have to make those decisions and you do have to reduce the breadth of the curriculum for the children who need it the most. But that's not at the expense of that kind of wider child stuff. You still do the PE and the PSHE and the character development, and you still have the wonderful enrichment, as soon as we can do it again, the trips and all the rest of it. So I think that that's the balance we need to get right.

Rachel Sylvester:

There's a really interesting question here from Jackie Sharman. She says, "Post-COVID there's a real opportunity for growth," is the subject. "Is it an opportunity to challenge the norm, eg. exams, time for teachers' learning." On the exams question, I mean with two years now without normal exams, Kevan, do you think we have to reopen... A lot of people are saying GCSEs now, time to look again at all of that. How radical do you think the shakeup needs to be?

Kevan Collins:

So I don't think my answer's going to be super popular. This goes back to my focus point about what do we bite off now? There's a whole issue about the GCSE and the normal distribution which concerns me quite a lot, which I've talked about before and written about before. And there's a whole issue about the

young people we ask to take their GCSEs again. And I don't understand why we put young people through failure twice when we can pretty much predict some of that stuff, and we couldn't give them a four year program.

Kevan Collins:

Level Two does really, really matter. So a decent GCSE... I think what Becky said about English and Maths still sit right at the heart of a sort of empowered opportunity in life, so everything we can do to get that, I'm for. That particular exam, the way we do it, I think there's a debate. I personally don't think it's for now.

Rachel Sylvester:

Okay. Lucy, what about you on those sort of wider questions about exams, time for teachers' learning that Jackie mentioned?

Lucy Heller:

I guess on the assessment question, I'm probably not at the... Rarely, I'm not entirely aligned with Kevan on that, because I do think it's important for us to be looking at some of those things. I certainly don't want to throw the exam baby out with the bathwater. I absolutely agree that it's really important. I think it's really important in terms of the achievement gap that we keep some solid measure of attainment.

Lucy Heller:

But I think that one of the things that the pandemic has sort of underlined for me is the extent to which we have a great many years of schooling apparently balancing on a pinpoint of data. And I do think that our children are arguably sort of over-examined in some cases and not at great benefit to their education.

Lucy Heller:

But it's a very delicate thing. I don't think it's a question sort of, in a sense, for immediate answers. I think this could at least open up the debate. And in some ways, the fact that we won't have solid external exam data for effectively three years, I think it will be at least 2023 before we have something that starts being comparable, that gives us a kind of breathing space to look at it objectively. I hope it's the kind of thing the Times Commission's going to be looking at.

Rachel Sylvester:

Definitely. Becky, do you have a view? I mean, do you feel that it's the pressure is so much... As a parent, it seems to be all about the mark scheme as much as about the learning these days. Is that how it feels as a head?

Becky Curtis:

I think great teachers do not allow children to feel like subjects are reduced to a mark scheme. And certainly, a great curriculum doesn't allow that either. And so we should avoid that at all costs. And I know that my teachers at Elvin know that we don't want children at the beginning of Year 10 being told, "This is how you answer question B on paper two," or whatever. It's about studying Macbeth and loving the text and really exploring that. So I think, that's just poor teaching, to be honest. I think that we can do much better than that.

Becky Curtis:

I agree with what others have said. Now is not the time to tinker with exams. I think there's definitely question marks, but not now. And no head in the country, I'm sure, can say that the CAGs process we're about to go through is better than a set of exams. So yeah, we'll see where that ends, I think.

Kevan Collins:

Rachel, we could face the delicious scenario of the best ever GCSE results with the most disrupted year of education.

Lucy Heller:

Yes. I've [crosstalk 00:40:31].

Kevan Collins:

And that would send an interesting signal in terms of how we as a profession present that. How we describe the importance and value of teacher assessment. I think it's going to be... It's just something I think we should be wary of.

Rachel Sylvester:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, will they have the credibility, I suppose, is the issue?

Kevan Collins:

Yeah. Yeah. Of course it's the issue. And I personally do think exams, particularly for disadvantaged children, is a fairer way. You have to follow the evidence. The data is clear about how unbiased and how unconscious bias kicks in. I know that won't happen in many, many schools because of the work that's being done, but that will be something we have to explain to ourselves and to the system.

Rachel Sylvester:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). There's an interesting question here from Nina Bell. This may be for you Kevan, actually. "There's been talk of longer school days and shorter school holidays so children can catch up on lost learning. From what we've heard, you favor a broader and more balanced approach. Can you tell us what plans are in place to support children to regain confidence and enjoy experiences that are essential for life? And how will this support be targeted and sustained?" I guess that's a question about what, in practice, this is all going to mean.

Kevan Collins:

Yeah. So for me, the idea of more time to learn is the broad experience. I'm rejecting the idea that there's academic learning over here and there are non-cognitive or soft skills over here, I think these things live in a virtuous sort of set of relationships, and we must reject that false dichotomy. So a broad and rich experience is what I'm talking about. So I don't want it to be bolted on, I want this is woven into what should a great, rich experience.

Kevan Collins:

Now, I do think we have seen for young people issues around... Becky mentioned it, some issues around mental health, the lack of socialization, whether it's physical, obesity, a whole set of things where we've

learnt that schools really, really matter. I mean, the great example for me would be imagining when I was 15 that I'd had a year when I hadn't been out and about with my mates to define my own personal identity. Because that's where it happened. It didn't happen in my home, it happened with my peers. So even for teens, something has been missing, and we need to think about this. We just can't pretend it didn't happen.

Kevan Collins:

And I think this rich experience is something which for too many kids had been narrowed. Not at Becky's school and not at most Ark schools, but there are too many children have been going to schools where the day has been shortened, where they've been going home early, where you think, "Actually, what's the education experience? Not just the lessons." And that's the bit that I think is so valuable that I want to capture.

Rachel Sylvester:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). This question follows on actually, from Samantha Booth for Kevan. "Do you think the funding is enough for summer schools? Is one or two weeks, even at high quality, enough? And how do you ensure that students attend?"

Kevan Collins:

So I always said, when it was announced, I'd just got there, that two things happen. I think that's not a recovery, it's a bit of a kind of stop-gap. The summer schools approach is saying to schools, "There's enough money, potentially, about 80% of Year Sevens, is that what you want?" We opened it up and said to schools, "You choose who goes. It can be across all year groups." Probably you'll always need more money. I think that's going to be a constant refrain.

Kevan Collins:

The targeting is important. I think it's for schools to decide who should attend. There is an issue, of course, when we've done studies on summer schools in the past, that you have this thing in England often called 'opportunity hoarding', where when you create a new opportunity, it's taken by the very people who don't need it. And that's constant, whether it's children centers, early years, whatever. And if we do increase the hours, that's why if that is where we go, my own view is it should be compulsory for children. Because if you start making it voluntary, you will get a skewed attendance.

Kevan Collins:

But the other thing that happened in that package for the summer, by the way, a big important shift that people might not have clocked: when the first COVID recovery fund came out it was pro-rata for every child, that first 600 million. The recovery premium that came out recently, we used a pupil... When I say, "We," it's not a we. The Department used the pupil premium to allocate the mechanism, which meant that the money... With a decent floor for all schools, but the money disproportionately went to areas of disadvantage, and that's something I'm really pleased they did and we should do with all of this kind of funding.

Rachel Sylvester:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). So Kristen Hicks...

Lucy Heller:

Kevan, [crosstalk 00:45:07]... I was just saying, Kevan, you can reassure Susan Hawes who's saying, "Pupil premium? What's happened? Is this superseded?"

Kevan Collins:

No.

Lucy Heller:

And I know you'll be able to say, "Not."

Kevan Collins:

No. Pupil premium stays. As well as.

Rachel Sylvester:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). This-

Becky Curtis:

The only other thing I would add... Sorry to jump into that.

Rachel Sylvester:

Sorry. No.

Becky Curtis:

Is that certainly our experience of serving a particularly disadvantaged community is that pupil premium is still a very blunt tool, and poverty goes way beyond that group of pupils, and we do need to make sure that particularly the working poor, so families who have very low incomes but are working many, sometimes more than two or three jobs to make ends meet, that they're children experiencing real poverty and they need to be able to access this resource and the opportunities that come with it.

Kevan Collins:

Becky, the new guidance on the pupil premium, I think, came out yesterday or whenever it's coming out, which clearly, in my view, is that the best way to raise the attainment and the broader outcomes for disadvantaged young people is to get great teaching.

Becky Curtis:

Great.

Kevan Collins:

So the idea is that half of the pupil premium actually should be spent on raising the quality of teaching, whether that's retention, recruitment, training for all children. And then, 25% on, this is the guidance, not statutory, 25% on targeted and 25% on enriched, but the best way to raise attainment for disadvantaged kids is to improve the quality of teaching for everybody, and the pupil premium should be used... Half of it should be used for that, in my view.



Rachel Sylvester:

That's really fascinating. This sort of follows on. From Ed Davison, he's from the Office for Students, universities regulator, and he's a former Ark teacher. His question is, "What's going to be the appropriate balance between central government mandate and prescription and school autonomy when it comes to education recovery?" Now he says, "For example, Kevan is suggesting stipulating more time in education," and you talked about it being compulsory, Kevan, "But Lucy's suggested that schools need to have agency about how that's done." Lucy, do you want to pick up on... I suppose you could have agency over how you use the extra time?

Lucy Heller:

Well, I think it's definitely an interesting discussion and a kind of perennial one, that there was always going to be that sort of balance of where decisions are made, from the center, where obviously we're looking for the funding, and the school. And, mostly, schools would always say, "We know what we're doing. We want to have the money. We want to have the autonomy to decide on that." It's a difficult balance. A

Lucy Heller:

And I think I'm conscious, even reading that Ed was a sort of Ark teacher, sometimes those discussions and tensions play out within any sort of multi-academy trust that's saying there's a network decision on things which may not always be where schools want to go.

Lucy Heller:

I think in this case, I'm sure... On the timing, I think there's probably going to be, I hope, enough room for maneuver that schools will be able to decide how they use it. But there will be some givens, which will be, so for instance, saying that it's extra time for all pupils. As Kevan has said, that some schools would say they'd like to do it differently. It's a balance. I hope there'll be enough flexibility in the end result. But we look to Kevan for that.

Kevan Collins:

I think that's important for me that the idea that the school... I trust schools to do this, and I trust... But you also have to put into the equation, don't you, you've got the support but you have to think about accountability. There's no getting away from it. And it's not an oxymoron to talk about intelligent accountability.

Kevan Collins:

So one of the questions there is that I think the inspection framework, for example... Personally, I think the new inspection framework is a step on. And there's a section in there around the personal development of young people, which is slightly underplayed. I'd like to beef up our attention to that element of how we're assessing schools and the performance of schools, and move away from it just being the numbers, the scores on the doors, if you like, the results, which are important.

Kevan Collins:

So that's where I'd look to: a really well-designed, a very carefully informed process that says, "Talk to me about the way you're using the time." The classic kind of intent, implementation, impact discussion of Ofsted. "Talk to me about the way you're thinking about using this opportunity and this funding to

increase time." Time has a very, very big price tag. And nobody must be deluded to think that it won't come with some strings around accountability. Are we getting the outcomes we expect? It's got to come with that. I think we've just got to be sort of potentially grown-up about that.

Kevan Collins:

But while someone from the Office of Students is on the call, the other thing, I'd like to put a challenge back to colleagues at HE. We've got young people doing physics A Level who are going on to do physics degrees. And I'm really hoping that what universities are doing, and I have been talking to some of the Vice Chancellors, is making sure that they're thinking about foundation courses, physics 101, making their syllabus really clear so young people have got the chance to really understand all the physics content they needed to have covered to thrive in physics when they get to university. And that needs to be supported by the universities, and I'm really hoping they step up to their responsibility in that kind of step. Because it's upstream where people need to talk responsibility as well.

Rachel Sylvester:

There's quite a few questions coming in on teachers. And Jenny in Ashmond says, for example, "Teachers are exhausted and have probably worked harder in the past year than ever before. How can we enable them to be the best possible teachers for their children? And what can we take off them to allow them to focus on their key focus of teaching?"

Rachel Sylvester:

And actually, if the whole school day's going to potentially be longer, Becky, how's that going to work for teachers? Is it going to put extra pressure? Are you going to have to have... I know Rob Halfon, the Chair of the Education Select Committee's, talked about perhaps having volunteers or charities running the afterschool clubs rather than teachers, but then there's a danger of quality control. How would you manage that?

Becky Curtis:

Well, I think this extra time, as Kevan says, is expensive. It needs to be resourced, because it can't just be done on the goodwill of teachers. And the core business of delivering the curriculum and teaching fantastic lessons, that takes time. Teachers need time to do that really, really well.

Becky Curtis:

I know that my teachers at Elvin, they love doing enrichment as well. They want to do enrichment as well. But it can't all be on their shoulders. We need to bring in additional resources to do that, and do that really, really well.

Becky Curtis:

I would say the best people to do that are people in school, not external organizations. So pay for more teachers, have more staff in school, and support staff who can do that, and do that on a manageable timetable so that staff are still fresh and excited about teaching the next morning as well. So yeah. It's just expensive. It needs the resource.

Rachel Sylvester:

Lucy, what do you say to that? The pressures on teachers?

Lucy Heller:

I agree. I agree absolutely. And I think, and I'm certainly hoping, I think, that the funding available will allow schools to make the choice about whether they're bringing in extra staff, paying overtime to people, or bringing people in outside.

Lucy Heller:

And I agree with Becky, I mean, I think there's fundamental problems. We have in some cases, in terms of lots of extracurricular provision, we have the variety of small differences. There are lots of organizations doing very good work but that overlap, so that it's sometimes difficult for schools to make sense of that provision.

Lucy Heller:

On the whole, I think the people who know students best are the best people to provide that enrichment. It's not always possible, but we should be trying to ensure that as much possible sort of starts with schools, but they need the options to do it in the way that makes sense for them.

Rachel Sylvester:

Kevan, I saw you nodding vigorously during that. I suppose, does the government understand how much this is all going to cost? Are you telling them? Or do they want it all to be down to the Big Society?

Kevan Collins:

No, no, no, no. I always nod when Lucy's speaking, but no. No.

Becky Curtis:

So do I.

Kevan Collins:

There we go. It has to be... It has to be... Of course it's been costed. And it has to be... It comes with a serious price tag. I think this question of who delivers what is really important. I absolutely think no teacher will have to do extra time without being paid. Of course not. And teachers won't have to do it if they don't want to do it. But you may find that there are some teachers who want to do some extra time. You find you get more flex... I wish we'd got into more flexible working patterns in some schools. That hasn't really broken through.

Kevan Collins:

We'll obviously need more teachers, that's, I hate to say this, but in a recession it's a good time to recruit teachers. There may be other people that we get in. I think there's a place for artists in residence and sports instructors and others, if we're going to broaden the experience.

Kevan Collins:

But I don't want to think of it all... And this will be hard, though, Becky. I don't want it all to be thought of at the end. I think it's a broader, richer curriculum. There's great evidence about breakfast clubs and early starts for primary schools, for example. That's a strong, solid piece of research. So I think it's... And I keep using the phrase, I think it's this description of schools building this richer, broader experience

with more time and working out, with the resources and support, how you sort of staff and resource that.

Rachel Sylvester:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Do you think the curriculum's become too reductive with this kind of... Post the Gove reforms, it's been very narrowly focused on academic work.

Kevan Collins:

I think in some schools... Obviously this is a gross generalization. In some schools, the education experience has become reductive. I've got a personal prejudice, and probably some people will shout at me now, I don't like half an hour for lunch for a thousand children. I don't know what we're saying to children about the experience of eating together. I think playtime is important. I think you learn all sorts of things. I know that's difficult in terms of... So for me, it's this: what is the whole experience for? And that's the agenda, I think, the time should be thought about in relation to.

Rachel Sylvester:

Yeah. Lucy, what would you say to that? Do you think it's about broadening the whole experience? That we need to learn from this that education is beyond English, maths, algebra, and dates, and kings and queens?

Lucy Heller:

I'm not sure I take that. I'm always surprised when people say that the pandemic has revealed the huge sort of inequalities. Similarly, I don't think that the pandemic has shown us that a full, broad education's important. I think those things we knew already. I think it becomes doubly important in sort of recovering from that.

Lucy Heller:

I mean, getting children back into schools, showing them richness, there needs to be... They've had, in many cases, a miserable time. They need partly to have some joy in education. So partly what's important.

Lucy Heller:

There is sometimes, and I think it's more the popular press than it is in education, the sort of grad grind version that says, "We're going to get them back and we're going to drill them and we're going to do sort of summer school and weekend school." And that's not the thing that's going to drive great results, it's getting children to feel that they want to learn, that there's a sort of urgency and an excitement to the project.

Lucy Heller:

So I think we already knew all this, and I don't know many schools that aren't trying, at least, to do it. But there are lots of pressures on schools and it's difficult sometimes finding the capacity and the time.

Rachel Sylvester:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). We're almost out of time, but I just wanted to ask Kevan really to sum up with: what do you think needs to be different in five years' time? The education system's recovered, you've

done the recovery work, but what does recovery look like? How does it look different? What do you think needs to have changed in that beyond this immediate crisis?

Kevan Collins:

I think there are three quick things. We're a much more confident system and profession. We look back with a kind of pride of what we... We should already look back with pride of what we've done in the last year, but we look back with pride of what we achieved through the recovery phase in the broadest long-term sense of it. And I think that that's the first.

Kevan Collins:

So confidence in education, about the education of this country, because we are a good education system. We're not broken. We're a good system. And I want people to stop talking about us as not a good system. We're just not good enough for all of our children. But our best schools are as good as anybody's in my view. So we have more confidence in the system.

Kevan Collins:

The second is that there's more trust in the system, because when people look at what the profession did, which is where the real work goes on. I'm not doing the hard work, people in schools are doing the hard work. That actually when you look, people with admiration see how the profession responded to this. I mean, look at the testing work that schools are doing right now. It's incredible how well schools are doing that job. That's just one example. So there's a growing... And I think there already is in parents a growing appreciation for what we do.

Kevan Collins:

So you've got confidence, you've got appreciation. And then I think you've got governments who understand my point, I didn't really land it that well, that spending in education is not... We almost need to stop using the word spending; we invest in education. Long-term future of this country economically, socially, in every way you think about it is determined by how much we invest in our young people right now. And we don't have to kind of keep fighting for every penny, it's seen as an absolute top priority to invest.

Kevan Collins:

So they're the three things I'd look for for a successful recovery. And of course, our children are thriving, happy, and fulfilled, as ever.

Rachel Sylvester:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). That was so fascinating. Thank you to all the panelists. That was absolutely fascinating to me. I hope it was to everyone in the audience. And some real reasons for optimism as well as for concern at the moment. But thank you so much.

Rachel Sylvester:

And I just wanted to flag also that there are some other fantastically interesting Ark Talk events coming up, and registration is now open for two: one with Rachel de Souza, the Children's Commissioner on April 28th, and one with Andreas Schleicher, the Education Lead at the OECD in Pisa on May 25th.

This transcript was exported on Apr 02, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Rachel Sylvester:

So thank you all very much, to the panelists and to all of you. And have a good evening.