
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove

The Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP
Secretary of State for Education
(*via email*)

8 October 2018

Dear Secretary of State

I am writing to raise with you serious concerns about the Department for Education's presentation and use of statistics.

The UK Statistics Authority has had cause to publicly write to the Department with concerns on four occasions in the past year.¹ I regret that the Department does not yet appear to have resolved issues with its use of statistics.

Last week, the Minister of State for School Standards wrote that, in an international survey of reading abilities of nine-year-olds, England "leapfrogged up the rankings last year, after decades of falling standards, going from 19th out of 50 countries to 8th."² This is not correct. Figures published last year show the increase was from 10th place in 2011 to 8th place in 2016.

My attention has also been drawn to a recent tweet and blog issued by the Department regarding education funding.³ As the Authority's Director General for Regulation has noted in a letter to the Department today, figures were presented in such a way as to misrepresent changes in school funding. In the tweet, school spending figures were exaggerated by using a truncated axis, and by not adjusting for per pupil spend. In the blog about government funding of schools (which I note your Department has now updated), an international comparison of spend which included a wide range of education expenditure unrelated to publicly funded schools was used, rather than a comparison of school spending alone. The result was to give a more favourable picture. Yet the context would clearly lead readers to expect that the figures referred to spending on schools.

The Shadow Secretary of State for Education has written to express concerns about your use of a figure that appears to show a substantial increase in the number of children in high performing schools, as judged by OFSTED. While accurate as far as it goes, this figure does not give a full picture. It should be set in the context of increasing pupil numbers, changes to the inspection framework and some inspections that are now long in the past, as an earlier letter to the Department from the Office of Statistics Regulation pointed out.

¹ Letter from Ed Humpherson to Head of Profession (March 2018) [National Pupil Database Access](#)
Letter from Sir David Norgrove to Shadow Secretary of State for Education (March 2018), [School Funding](#)
Letter from Ed Humpherson to Head of Profession (January 2018) [International Reading Literacy Study](#)
Letter from Ed Humpherson to Jonathan Slater (November 2017) [Department for Education breaches of the Code of Practice](#)

² The Telegraph (27 September 2018): [Our whizzpopping phonics revolution is transforming literacy in schools](#)

³ Department for Education (28 September 2018): [Tweet regarding school funding](#)
Department for Education (28 September 2018): [Education in the Media: Funding](#)

I am sure you share my concerns that instances such as these do not help to promote trust and confidence in official data, and indeed risk undermining them.

I seek your reassurance that the Department remains committed to the principles and practices defined in the statutory *Code of Practice for Statistics*. In particular, I urge the Department to involve analysts closely in the development of its communications, to ensure that data are properly presented in a way that does not mislead.

I have asked the Authority's Director-General for Regulation, Ed Humpherson to speak with Jonathan Slater, Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education, and to Neil McIvor, Head of Profession for Statistics at the Department for Education, about what the Department might do to improve its practice.

I am copying this letter to the Minister of State for School Standards, to Mr Slater and Mr McIvor, and to John Pullinger, the National Statistician.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Norgrove". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Sir David Norgrove