

23rd July 2018

Nadhim Zahawi MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith St
Westminster, London
SW1P 3BT

Dear Minister,

Strong early development is the foundation upon which life chances are built. Evidence shows children with poor levels of development at age five are more likely to struggle throughout primary and secondary school, impacting their chances of success well into adulthood.

We welcome the government's ambition to close the early learning gap for the most disadvantaged children. However, we are extremely concerned that you have decided to drop your commitment to grow the graduate early years workforce. This will deny thousands of disadvantaged children vital support that can set them up for life.

As you know, early years practitioners work tirelessly to ensure that children have the best start to life, but they require more support from government. The evidence, and many of our organisations' work with children and families, show that high quality early education led by specialist graduate early years teachers make a decisive difference in boosting the early development of children, particularly in literacy and for those most likely to fall behind.

Graduate early years teachers are one of the strongest indicators of high quality education for England's preschool children. Early years teachers are adept at supporting children to learn in a nursery setting and are skilled in observing children's progress to best support those at risk of falling behind. They also play an important role in working with other staff and crucially parents – giving them the support they need to help with their children's learning at home.

There is a critical shortage of early years teachers across the country. The numbers starting early years initial teacher training have plummeted and many existing graduate level staff are approaching retirement age. With a wider retention crisis in the sector, the problem only stands to get worse, as we lose level 3 practitioners who have minimal support to progress onto graduate study and little reward or recognition when they do.

The commitment set out in the Early Years Workforce Strategy to conduct a feasibility study into growing the graduate workforce was an important step towards addressing this problem and understanding what works in boosting recruitment and retention in early education.

The Department is making welcome investment in identifying new approaches to supporting children's early learning, yet we are alarmed that the Department is going backwards on what we already know works – early years provision led by early years teachers.

If you are committed to closing the early development gap and boosting social mobility, the department should be raising its level of ambition for the quality of early years education rather than lowering it.

Yours sincerely,

Lydia Cuddy-Gibbs
Head of Early Years, Ark

Beatrice Merrick
Chief Executive, Early Education

Paul Whiteman
General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers

Purnima Tanuku
Chief Executive, National Day Nurseries Association

Sandra Mathers
Senior Researcher, Oxford University

Professor Edward Melhuish
Professor of Human Development, Oxford University

Professor Kathy Sylva
Professor of Educational Psychology, Oxford University

Liz Bayram
Chief Executive, Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years

Steven McIntosh
Director of UK Poverty, Save the Children

Sally Pearce
Head of Early Years Initial Training, Sheffield Hallam University and Early Years Lead for South Yorkshire Futures

Deborah Lawson
General Secretary, Voice the Union

Dr Elizabeth Kilbey
Consultant Clinical Psychologist