

# Opinion

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The return to school without exams presents a golden opportunity to provide a truly balanced curriculum, write Rebecca Boomer-Clark and Jake Curtis

Our organisations support some of the country's most vulnerable teenagers – the very children who, sadly but unsurprisingly, have been hardest hit by the pandemic. Together, we have been considering what seeds of hope have come out of the past year and how we can harness these opportunities to support them to thrive.

First and foremost, this period of interrupted education has provided a rare opportunity for us to reflect on the long-term vision for our education system. Schools have demonstrated the vital role that they play in helping to mould healthy and happy citizens who contribute to their community, their country and the world around them, as well as securing academic outcomes.

Perhaps if schools were held to account against some of these wider objectives, and not just their academic results, they would feel more incentivised and rewarded for that incredibly tough work. In normal times, the effort that goes into keeping those students who are 'on the edge' in school, learning and achieving, is often unseen.

But throughout the pandemic, we have seen many schools step up in ways they couldn't have imagined previously. The level to which they have been able to adapt to challenging new circumstances proves once and for all that there is a false dichotomy between academic rigour and pastoral support. The best schools do both. They understand that the relationships

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## Schools teach and care. We ought to value both

developed in one arena enable engagement in the other, that they are mutually reinforcing.

During repeated school closures and lockdowns, engagement with

previously. This is not a surprise; just as there were many children for whom school represented exam stress and social pressure, there were a great many others for whom

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parents and families leapt to the top of many teachers' priority lists. For the past year, they have fulfilled the jobs of food bank operator, social worker and education welfare officer. We believe there is an opportunity to maintain those connections in order to provide the kind of joined-up support that we know enables all young people to flourish.

Vulnerability comes in many forms, so the support we offer our students must be flexible and personalised. All of us, children and adults alike, have lost the sense of routine, purpose and connection that helped bolster our mental health. We know that many of the students who have struggled the most were not necessarily even on the radar of pastoral teams

school provided a chance to succeed, a supportive routine and valued friendships.

We all know just how much deeper the toll of this 'winter lockdown' has been. Because of the shared nature of this challenging period, there is an opportunity for empathy and connection between professionals and their more vulnerable students in a way that may have been difficult to achieve before.

When schools return next month, staff will have to be very sensitive to mental health issues arising in places they would not have foreseen and offer interventions based on individual need rather than any 'label' or previous diagnosis. These interventions will need to be based



on nurture, routine and challenge to ensure pupils feel fulfilled and confident once again, especially if there is time to acknowledge and appreciate successes and qualities. Simple 'shout-outs' offer so much to ensure children feel truly proud of the good decisions they make.

So, the lack of formal exams this summer presents a huge opportunity for schools to embrace the richer elements of the wider curriculum and broader life at school. There may be wonderful opportunities to provide even more outdoor activities, sports, drama and music when all pupils return. Participation in these activities is heavily correlated to increased engagement with school for vulnerable students. They are also crucial ingredients to promoting the long-term physical and mental health of all children.

Exams will return. As will routine Ofsted inspections. But it should not be at the expense of the insights gained in their absence. Schools have shown their incredible capacity to teach and to care in the toughest of circumstances. As we emerge from this (hopefully) final period of interruption, it is vital we ensure our school system provides the best of both into the future.