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**Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE**

Janet Downs  
via email

4 December 2014

Dear Ms Downs

**STATISTICS ON LITERACY AND NUMERACY**

Thank you for your email about an article in the Times Educational Supplement which reported statements made by the Schools Minister, Sam Gyimah MP, at the recent Conservative Party conference.<sup>1</sup> The article included the sentence “Mr Gyimah claimed that when the coalition government came to power in 2010 figures from the influential Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests showed that more than a third of young people were leaving school ‘unable to read, write or do maths’”.

We have not been able to confirm the source of the specific statements attributed to the Minister. We can, however, set out the relevant statistics relating to the age at which pupils might be leaving secondary school.

The international PISA tests are a commonly-referenced basis for comparisons of reading and mathematics levels across countries. The relevant test data for England in 2010 do *not* show that more than a third of school leavers are leaving school ‘unable to read, write or do maths’. PISA test results are scored in terms of levels, which describe the achievement of pupils at the age of 15 (and at about the time, therefore, when pupils might have been getting ready to leave secondary school). These range from 1a/1b (lowest) to 5 (highest) in Reading Literacy, and 1 to 6 in Mathematics Literacy. The 2009 PISA results for England show<sup>2</sup> the proportions of students at each level of competency, including that:

- 1% of pupils scored below level 1b<sup>3</sup>, and 18.4% at level 1a or below, in reading.
- 6.1% of pupils scored below level 1<sup>4</sup>, and 19.8% at level 1 or below, in mathematics.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.tes.co.uk/b/news/2014/09/30/conservative-minister-condemned-after-claiming-uk-students-39-illiterate-and-innumerate-39.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/npdz01/npdz01\\_home.cfm](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/npdz01/npdz01_home.cfm)

<sup>3</sup> 1b and 1a are defined in detail in the PISA reports. 1a is a higher level of attainment than 1b, and is defined as including the ability to “locate one or more independent pieces of explicitly stated information” and to “recognise the main theme or author’s purpose”. PISA 2009: Achievement of 15-year-olds in England, National Foundation for Educational Research, p 20.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 2, p83. At level 1 in mathematics, students “can answer questions involving familiar contexts where all relevant information is present and the questions are clearly defined. They are able to identify information and to carry out routine procedures according to direct instructions in explicit situations”.

We also note that, at the same conference, the Secretary of State for Education's speech included a related statement on the educational levels achieved by school children leaving *primary* school, as follows:

"13 years of Labour... and 1 in every third child finished primary school unable to read, write or add up."<sup>5</sup>

The Department for Education (DfE) publishes National Statistics on school performance in England as a whole<sup>6</sup>. These show that, based on tests taken in May 2010, 83% of pupils were assessed as reaching level four at key stage 2 in reading; 79% in mathematics; and 71 % in writing. In May 2010, 64% of pupils were assessed as reaching level four at key stage 2 in all three of the tests. Level four is the level at which pupils are expected to achieve at the end of key stage 2, usually at the age of 11. Assessing a child as below level four is, however, clearly not the same as being 'unable to read, write or add up'.

I am copying this to the Secretary of State for Education, Rt. Hon. Nicky Morgan MP; the Minister of State for Schools, Sam Gyimah MP; the Permanent Secretary to the Department for Education, Chris Wormald; the National Statistician, John Pullinger; and to Ed Humpherson, the Authority's Director General for Regulation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew Dilnot". The signature is written in a cursive style with some loops and flourishes.

**Sir Andrew Dilnot CB**

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<sup>5</sup> <http://press.conservatives.com/post/98807929855/nicky-morgan-speech-to-conservative-party-conference>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-curriculum-assessments-at-key-stage-2-england-academic-year-2009-to-2010-revised>