

Pupil engagement in remote learning

Introduction and background

Although some year groups are beginning to return to primary schools and some Year 10 and 12 pupils are having contact with their teachers in secondary schools, most pupils are not expected to return to the classroom until the autumn. Remote learning will therefore remain central to pupils' learning in the coming months. Given the potential impact of this extended period of remote learning, particularly for more disadvantaged pupils, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) undertook an independent assessment to see how engaged pupils are and the factors that might be driving this. The report is based on findings from a national survey of 1233 senior leaders and 1821 teachers in publicly-funded, mainstream primary and secondary schools in England. Responses between 7th and 17th May have been weighted by phase and free school meal (FSM) eligibility to provide a nationally representative picture.

Key findings

Pupil engagement

- Teachers are in regular contact with, on average, 60 per cent of their pupils. However, on average, less than half of pupils (42%) returned their last piece of set work. Ninety per cent of teachers believe that their pupils are doing less or much less work than they would usually expect at this time of year.
- Although the percentage of pupils returning work is low, senior leaders indicate that more pupils are getting involved in work or learning activities than are returning work. On average, primary senior leaders say that 71 per cent of pupils are getting involved in learning activities, while those in secondary schools give a figure of 63 per cent. It is, however, worrying that senior leaders believe that around one third of pupils are not engaging with set work at all.
- Despite high levels of leadership guidance and teachers' readiness to provide remote learning support, there is currently a substantial deficit in curriculum coverage across schools. Almost all senior leaders say they are providing guidance on the type (95 per cent), and amount (90 per cent) of work teachers should be setting, and whether they should be providing feedback to pupils on submitted work (85 per cent). However, fewer senior leaders are setting expectations for their staff about the submission of work by pupils.
- Most teachers (between 66 and 75 per cent) rate their ability to offer remote learning support to pupils as 'good or very good'. However, only around 50 per cent of teachers rate their home working environment (being able to work without distractions) as good or very good and around 30 per cent rate it as poor or very poor. In an open-ended question about what would help teachers to provide remote learning more effectively in future, the need for closer working relationships was commonly cited. Many of the comments mentioned helping parents to create regular routines for their children and developing a positive dialogue about learning.
- Eighty per cent of teachers report that all or certain areas of the curriculum are currently getting less attention than usual, across many subject areas, including all core curriculum subjects. They give two main reasons: provision challenges such as poor access to resources when working from home; and engagement challenges including limited parental confidence in supporting learning, and a general lack of pupil motivation and engagement.
- Teachers report that, on average, just over half (55 per cent) of their pupils' parents are engaged with their children's home learning. Parental engagement is significantly lower among the parents of secondary than primary pupils (48 compared to 56 per cent). Parents of secondary pupils are more likely to feel that their children can manage their own learning.
- Senior leaders and teachers were asked what proportion of their pupils have little or no IT access at home. They report that this is a challenge for around a quarter of their pupils (senior leaders report 23 per cent and teachers, 27 per cent). The vast majority of leaders and teachers say that at least some of their pupils have little or no access to IT at home.
- Teachers are concerned about the engagement of all their disadvantaged pupils but are most concerned about low engagement from pupils with limited access to IT and/or those who lack space to study at home. Teachers report that the following proportions of pupils are less engaged than their classmates: pupils with limited access to IT and/or study space (81 per cent); vulnerable pupils (62 per cent); pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (58 per cent); pupils eligible for Pupil Premium funding (52 per cent); and young carers (48 per cent).

Factors influencing engagement

- Pupil engagement and disadvantaged pupil engagement are both lower in the most deprived schools. The most deprived schools are associated with a 12 percentage point decrease in the probability of a high level of engagement among their disadvantaged pupils. This mirrors the findings from recent IFS study of parents (Andrew et al., 2020) which found that, while children in the highest-income families spend 5.8 hours per day on home learning, those in the poorest fifth of households spend only 4.5 hours per day.
- Teachers in the most deprived schools report 30 per cent of pupils returning work, compared to 49 per cent of pupils in the least deprived schools. Similarly, in the most deprived schools, 55 per cent of primary pupils and 48 per cent of secondary pupils are reported to be engaging with learning activities; the figures for the least deprived schools are 79 and 77 per cent respectively.
- Teachers in the most deprived schools are, on average, in regular contact with 50 per cent of their pupils, whereas teachers in the least deprived schools are in contact with 67 per cent of their pupils. This means that around half of pupils in the most deprived schools currently have no regular contact with their teacher. Teachers in the most deprived schools also feel that fewer parents are engaged.
- The proportion of pupils with little to no IT access in the most deprived schools is double that of the least deprived schools.
- Teachers in the most deprived schools are more likely than those in the least deprived schools to say that all areas of the curriculum are currently getting less attention than usual. However, teachers in the most deprived schools are more likely to feel well-supported by their schools to help pupils to learn remotely.
- Secondary leaders are more likely to provide guidance to staff on remote learning, and to expect pupils to submit work.
- Primary teachers are likely to be in contact with more of their pupils, but to be covering less of the curriculum than secondary teachers. Maintained schools also have less curriculum coverage than academy schools, and academies are likely to have higher pupil engagement than maintained schools.
- Teachers in the West Midlands have lower levels of pupil engagement than in London. Schools in some of the northern regions of England have lower levels of parental engagement and pupil access to IT. Schools in some northern regions are also less likely to be engaging in online conversations between teachers and pupils, or pre-recorded video lessons (both of which are positively associated with pupil engagement) than schools in the south.
- Schools with low prior attainment and schools which experienced a significant drop in the numbers of pupils attending school prior to 20 March have lower levels of pupil engagement.
- When pupils in general and disadvantaged pupils are taught by relatively young teachers (those aged 20-29), they have lower levels of engagement. Disadvantaged pupil engagement is higher when teachers report having a good quality home working environment.
- Schools using a virtual learning environment (VLE) to inform pupils about learning activities – rather than the school website, and those delivering learning content to pupils through online conversations or activities that involve consolidating previous learning or revising, have higher pupil engagement levels and an increased probability of having highly engaged disadvantaged pupils.

Implications for government, academy trusts and local authorities

- This research has shown that it is critical to get disadvantaged pupils, pupils in the most disadvantaged schools, and pupils with little or no access to IT and/or study space, back to school as soon as it is safe to do so. During this extended period of home learning, it will be vital to broaden access to digital devices to a wider range of disadvantaged pupils in order to avoid an increase in disengagement.
- The return of Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 pupils to split classes, and the phased return of Year 10 and 12 pupils means that schools will have less capacity to maintain high-quality remote support for pupils in other year groups.
- Given the positive link between pupil engagement and schools' use of VLEs, the benefits of these platforms should be promoted more to schools. It is also important for teachers to have access to sufficient training and equipment to deliver effective remote learning support and use technology effectively.
- Senior leaders should continue providing remote learning support for all staff but should particularly consider younger teachers, who may lack confidence, for example by providing CPD on effective strategies for remote learning.
- School leaders and teachers focus on the most effective means of supporting pupils' learning, such as how to achieve high-quality teaching (as opposed to ensuring that there is a flow of set work), and doing everything they can to support parents to support their children. Schools may also wish to consider the possibility of expanding their range of 'active' forms of teaching and learning, such as online conversations between teachers and pupils, which have a positive association with pupil engagement (though this needs to be balanced against the increased demands on staff).

The full document can be downloaded from:

https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4073/schools_responses_to_covid_19_pupil_engagement_in_remote_learning.pdf