

The challenges facing schools and pupils in September 2020

Introduction and background

This research investigates the impact of Covid-19 on mainstream primary and secondary schools in England. It focuses on the challenges schools will face from September. It considers: the extent to which pupils are behind in their curriculum learning in relation to normal expectations; the impact of Covid-19 on the 'disadvantage gap'; the need for catch-up support from September; and the logistical issues and resource implications of opening schools fully while taking measures to reduce the risk of infection. The report also considers schools' experiences of offering remote and blended learning.

The data has been gathered from responses to a survey which was sent in July to all mainstream schools primary and secondary schools in England. Responses were received from 1176 senior leaders, 1782 primary school teachers and from staff in 898 secondary schools.

Key findings

Pupils' learning during Covid-19

- Ninety-eight per cent of teachers report that their pupils are behind where they would normally be expected to be in their curriculum learning at the end of the 2019-20 academic year.
- On average, teachers estimate that their pupils are 3 months behind. Seventy-eight per cent note no difference between girls and boys in this respect, but 21 per cent say that boys have fallen further behind than girls.
- On average teachers report that they only covered 66 per cent of the normal curriculum during the 2019/20 school year.
- Sixty-one per cent of teachers report that the learning gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has widened since the previous year: Thirty-two per cent report that the gap has stayed the same and 7 per cent report that it has narrowed.
- Based on teacher estimates, the average gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers had increased by 46 per cent. This is, however, likely to be an underestimate, as differences between schools may have also contributed to changes in the disadvantaged learning gap.
- Teachers in the most deprived schools were over 3 times more likely to report that their pupils are 4 months or more behind in their curriculum-related learning by July (53% compared to 15% of teachers in the least deprived schools).

Reasons why pupils are falling behind

- Most pupils were expected to learn at home throughout the summer term, but pupil engagement in remote learning in July was low. Teachers reported that only 38 per cent of pupils returned their last piece of set work in June and July. Parental engagement was similarly comparatively low, at 44 per cent.
- In the second half of the summer term, when certain year groups were invited to return, senior leaders reported that only 56 per cent of the pupils eligible to attend actually did so.
- Attendance was lower among pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium (45%) and those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds (49%).
- According to 32 per cent of senior leaders, parental safety concerns were a main reason for non-attendance. Leaders in schools with high proportions of pupils from BAME backgrounds were more likely to report safety concerns than schools with no BAME pupils (65 compared to 35%).
- The quality of teaching in schools was also affected by Covid-19. Seventy-four per cent of teachers did not feel able to teach to their usual standard under the restrictions that were in force in July. In response to an open question, almost half said that distancing requirements had negatively impacted their teaching practices. They were no longer able to deploy key elements of teaching practice such as group and practical work, nor did they feel able to move around the classroom to support and interact with their pupils. Forty per cent reported that they no longer had



access to their usual resources, such as equipment and learning materials. They also highlighted the difficulties caused by pupils not being able to share resources.

- Fifty-one per cent of senior leaders reported that they were using teaching assistants (TAs) to lead classes as a way of managing the supervision of smaller classes necessitated by social distancing, and 46 per cent of teachers said that they were mainly teaching pupils they did not usually teach.

Recovering learning from September

- Teachers estimate that 44 per cent of their pupils need intensive catch-up support. Teachers' estimates are 25 percentage points higher in the most deprived schools, than in the least deprived schools. They are also significantly higher (by 18 percentage points) in schools serving the highest proportion of pupils from BAME backgrounds, and this relationship persists after controlling for the effects of deprivation.
- Senior leaders' top priorities for September are: to provide support for pupils' emotional and mental health and well-being (81 per cent); to re-engage pupils with learning (64 per cent); and to settle them into school (63 per cent). The catch-up effort in schools is therefore likely to start later in the autumn term and will be a 'long game' rather than a 'quick fix'.
- At this early stage, teachers are planning to create time in the school day for small group or one-to-one sessions to support pupils with the greatest need, mostly using interventions recommended by other teachers.
- In July, around 2 in 5 senior leaders were intending to access the Government's £350 million National Tutoring Programme (NTP) for disadvantaged pupils. The main barrier for those who were undecided about this was a concern about using tutors who were unfamiliar to their pupils.

Opening schools safely

- While most senior leaders (89 per cent) predict that they will find it at least 'somewhat manageable' to open to all pupils while taking measures to minimise the risk of infection, many identify a need for additional staffing and resources.
- Among the 78 per cent of senior leaders who have concerns about the manageability of opening their schools under these circumstances (those who said it was 'somewhat manageable' or 'completely unmanageable'), additional needs identified included more teachers, TAs, cleaning staff, support staff, and funding for additional cleaning and protective equipment and for IT. For this group of senior leaders, the cost of additional staffing and resource needs represent an increase in total expenditure of approximately one-fifth for an average primary and one-tenth for an average secondary school, although some of the costs associated with these additional needs will be met by government schemes
- One result of the pandemic is an apparent increase in potential teacher retention. The percentage of teachers and senior leaders intending to leave the profession has reduced by more than half compared to previous estimates. If retention were to improve to this extent, it

would more than compensate for previous teacher shortages and could help to address some of the additional Covid-related staffing needs. On the other hand, schools plan to reduce their initial teacher training (ITT) placements in 2020-21 by an average of 0.6 trainees in primary schools (20% reduction) and 0.5 trainees in secondary schools (7% reduction).

Preparing for further outbreaks

- The Government guidance to schools on opening in September (DfE, 2020e) includes a requirement to devise a remote learning plan by the end of September in case of further school closures.
- Research to date has exposed several gaps regarding home working – challenges which would need to be addressed, preferably before further lockdowns. During the lockdown, 35 per cent of teachers were providing their own laptop or computer. Twenty-eight per cent of pupils were identified as having limited access to IT at home. This was a particular issue for schools in more deprived areas. The Government's decision to allow schools which must close due to local lockdown to apply to the DfE for laptops and other IT for disadvantaged children in Years 3 to 11, who need to study at home, is therefore welcome.

Implications for government and schools

- Schools may need help with the management of non-attending pupils. Liaising with the families of these pupils is a time consuming and difficult task and schools may need support from local authorities and trusts.
- Schools will need extra resources to manage the demands of Covid-19, such as extra cleaning and additional staffing.
- The Government needs to work with school leaders and ITT providers to explore how to tackle the challenges resulting from an increase in ITT applications, coupled with a reduction in training places in schools.
- When inspections resume, Ofsted may need to modify expectations of schools providing a broad and balanced curriculum while social distancing is in force. They may, for example, need to consider the impact of social distancing and pupils having to face forwards.
- Catch up needs to be treated as a long term endeavour rather than a 'quick fix'.
- In future episodes of partial lockdown, 'blended learning' must ensure equity for all pupils. Properly-resourced remote learning needs to be coupled with high-quality in-school teaching.
- Schools need more government support and clearer direction to prepare for remote learning in a local lockdown. In particular, they need a clear steer on safeguarding.
- Schools need to take an evidence-informed approach to preparing for local lockdown.
- It is encouraging that the Government is offering laptop and hotspot provision to cover disadvantaged pupils in the event of local lockdowns. However, the system for this support must result in a much swifter dispatch of devices than under the previous scheme.

The full document can be downloaded from:

https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4119/schools_responses_to_covid_19_the_challenges_facing_schools_and_pupils_in_september_2020.pdf