

The 'new normal': The future of education after COVID-19

Introduction and background

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to schools and learners in England, with school closures and the cancellation of exams. There is now a growing sense of urgency about the need to 'recover' both the education system and 'lost learning' among students after the pandemic. Schools opened to all pupils in September and there is ongoing discussion about how exams and accountability mechanisms can be reinstated. Discussion about the recovery of 'lost learning' has resulted in the government announcing a £1 billion 'catch-up fund' to help provide additional tuition to students at risk of falling behind.

There has, however, been less discussion about the pandemic as an opportunity to reimagine the education system. Although it has many strengths, England's education system suffers from several longstanding weaknesses that pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic and the resultant disruption provide an opportunity to stand back and reflect on these weaknesses. This report from the IPPR asks how society can build back better and what we want the 'new normal' in schools to look like.

Key points

Preparing children for life, not just exams

- The pandemic has temporarily dismantled large parts of the UK's exams and accountability system. This year, exams were replaced by teacher assessment and Ofsted inspections were scrapped until this September.
- The situation has presented an opportunity to step back and evaluate whether it is desirable to revert to the same systems of assessment and accountability after the COVID-19 pandemic. We can question which elements should be put back in place after the pandemic. This will involve questions about the knowledge, skills and attitudes which we want young people to have, and about the role of accountability and assessment.
- There is a risk of schools narrowing the curriculum further to catch up on 'lost learning'. However, there is a growing consensus, including in interviews with stakeholders from across the sector, that this would be undesirable. This view is supported by polling conducted by YouGov, which found that teachers and parents want the pandemic to lead to a "much broader and more rounded education". Furthermore, the government is advising, in its guidance for opening schools, that they should continue to offer a "broad and balanced" curriculum.
- The pandemic could create space for a conversation about the skills which young people need for the future of work. The UK is facing the worst jobs crisis in a generation, with young people likely to be particularly hard hit. This crisis will reinforce pre-existing trends such as automation, environmental breakdown and globalisation that are reshaping the future jobs market. It will be more important than ever to prepare young people for this future; skills such as interpersonal skills, higher-order cognitive skills, and systems skills, for example judgement and decision-making, will become increasingly important.
- The two main camps on curriculum – 'traditionalists' who focus on academic rigour and knowledge, and 'progressives' who argue for a more rounded and skills-based approach – have historically been regarded as mutually exclusive. However, this does not need to be the case. High levels of knowledge and high levels of skill are intertwined. Recognising this opens up the space for a more productive conversation going forward. It paves the way for an approach which respects the evidence supporting current approaches and the value of academic subjects such as maths and English, while embracing the need for a broader curriculum.
- Although there is some polarised debate, most agree that teacher assessment and feedback are a vital part of high-quality teaching and learning, but that there is also a role for an accountability framework within the school system, to ensure quality and safety.
- However, there are significant downsides when standardised assessment and high-stakes accountability



structures dominate. It has been shown to lead to 'gaming' the system or to 'teaching to the test' without necessarily improving outcomes. Whereas it has been shown that Ofsted can raise substandard performance, it does not drive excellence because it relies on compliance rather than innovation.

- There is evidence which suggests that the UK's reliance on hard levers of accountability – instead of softer 'improvement' levers such as leadership, culture and training – is disproportionate compared with other countries.
- The government should urgently review the publication of school performance tables, moving to a multi-year model and including contextual information as a minimum to avoid the high-stakes dynamic of the current system.
- The government should review the role of assessment and accountability mechanisms across the education system in light of the pandemic (in particular KS2 SATs and GCSEs) and investigate the use of other accountability mechanisms, including via the submission of school-assessed performance and a school-to-school peer-review model.

Where and how learning takes place

- The pandemic has led to a re-evaluation of the role that technology could play in teaching and learning. This is partly because of the need to plan for the possibility of future lockdowns, and partly because more schools have seen the potential for technology to enable better learning. However, the key question is not: Should we use digital technology? but rather: When and how should we use digital technology to best effect?
- In the wake of the pandemic, the government's digital strategy in schools should be focussed on 4 key objectives: enhancing teaching in the classroom; improving learning outside the classroom; personalising education where possible; and reducing teacher workload.
- The government should create a national transformation fund and support unit to help schools push forward with this agenda, with a focus on basing changes on global best practice, supporting procurement and implementation, and training teachers to adapt to new ways of working.
- The government should use the pandemic as an opportunity to end the digital divide (with 1 million children still without access to the internet at home) by providing schools with funding to ensure that all young people have the infrastructure required to benefit from technology-enabled schooling.
- During the pandemic, most parents took a much greater role in their children's education. While many working parents will be relieved that children are now back to school, most want a bigger role in their children's education in the future. This should be welcomed; most studies conclude that increased parental engagement leads to better outcomes.
- There is an opportunity to reset the relationship between schools, parents and their children. To this end, the government should work with schools and parents, drawing on Parentkind's 'Blueprint for Parent-Friendly Schools', to set out a new parental engagement strategy. The government should also commit to building on Ofsted's Parent View survey to create a regular published parent

survey to embed parent voice and transparency in the system. Finally, it should provide funding to ensure that all teachers have access to training on effective parental engagement and all schools provide access to support activities for parents.

Tackling inequalities outside the classroom

- Before the pandemic, there was already an 'attainment gap' in outcomes between disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers. This has widened considerably during the pandemic. Recognising this, the government has made efforts to largely focus academic catch up support on disadvantaged pupils,
- However, the pandemic has highlighted a need to take inequalities beyond the classroom just as seriously. These inequalities include disparities in parental support, the home environment, access to learning resources and exposure to vulnerabilities such as mental health problems, violence, neglect, abuse, bereavement and caring responsibilities. Schools must work with other public services to address the barriers to learning 'beyond the classroom' that children experience.
- The government should endorse 'parity of esteem' between academic and wellbeing outcomes in schools. This should involve supporting schools to adopt a 'whole-school' approach to wellbeing and mandating an annual wellbeing assessment for every student and teacher across the country. This should form part of any accountability structures going forward.
- The government should revisit the vision behind community schools and set out a national entitlement, alongside additional funding for schools, to the core elements of this, including: an extended school day (pre- and post-school activity); a comprehensive programme of parental engagement and activities; and, crucially, embedded mental health and social work support.

Conclusion

- There is a risk that the legacy of the pandemic will be deeply regressive with increased inequalities. The government is right to pursue measures now to undo this damage. It should, however, go further: the pandemic provides an opportunity to 'build back better', to 'reset' our system and to address some of the longstanding weaknesses that pre-date the pandemic. Opportunities for reassessment and rebuilding span: the role of accountability and assessment in preparing children for life; where, when and how learning takes place; and the best approach to narrowing inequalities not just within but also outside of school.
- In the coming months and years, IPPR will be working with Big Change to take this agenda forward in the form of a new Co-Mission on Education and Learning to help build a brighter future for young people and society.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/the-new-normal>