COVID-19 Series: Briefing on Schools: October 2020

Introduction and background

During the autumn term, Ofsted is carrying out a series of 'interim visits' to schools. This briefing note reports on 380 visits carried out between 29 September and 23 October. This is Ofsted's second briefing note; the next one will be published in December this year. The briefing answers 4 main questions, as outlined below:

- **What is the current state of children's school education?**
- **How have children been affected by schools' closures?**
- **How are schools planning to maintain standards in education through the pandemic?**
- **What are schools doing with their COVID-19 catch-up funding?**

Key findings

The current state of children's school education

- There is wide variability from one school to the next in terms of whether all pupils have returned to school, and the extent to which attendance is being affected by COVID-19.
- Around three quarters of the schools visited reported having attendance that was similar to or higher than, this time last year. Where attendance had improved, leaders often attributed this to the work that they had done to build families' trust during the first lockdown and reassure parents that their children would be safe in school. However, in some schools, attendance had declined since the start of the term.
- Many leaders said that a few pupils had not returned to school in September. Some had moved to another country. Several schools reported that their pupils from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities had not returned, sometimes noting parents' comments that the children would not return until COVID-19 'is over'.
- In schools with significant proportions of minority ethnic pupils, some leaders said that the local community's experiences of COVID-19 had made families particularly anxious about allowing their children to return to school.
- Special schools reported a mixed picture in terms of attendance. Not all schools were fully open to all pupils. A few schools had chosen to have a 'staggered start', bringing pupils back to school gradually. Some leaders said that conflicting or changing advice about how to cater for pupils who needed certain types of care was causing delays to pupils' return. Leaders reported distress about having to tell some families that their children could not

return because of a lack of medical support to cater for them in school. Where pupils had complex needs, attendance was often lower than usual, even when all had been welcomed back. This was mainly attributed to parents' anxiety about their children's vulnerabilities to infection, although pupils' own anxiety was also a factor.

- Leaders of alternative provision (AP) settings said that the support put in place to support families had had a positive impact on relationships, and, in turn, on pupil attendance.

Effects of the first national lockdown

- In the most recent visits, more leaders than in earlier visits talked about pupils having many gaps in their learning or having regressed.
- Primary school leaders most commonly reported that pupils had lost some knowledge and skills in reading. All aspects of writing were also cited as an issue. Some leaders reported regression in language, communication skills and oral fluency. Primary leaders also said that many pupils had fallen behind in mathematics.
- There was widespread concern among leaders about lost learning for pupils with SEND, especially in literacy. Some leaders said that pupils with SEND have 'struggled' and have 'fallen further' than those without SEND.
- In secondary schools, literacy and mathematics were also a concern. Leaders mentioned that pupils had particularly fallen behind in MFL.

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- Leaders of special schools found that some pupils' communication and physical skills had regressed, particularly in those with more complex needs. Transport problems were a further ongoing concern for pupils with special needs.
- Leaders of AP felt that despite the provision of devices and different approaches to learning, pupils' regression since they were last in school suggested that remote learning had not worked well for them.
- Many leaders noticed the positive impact of staggered breaks and bubbles on pupil behaviour, as they have reduced the possibility of conflict. However, dips in behaviour were also noted, attributed in some cases to having experienced domestic violence, trauma and mental health issues at home. Other concerns included: ongoing conflicts which had developed on social media during the first lockdown; and a reduction in pupils' concentration or their mental and physical stamina. Some leaders noted that pupils had gained weight and that physical fitness had declined.
- Leaders noticed a rise in mental health issues such as self-harming and eating disorders. Primary leaders have noticed increased attachment to parents and home and that some pupils had also lost elements of independence, for example forgetting how to use a knife and fork.
- The mental health of parents was a cause of concern for quite a few schools as it can impact on the well-being of pupils. Increased anxiety on the part of parents has led to schools deeming some pupils as newly vulnerable.
- In terms of safeguarding, leaders in some schools had seen an increase in vulnerable pupils. Some leaders of special schools and AP settings reported that some pupils had become more involved in criminal exploitation, including gang violence, and child sexual exploitation. Leaders talked about seeing rises in anxiety levels and aggression.

Maintaining high standards in education

- Most school leaders are aiming to return to a normal curriculum by next summer, or earlier. However, they reported several factors which may impede this.
- Through their assessment process, school leaders were aiming to understand any learning losses and to find pupils' new starting points. Schools were using different approaches to assessment. Some were using standardised tests, reading-age tests and cognition tests which do not measure learning loss. Others were using more informal 'assessment for learning' practices. A few leaders reported that they had not received the assessment information from feeder primaries, so that assessing the starting points for their Year 7 cohort was a priority for them.
- Leaders of primary schools were considering what learning had been missed in English and mathematics and making curriculum adaptations. But this was often not the case for foundation subjects such as history or music.
- Many leaders were considering how the sequencing of curriculum content could best support pupils' progression. Some were bringing forward particularly challenging units of work, or practical ones in case of future lockdowns that would restrict access to resources or face-to-face teaching.
- Other schools reported re-sequencing to prioritise areas where more support was needed. For example, one school

was continuing to focus on grammar in its MFL curriculum rather than pressing on to topic-based work. Some schools referred to 'stripping out' what they saw as non-essential content. A few schools had added extra curriculum time to support pupils to cover the content.
- Many leaders expressed concern over uncertainties with national examinations. A few were building in more assessment opportunities, including additional mock examinations, in case there are no public examinations again next year.
- Some leaders had decided that it was necessary to provide one-to-one help. Some, for example, had introduced one-to-one or small group tuition delivered by their own staff. Others were in the process of appointing additional staff to do this. A small number of schools had extended their school day to give additional teaching time to all pupils.

Challenges for leaders

- Some leaders noted that, despite the generally high levels of resilience, staff are tired or exhausted, and that workload had increased due to such duties as providing support for absent pupils or covering for absent colleagues.
- Leaders reported increased pressures, sometimes described as unsustainable, overwhelming or unrealistic. The causes of pressure arose such factors as: taking on more teaching responsibilities, frequent changes in government guidance and the daily implementation of safety measures.
- In some schools, leaders reported that their budgets were also significantly affected due to the cost of PPE, sanitising materials and actions taken to make the school environment safe and accessible. Leaders have taken different approaches to minimising workload such as the use of off the shelf materials for remote learning, workload such as using platforms which enabled pupils to access their normal lessons from home and allowing self-isolating staff to teach remotely.

How the COVID-19 catch up premium is being used

- Many schools have no definite plans yet for the catch-up premium. Where leaders had decided on how to use the funding, they were generally focusing on different ways to help individual pupils to catch-up with missed learning. In primary schools, the intervention work, or planned work, was often focused on reading, and sometimes also on mathematics and writing. Leaders usually intended to pay for additional staff to enable this work to happen. Some leaders said that these staff would be employed for this purpose, while others planned to use their own staff. One leader said that the latter option was better for them 'because our staff know our kids'.
- Leaders said they might also use the funding to pay for online tutoring, extending the day for Year 11, releasing teachers to plan remote learning, additional pastoral staff, education welfare officer support or counselling for pupils.