

# COVID-19 series: Briefing on Schools

## November 2020

### Introduction and background

During the autumn term, Ofsted has carried out a series of one-day interim visits to schools. This briefing note reports on 297 visits carried out between 2 November and 24 November (164 to primary schools, 100 to secondary schools and 33 to other schools including pupil referral units and special schools). The sample of schools visited is broadly comparable to the national picture in terms of the spread of schools across the four inspection judgements (outstanding, good, requires improvement and inadequate), although there is a higher percentage of inadequate schools and a smaller percentage of good schools in the sample.

The briefing focusses on 4 issues: the current state of children's school education; how children have been affected by school closures; how schools are planning to maintain standards during the pandemic; and what schools are doing with their catch-up funding. In the visits, Ofsted focused on different foundation subjects each week, to gain further insight into schools' work beyond English and mathematics. There was a stronger focus than previously on pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in mainstream schools.

This is the third and final briefing note in the series.

### Key findings

#### The current state of children's school education

- The extent to which pupils are absent because of having to self-isolate is varied. While some schools have been virtually unaffected, others have had repeated absences related to COVID-19, sometimes for large numbers of pupils and sometimes for the same pupils.
- The numbers of pupils being removed from school to be electively home educated have again risen. Almost 3 fifths of schools had had at least one pupil whose parents had removed them from school to electively home educate them since the start of the autumn term.
- In most mainstream schools, all pupils with SEND had returned to school full time at the start of the autumn term. However, some leaders reported that attendance for some of their pupils with SEND was 'a bit up and down'. Some factors affecting the attendance of pupils with SEND were experiencing difficulties with new routines, being taught in bubbles, settling back into being with other pupils and general anxiety.
- Just over half of the schools visited had had to send some bubbles home to self-isolate at some point during the autumn term. The sending home of bubbles home was slightly more prevalent in secondary schools than in primaries.
- Some schools were managing to reduce the size of the bubbles they were sending home by using seating plans so that only pupils who had sat close to an infected child were sent home. Quicker testing had meant that some pupils were able to return to school earlier.
- A few primary schools were not teaching the full range of subjects, leaving subjects such as modern foreign languages (MFL), music, computing or design and technology (DT) till later in the year. Almost all others were teaching their full range of subjects.
- Most primary school leaders had restructured their timetables to provide extra time for English and mathematics. A few schools had designed a 'catch-up' curriculum for mathematics or English, which they were teaching alongside their usual curriculum, often drawing time away from assemblies or from foundation subjects.
- Some leaders mentioned barriers they were encountering in arranging specialist support for pupils with SEND, usually because they did not feel able to move staff around the school's bubbles. A few leaders described how they had created temporary small-group bubbles for the pupils who needed the most specialised help, where they spent all their time.



- As in the primary schools, secondary school leaders had adapted the content of their curriculum. Many key stage 3 pupils were doing less practical work, because leaders had prioritised key stage 4 and 5 to use science, art, and music rooms. Many secondary schools had integrated missed components from the summer term into this year's programmes of study. Some secondary schools were focussing more on PSHE – for example using tutor time for additional work on mental well-being.
- Very often, the time that was usually spent on foundation subjects had been reduced to create extra time for English and mathematics. Other schools had used small amounts of additional time available from 'staggered' starts and finishes to the school day or from not having assemblies.
- Leaders in secondary schools faced the same barriers to SEND provision as in primaries. A few had created separate small groups for some pupils with SEND, but this was not the norm. Others talked about TAs still being able to work with small groups, with careful assessment of risk.
- Most special schools and alternative provision reported that important community-based learning (such as shopping and travel training), volunteering, work experience and outdoor activities were not taking place. The lack of some elements of vocational courses was also having an impact on a few key stage 4 and 5 pupils' curriculum.
- Although extra-curricular and enrichment activity was reduced or halted due to risk assessments and pupils not being able to cross bubbles, more leaders now are reporting the use of virtual learning to enhance the curriculum. For example, one primary school was given a virtual tour of a local mosque by the imam after they had to cancel their trip.

### Remote learning

- The rate at which bubbles of pupils have been sent home has varied widely across schools, meaning that schools have had to provide different amounts of remote learning.
- In primary schools, individual pupils who were self-isolating tended to be provided with physical work packs or resources on the school website; bubbles who were self-isolating were more likely to receive live teaching.
- Secondary schools usually offered live lessons to self-isolating bubbles. Pupils' limited access to technology at home led to some secondary schools deciding to provide recorded lessons or other resources rather than live lessons. If leaders had identified lack of access as an issue, they had attempted to provide appropriate IT equipment or paper-based materials to pupils who needed it.
- Special school and alternative provision (AP) leaders used online learning in a more limited way, often as a way of keeping in touch with pupils rather than as a vehicle for teaching.
- Most primary leaders said that, when teaching remotely, there would be some English (including phonics) and mathematics in the morning with 'topic work' or foundation subjects in the afternoon. Other primary schools focused their remote learning heavily or even entirely on mathematics and English. Some primary schools were delivering live or recorded phonics sessions so that pupils

could receive direct teaching of phonics in line with the school's phonics programme.

- Many secondary schools expected their pupils' remote learning day to follow the pattern of their usual timetable. Most secondary leaders reported that the content of the core subjects when taught remotely was aligned with the pre-existing curriculum. However, occasionally, schools focused solely on consolidation.
- There are currently few systems in place to assess what pupils have learned; leaders recognised this as an area for improvement. However, some schools had developed methods such as digital submission and marking of work, or online quizzes that enabled teachers to identify which questions were not answered well.
- Assessment was recognised as another area requiring further development. Schools were working out what was possible, reasonable, and useful, depending on the different subjects and methods of delivery that they were using.
- Leaders continue to express concern about the challenges of remote learning; these include lack of space at home, lack of parental support, or lack of digital devices. Some leaders reported that they had not received what they needed from the government's laptop scheme. There is an ongoing issue around teacher workload.

### Lost learning

- Many leaders said that younger pupils had been most negatively affected by the lockdown. Many had seen a negative impact on key stage 1 pupils' social and communication skills, listening skills, speech, phonic knowledge, and gross motor skills. Regression in fine motor skills was a particular concern. Some pupils were unable to hold a pencil when they could do so before.
- Many primary school leaders reported that pupils had fallen behind in mathematical vocabulary, place value, recall, number, fluency, and data handling. Even more leaders said that pupils had lost basic literacy skills.
- Secondary school leaders also often said that pupils had fallen behind in mathematics and literacy. Many leaders were concerned about their Year 7 cohort and how they had fallen behind, particularly in English, partly because of the lack of normal transition. Some leaders were also very concerned about Year 11 pupils and their preparedness for national examinations.

### Ongoing challenges for leaders

- In this briefing, a few new findings have emerged in relation to teachers' well-being.
- The bubble structure in secondary schools is causing physical fatigue for some teachers, as staff move from classroom to classroom carrying their resources.
- The usual 'socialising in the staffroom' that helps staff's well-being cannot take place across bubbles.
- Many school leaders were struggling with the amount of workload due to a 'constantly fluid' situation, constant vigilance and responding to situations on a daily basis. These include being on-call at all times, keeping abreast of government guidance, positive COVID-19 tests for students and staff and tracking close contacts of positive cases.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-series-briefing-on-schools-november-2020>