

Education Recovery in Schools: Spring 2022

Introduction and background

In April, Ofsted produced the latest in its series of recovery briefings which present an overview of education recovery across different sectors of education. The briefings draw on inspections and discussions with school inspectors. This summary focusses on the schools recovery briefing. Additional briefings for early years, and further education and skills providers can also be found via the link below.

Key points

Education recovery in schools

- Ofsted gathered evidence from routine inspections of 43 primary schools, 48 secondary schools and 14 special schools in England between 22 November 2021 and 28 January 2022. There were focus group discussions with 23 Ofsted inspectors.
- Throughout January 2022, the pandemic continued to reduce pupils' attendance in many schools. Data from the DfE shows an increase in pupils not attending school for COVID-related reasons during January, but this reduced before the spring half term.
- Some leaders of special schools said that attendance had been a challenge for them, particularly among pupils with complex health needs.
- Some parents were not sending their children to school because of their concerns. Anxiety around COVID-19 was thought to be higher among certain communities, including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. There was push-back from some parents when schools communicated high expectations and the importance of attendance.
- Some schools also talked about their contingency plans for online learning in case of further lockdowns or to accommodate high levels of absence. However, compared with the national lockdowns, fewer schools were offering comprehensive remote learning for small numbers of pupils who were not at school.
- Leaders identified learning gaps, particularly in subjects where knowledge was essential for progression – mathematics, phonics, reading, writing stamina and handwriting, languages (particularly listening and speaking), and PE.
- As in the autumn term, leaders identified pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and disadvantaged pupils as being hardest hit by the pandemic.
- More leaders are now reporting that pupils' gaps in knowledge and skills are closing or have closed in some subjects, and that pupils were 'where they should be.' Inspections have also revealed pupils recovering skills and knowledge.
- Some schools reported that the pandemic has influenced subject choices at GCSE and A level. A few schools reported decreases in pupils opting for triple science and others had noted declines in the number of pupils taking English Baccalaureate subjects. One leader thought that this was due to pupils' lower level of confidence in languages following lockdowns.
- As reported in our December briefing, they continued to have concerns about pupils having lower resilience and confidence and greater anxiety. For some pupils, the impact of the pandemic had been most noticeable when they first went back to school, but others were still experiencing poorer well-being in the spring term. In some schools, safeguarding concerns and disclosures had increased. These school leaders spoke about more concerns relating to domestic abuse.
- A common approach was to increase the focus on mental health in the curriculum for all pupils, often through personal, social, and health education. Schools were also providing therapeutic interventions for individual pupils, either by training their own staff or employing staff with therapeutic qualifications. Some schools were adding these roles to their pastoral teams because it has been difficult to access external services, which often had long waiting times.
- In the spring term, a few leaders were optimistic that pupils' well-being was 'improving' and 'getting back to normal.'
- Opportunities for pupils to take part in enrichment activities, such as clubs and trips, continued to vary between schools this term. Most schools were offering some activities, and a few were back to their full programme.

Pupil behaviour

- This term, many more leaders said that poor behaviour had been addressed. Leaders had established boundaries and set expectations. Some schools had retained staggered lunch hours which created a calmer atmosphere.
- Other schools were facing ongoing challenges with behaviour and reporting that pupils' engagement and ability to stay on task was still worse than pre-pandemic.
- Several leaders mentioned that children in Reception were not as used to sharing and taking turns, and more work was needed to develop their listening skills. They felt that this was due to a lack of pre-school social experiences.



Assessment

- Following initial assessments when pupils returned to school after lockdown, many teachers were extracting diagnostic information from assessments routinely built into the curriculum to reinforce pupils' learning and retention, such as low-stakes quizzes, targeted questioning, and knowledge retrieval activities.
- Some leaders, particularly in mathematics, had done baseline assessments and repeated these at intervals to monitor how well their adapted curriculum was filling the gaps.
- A few schools reported focussing more on formative assessment practices, such as looking more closely at the key objectives, and checking prior learning more carefully before moving on to new material. Activities at the start of lessons to check learning were taking longer as teachers checked for a wider range of gaps.
- Ofsted has seen the importance of strong leadership for effective assessment. Strong leaders tended to have a clear strategic plan which included the essential knowledge on which assessment should be focussed.
- Effective assessment is linked to a good understanding of the curriculum and strong subject knowledge. When teachers were clear about the knowledge that pupils needed to acquire, they understood what needed to be assessed.
- Inspectors often found that mathematics was being assessed more effectively than other subjects, as leaders knew the curriculum well and were clear about what pupils should know at each stage.
- In the best examples of assessment practice, leaders were focused on checking that pupils were building the knowledge necessary to progress by continually tracking, in-class, what they knew at different points.
- Some primary schools were focusing assessment narrowly on the core curriculum, particularly English and mathematics, and paying less attention to foundation subjects. This narrow focus may be partly due to teachers' lack of confidence in the foundation subjects. Assessment of foundation subjects was stronger in secondary schools.
- Ofsted often had concerns with assessment when leaders had acknowledged that pupils had learning gaps but were unsure about which knowledge was missing. In some schools, leaders were 'assuming but not assessing' for gaps.
- Ofsted warns against an over-reliance on standardised assessment. It may not check the taught curriculum and so may not be an accurate reflection of whether pupils are learning what the school intends.
- Other schools with weak assessment practice had identified gaps in learning and pupils' needs, but this did not then lead to sufficient or timely curriculum adaptation.
- Inspection evidence showed that some teachers of Year 11 and Year 13 cohorts were focusing on exam preparation with extra formal assessments and practice questions, targeted on gaps emerging from mock assessments. In some schools, assessment practices for these year groups had been adjusted to account for this. However, inspectors pointed out that the potential for pupils being 'more weighed than fed' and the focus on assessment could mean learning suffers as a result.

Catch-up strategies

- Some schools are continuing to adapt their curriculum in several ways such as providing interventions for certain pupils, prioritising what has been missed, or focussing on extra-curricular activities.
- Most leaders said that assessment was driving curriculum adaptations. Some leaders referred to frequent assessment which meant that interventions could be responsive.
- This term schools were using some new catch-up strategies such as providing time to practise independent writing, introducing grammar lessons, and focussing on swimming lessons.
- Some Y10 and Y11 pupils have missed out on work experience – leaders said that they are working with external partners to rebuild this.
- Participants in focus group discussions suggested that the education inspection framework, with its focus on a broad and balanced curriculum, had prevented schools from narrowing the curriculum and GCSE options.
- Although it may, in some cases, be appropriate for pupils with SEN to be taken out of foundation lessons to focus on core subjects, schools should be careful to ensure that these pupils do not receive a curriculum which is too narrow.

Targeted support and tutoring

- Schools used assessment to identify pupils or groups of pupils for focused support. This sometimes involved 'pre-teaching' before a whole-class lesson.
- Many schools using tuition partners had found that there was a lack of available tutors. Sometimes the tutors did not follow the schools' teaching approaches and schools felt that there was a lack of evidence about the quality of the tutoring, leading them to believe that the additional tutoring may not benefit pupils.
- Many schools had chosen the school-led route and trained their own staff as tutors, internally or across academy trusts. Ofsted observed some good practice in using trained teaching assistants as tutors, but using internal staff placed additional pressure on already strained school staff.
- Tutoring was mainly directed towards maths and English, and towards phonics in particular.
- Some schools were holding tutoring sessions outside of normal teaching hours, either before or after school.

Staffing

- Schools were particularly hard hit with staff absence in the Spring term, with 5 per cent of teachers and leaders absent in January 2022 for COVID-related reasons. In the face of difficulties recruiting cover staff, many schools used their own staff to cover lessons, including leaders, teachers, and higher-level teaching assistants. This increased staff workloads.
- Staff absence in the Spring term impacted the introduction of targeted support and led to children being sent back to remote learning or the allocation of specialist subject teachers to exam groups.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/ofsted-education-recovery-series>