

COVID-19 series: briefing on schools, September 2020

Evidence from pilot visits to schools between 14 and 18 September

During the autumn term, Ofsted is carrying out [a series of 'interim visits' to schools](#). Before beginning these visits, we piloted our approach. This briefing note reports on 121 pilot visits we made between 14 and 18 September. The schools volunteered to take part in the pilot visits, so the picture presented here may not be representative. This is our first briefing note, and we will publish more through the term.

Data summary

Table: Number of pilot visits in this analysis: 121

Phase	Outstanding	Good	Requires improvement	Inadequate	No previous grade*	Total
Total in sample	21 (17%)	73 (60%)	15 (13%)	9 (8%)	3 (3%)	121 (100%)
Primary visits	13 (11%)	49 (41%)	4 (3%)	4 (3%)	1 (1%)	71 (59%)
Secondary visits	2 (2%)	21 (17%)	10 (8%)	5 (4%)	2 (2%)	40 (33%)
Other (including PRU and special)	6 (5%)	3 (2%)	1 (1%)	0%	0%	10 (8%)
National total	4,193 (19%)	14,615 (67%)	2,191 (10%)	775 (4%)	N/A	21,774 (100%)
Primary schools	2,810 (17%)	1,1852 (71%)	1,563 (9%)	467 (3%)	N/A	16,692 (100%)
Secondary schools	682 (21%)	1,859 (56%)	543 (16%)	240 (7%)	N/A	3,324 (100%)
Other (including PRU and special)	701 (40%)	904 (51%)	85 (5%)	68 (4%)	N/A	1,758 (100%)

* A school with no previous grade is usually a new school.

Main findings

In the schools we visited as part of the pilot, leaders had made many adaptations to make it safe for pupils and staff to be back. Most pupils had returned to school, and in most of the schools attendance was back to normal.

Leaders told us that they were teaching most of the subjects they usually teach, though many have reordered topics within subjects. Primary schools were giving even more attention to reading than usual. Schools were using remote learning to reach those pupils who have to stay at home, but remote learning materials were in many cases not fully aligned with the regular curriculum. The schools said that they planned to return to their normal curriculum by the summer term 2021 but many said they thought they would be able to achieve this earlier. School leaders were concerned about not being able to keep their schools open when staff had to self-isolate to wait for COVID-19 (coronavirus) tests and test results.

Methodological note

This is the first in our series of briefing notes about COVID-19. The evidence in it is based on one-day pilot interim visits with no graded judgement. The schools visited had volunteered to take part in the pilot, which is likely to affect the findings. We analysed evidence from 121 pilot visits. The sample is small compared with the total number of schools in England and therefore general conclusions should be drawn with caution.

Overarching questions

This briefing answers **four** broad questions based on evidence from the visits:

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

The current state of children's school education

Returning to school

All the schools visited had opened to all their pupils full time from the second week of September, some earlier. Generally, the schools reported that their attendance rate was similar to normal. Some schools had higher attendance than usual. Many leaders attributed this to the work they had done with families during the summer term, which had led to more trust in the school. Leaders told us that pupils seem happy to be back at school and had clearly missed their friends. In a few schools, leaders commented that absence was starting to increase because some pupils were unwell and awaiting COVID-19 tests. Over a third of the schools reported that some parents had removed their children from school to electively home educate them, or

were about to do so. Leaders told us that many of these parents seemed to have made this choice because of their anxiety about COVID-19.

Leaders described the many changes they had made to their daily routines to make the school safe for pupils to return. These included staggered starts and ends to the day and alterations to break and lunchtimes. For example, some schools had 'zoned' their playgrounds and made sure that each 'bubble'¹ of pupils had its own set of equipment. In secondary schools, leaders had sometimes lengthened lessons to minimise pupils' movement around the school.

Returning to the curriculum

In both primary and special schools, we saw a variety of approaches taken to their autumn-term curriculum. Some schools have returned to teaching all subjects straight away. Others are taking a gradual approach to reintroducing foundation subjects such as modern foreign languages and geography. Practical aspects of subjects such as physical education (PE) and music were sometimes not being taught. All the primary school leaders told us that they are concentrating hard on reading, including phonics. Many leaders explained that they wanted to make sure that if there have been any losses in learning, particularly in reading, these are quickly put right. Leaders of special schools echoed these views about losses in learning. They tended to be concentrating on the aspects they thought were the most urgent priority for their pupils, such as language and communication.

Many secondary schools told us that their pupils have come straight back to studying the full range of subjects. Most also reported that pupils are continuing with all their GCSE courses, although a few schools suggested that some pupils may need to drop an option subject. The secondary schools had generally re-ordered their curriculums in order to prioritise key concepts and knowledge. Some leaders talked about focusing on what they thought were the most important building blocks for each subject. Others said they were prioritising what they thought could not be taught effectively through remote learning. A few had extended their teaching time to support Year 11 pupils to catch up with their learning.

Some leaders talked about their current 'recovery curriculum' but this meant different things to different schools. Some meant that they had carefully selected the subject-specific knowledge and skills that needed to be taught in the first few weeks back to enable pupils to 'recover' any lost learning. Others meant that their curriculum currently had a stronger focus than normal on personal, social and health education (PSHE) and pupils' well-being, either through separate lessons or woven through the rest of the curriculum. Overall, the main focus in the schools visited was getting back to the normal curriculum as quickly and efficiently as possible.

¹ A 'bubble' is a group of pupils who are kept together in school with minimal contact with other pupils.

Remote learning

Most schools visited were providing remote education for some pupils – those who were in self-isolation or quarantine, or who were shielding. Schools that were not told us that they currently had no pupils who fell into these groups, but were ready to use remote learning when needed. A few leaders had already had to put in place remote education for whole classes or whole year groups, because of confirmed cases of COVID-19. The schools were generally using online methods of delivery – recorded online lessons, individual study modules or often a combination of the two. Occasionally, leaders said they were using live online lessons.

Leaders said that they sometimes supplement or support online work with textbooks and printed packs of work. Many told us that they were working on what content they can best use to align their remote learning with their existing curriculum. Leaders reported that in some subjects their remote education was only aligned with their pre-existing curriculum to some extent. In others, it was not yet aligned. We will explore remote learning in more detail during this term.

Schools already had e-safety guidelines in place before the lockdown, so were generally able to adapt these to take into account remote learning. Most schools communicated with parents about online safety, including how to raise any safety concerns. A few schools reported safety concerns about the use of live lessons, such as pupils being alone in a room while the lesson was taking place, and had chosen not to use live teaching because of these concerns. Some others had put measures in place that they thought would help, such as recording the whole lesson (including any discussion in the chat box), using audio only or occasionally making sure a parent was present in the room for the lesson.

Staff training and recruitment

All schools had done a range of online training with their staff during the summer term. Typically, leaders told us: 'We've done everything we usually do, but electronically.' The content varied depending on schools' priorities. Leaders explained how some training was delivered directly to staff through online platforms, with all staff attending at the same time. Staff could access other training online independently. A few leaders described how they had brought all staff in for face-to-face training at the end of the summer term. Usually, this involved senior leaders delivering the same training several times because social distancing meant that fewer staff could be present at any one time. Occasionally, schools had held their training sessions outside to get around this issue.

Many of the leaders in the schools visited said that they had continued to recruit staff during the summer term. This was generally done through online interviews. The biggest concern expressed by leaders was not being able to see a prospective teacher teaching. Occasionally, schools had recruited teachers on fixed-term contracts for this reason. However, some leaders said that online interviews had worked much better than they had anticipated. A few leaders had carried out

interviews in school, socially distanced. A small number of leaders did not like the idea of interviewing virtually so had delayed the process until this term.

How children were affected by partial school closures

Learning through the national lockdown

Leaders frequently talked about the challenges they had faced in getting remote education up and running at the start of the national lockdown in March to enable all pupils to carry on learning. There were significant challenges for the schools in more deprived areas when they wanted pupils to use information technology, as many families did not have devices or internet access. Most of the schools had at least some pupils who did not have devices or access to the internet.

Leaders also talked about the challenges of communicating with families about what they wanted pupils to learn, helping families to become confident in working with their children and making sure that all pupils had some good-quality learning to do. Some mentioned how difficult it was for their pupils to complete work at home, for example because of a lack of space. Overall, these challenges meant that many pupils missed out on much of their learning last term.

Our visits took place when schools had been back, following the summer break, for around a week, and many leaders said that it was too early to have identified specific gaps in pupils' learning or have a detailed picture. Some, though, said that they were already feeling confident that they understood which aspects of the curriculum pupils had not learned during the last term. In primary schools, leaders' main concerns were that pupils were behind where they would want them to be at this point in reading, particularly phonics, and in mathematics. For pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), particularly those who do not communicate verbally, some leaders told us that being away from school has meant that their communication skills have regressed. They also noticed the impact of pupils having missed out on physiotherapy and speech and language therapy.

Pupils' physical, social and emotional health

Many leaders told us that pupils had generally settled back into school well. They told us that pupils seem happy to be back at school and had clearly missed their friends. Leaders said that pupils were adapting to the new rules and restrictions and to being back in the classroom. Often, though, at least some of their pupils were finding it more difficult to concentrate on their learning than usual. Leaders felt that some were showing less resilience, for example becoming quickly upset if the work seemed difficult, or giving up more easily. Some, they thought, also seemed to have shorter concentration spans than usual and seemed tired. Leaders said that sometimes pupils were slightly agitated at being together, having spent such a long time away from each other. Several leaders said that their pupils were generally more subdued than usual.

Some leaders said that they had noticed that some pupils' physical health seemed to have deteriorated during the lockdown period. They told us that they were adjusting their curriculum to include more opportunities for sports and PE to promote physical well-being. Some also reported that a minority of students had been very anxious about the return to school. These pupils' anxiety was associated with a variety of factors, including health, new social distancing arrangements in school, being behind with schoolwork, and worries about being away from home. Leaders described how they were providing additional support for affected pupils, including one-to-one counselling and, in a few cases, a phased return to school.

Leaders were very aware that some pupils had suffered from a variety of difficult circumstances during lockdown. Many reported that families had needed additional support to get the food they needed. Some schools had provided food parcels. Many schools said that they had identified pupils who were newly vulnerable, due to parents' changed financial situations, or the separation of parents.

Safeguarding

While some schools told us that COVID-19 had not had an impact on the number of their safeguarding cases or referrals, others reported an increase in cases. For schools with increased safeguarding cases, most of these were attributed to incidents of domestic abuse. The impact of COVID-19 on the relationships between schools and external agencies was mixed. Some schools reported improved systems for sharing information across local authority services. In one example, leaders said that having cross-agency meetings online had improved communication and strengthened relationships. However, a few other schools had found that some external agencies were operating at lower capacity than usual.

How schools plan to maintain high standards in education

Planning for full recovery

Generally, the schools visited are aiming to return to their normal curriculum by the summer term 2021. Many of the schools believe that they will be able to achieve this much earlier. A very small number of the schools feel that they need more time to decide when it will be possible to return to their usual full curriculum. Many leaders conveyed their determination to avert detrimental effects for pupils – not allowing them to be the 'COVID generation' – despite, as one leader put it, having to 'spin plates every day'.

Leaders often told us that they were checking pupils' new starting points this term. They were using assessment to find out what pupils had learned in different subjects during last term, and to consider anything they had forgotten or regressed in. Some primary school leaders, for example, said that pupils had fallen behind with their reading fluency and comprehension. Others told us that they needed to revise letter sounds that had been covered in remote learning lessons, because pupils had not had the practice they needed to support them in remembering the new sounds

introduced. Many leaders had started to adjust the content of the curriculum to take account of what their assessment told them. Some of the primary school leaders, for example, told us about specific aspects of mathematics that they were focusing on in the first few weeks. Some secondary schools had decided to concentrate on 'refreshing' or 'revising' important knowledge across the curriculum for the first few weeks.

Settling back in

Many leaders described their schools as 'calm'. They told us that the new routines they had introduced, for example at break and lunchtime, were working well and appeared to be helping pupils to feel secure and behave sensibly. Some leaders talked about the improved relationships that they had formed with families, some of whom had grown to trust them more during the last term. These leaders commented that they wanted to maintain and build on these positive relationships. Leaders described how they had gone out of their way to find the best ways to communicate with families during the lockdown period, using their websites, social media, telephone calls, surveys and sometimes visits to homes.

Challenges for leaders

Nevertheless, the schools had faced significant challenges during the last term, and continue to do so. Staff being absent from school is already proving to be a challenge. Many leaders saw the lack of availability of COVID-19 testing in their area as a real barrier to getting – or staying – properly up and running again. Leaders of some small schools described how quickly their school might have to close if staff could not get tested when they needed to, though this fear was shared by schools of all sizes.

Leaders often commented on what they saw as a lack of clarity in the national and local guidance that they had to draw on. Many said that they received conflicting information from different agencies, or from different parts of the same agency. They said that this was very stressful for them and their leadership team, particularly last term but continuing into this term. Social media, particularly when this spread misinformation about COVID-19, was also a continuing challenge for leaders. Sometimes, they had to help parents to know what the real situation was.

Leaders' concerns about safety in both primary and secondary schools meant that they were struggling to work out how to include practical subjects such as PE, design and technology and music fully in the curriculum. Schools also expressed concerns about the likelihood of Year 11 pupils being 'exam ready'.

Mitigating the impact of COVID-19

Most schools had introduced school-wide measures to try to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on pupils' well-being. Many schools also described spending additional time on PSHE, with a specific focus on mental health issues and supporting pupils' well-being. Some schools had introduced new staff training to help teachers to identify and provide the right support to pupils in need. Some schools had introduced

well-being 'hubs' or increased the capacity of their existing arrangements, so that pupils in need of additional support had a physical safe space that they could use when needed. Many schools said that they had put additional support in place to help those pupils who had been affected by family bereavement.

At the time of our visits, schools were managing to find their way around some of the barriers they had faced in terms of providing remote education, such as pupils' access to the internet. Many were revising the way in which the remote curriculum was organised and delivered in order to make it more aligned to the school's curriculum.

How the COVID-19 catch-up premium is being used

Leaders were generally awaiting further information about the funding before making firm plans. Some of the schools had tentative plans to use COVID-19 funding to support their curriculum work. Of those leaders who explained their thinking, most were aiming to use the funding to help pupils to catch up with learning they had missed, such as aspects of reading and mathematics, based on their assessment. Some leaders thought that they might use the funding to pay extra staff for this work and others were planning to use it for resourcing their reading curriculum.

On the whole, leaders were not planning to use the funding to support pupils' behaviour or attendance, though they said this might change if pupils' needs changed during the term. This is another area we will come back to through the term as things develop.



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