



Research and analysis

Education recovery in schools: autumn 2021

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The picture overall

The impact of the pandemic on children and schools is well documented. This time last year, we published a [series of COVID-19-themed briefings](#), presenting findings from interim visits to schools in the autumn term 2020. Leaders faced challenges in managing the logistics of COVID-19 safety measures, delivering education remotely and identifying gaps in learning. Many school leaders and staff responded to these challenges with tenacity and demonstrated creativity in how they supported pupils.

Since then, schools faced another period of physical closure to most children from January 2021, and have continued to deal with the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on pupils and staff since reopening. Our inspection handbooks have been amended to consider the impact of the pandemic on schools. We have looked at the evidence collected from a sample of 98 routine inspections carried out this term. It is clear from our findings that the effects of the pandemic are still being felt by pupils, staff and leaders.

School leaders described the continued impact of the pandemic on pupils' education and personal development. Leaders said that the newest cohorts in primary and secondary schools have arrived with lower starting points than

previous years. Schools have also found that some pupils are taking longer than usual to settle in and get used to the school routine, which they attribute to the pandemic disrupting the previous academic year and pupils' transition arrangements. The pandemic continues to affect pupils' attendance and leaders also reported an increase in pupils with poor mental health and well-being.

Some pupils in primary schools have gaps in phonics knowledge, and in both primary and secondary schools, some pupils are catching up on practical skills, such as in the sciences and in physical education (PE). These 'gaps' in knowledge are either because schools had not taught this content while they were partially closed or because pupils did not learn effectively during this period.

Many schools were responding to these challenges by using regular, informal assessments to determine what knowledge pupils have (and have not) remembered from their teaching during lockdown. Most teachers were using this to inform their curriculum planning. Many schools also said that they were using assessment to identify pupils who may benefit from additional support, such as one-to-one intervention, to catch up. Leaders often spoke about this as a dynamic, ongoing process of assessing, adapting teaching and supporting specific pupils where needed.

Understanding what pupils do and do not know and using this information to make necessary adjustments to the curriculum is an important part of education recovery. However, effective approaches to assessment and catch-up will be different in different subject areas.^{[\[footnote 1\]](#)} In terms of adaptations, most teachers were providing lots of opportunities for pupils to revisit and consolidate previous learning and were focusing on areas of the curriculum that have been missed and need to be covered. One-to-one or group interventions were often led by school staff and targeted specific pupils, such as those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Some schools had set up additional catch-up provision before or after school.

The pandemic continues to affect school staff and leaders. This includes COVID-related staff absence, staff training being postponed, and school improvement plans being slowed down.

It is still too early to see the full impact of different approaches to education recovery on pupils' learning and personal development, but it is clear that schools are responding with resilience and perseverance to support all pupils. We have seen that leaders are working hard despite the challenges that schools continue to face.

Methodological note

This briefing uses evidence gathered from routine inspections to show:

- how the pandemic continues to impact on pupils' learning and personal

development

- how schools are helping pupils to catch up

Our inspections give us insight into schools' approaches to recovery. The findings in this briefing are based on evidence collected during routine inspections of 98 primary and secondary schools in England between 25 October and 19 November 2021. This is nearly a quarter (22%) of school inspections carried out during that time. However, it is just a selection so the findings illustrate the challenges that some schools are facing and the approaches they are taking. In future briefings, we will include findings for special schools and alternative provision; we didn't have a big enough sample of inspections of these schools during the time period for this report.

The current state of children's education

Ongoing COVID-related absence

Many schools are still working on getting back to pre-pandemic attendance levels. Schools report that much absence is directly related to COVID-19. Schools described a range of direct and indirect reasons for COVID-19-related absences, including:

- pupils testing positive for COVID-19
- COVID-19-related anxiety among both parents and pupils
- poorer mental health among pupils
- rescheduled or rearranged term-time holidays
- low resilience to setbacks or illness

Some schools had more COVID-19-related absences among disadvantaged pupils (often those for whom they received pupil premium funding), pupils with SEND and specific year groups (for example, Year 8, Year 11 and sixth form). Leaders are tackling this through family support, designated staff members, follow-up phone calls or home visits, and clubs for those whose attendance is particularly low.

The latest annual report from the Association of Directors of Children's Services suggests an increase in children being electively home educated as a result of the pandemic.^{[\[footnote 2\]](#)} A few school leaders said that, since they have fully reopened, some pupils who had moved to elective home education have now returned to school full-time.

The newest intake of pupils

Children coming into the Reception Year have missed out on or had interrupted nursery provision. This has resulted in the newest intake of pupils struggling more with peer interactions, behaviour, school readiness and attitudes to learning. Some teachers said that the impact of the pandemic on Reception pupils was bigger than they had expected. Schools had found that pupils had a wider range of starting points. As discussed in our [briefing on early years](#), the pandemic has hindered opportunities for children's language and communication development. Similarly, schools said that some Year 1 and Year 2 pupils were displaying poorer behaviours, including having difficulties socialising with peers. They also had gaps in phonics knowledge.

In secondary schools, Year 7 pupils struggled with the behaviour expectations of their new school and took longer to settle in. Schools suggested that this was because to the transition process between primary and secondary school was unusual. Some schools described Year 8 in a similar way, which may reflect that their first year of secondary school was also greatly affected by the pandemic.

Overall, schools said that Year 7 pupils had a wider range of starting points and greater knowledge gaps in specific subjects compared with previous cohorts. The subjects and skills that were commonly mentioned include: reading, mathematics, writing stamina, science (particularly in practical skills) and languages.

Schools said that disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND have been particularly affected by the pandemic. They had concerns about the social and emotional health of pupils with SEND. One school described its pupils with SEND as 'not secondary ready'. Leaders in some schools mentioned that the pandemic has exacerbated the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. A few schools said that lockdown had worsened behaviour among these pupils, including more persistent absences and exclusions and lower engagement with learning.

Knowledge and skills in specific areas

Schools identified a wide range of subject-specific areas that continued to be affected by the pandemic, either because teaching had been missed or because pupils did not learn well remotely. How much pupils had learned, and how secure they were in this knowledge, depended on whether they were in school during lockdowns, how much they had engaged with remote learning and how independently they could work at home. Primary school pupils' learning was often dependent on the level of support parents were able to give and the confidence parents had in helping their children in different subjects.

Gaps in literacy and language were frequently noted across both primary and secondary schools. Specific areas of learning loss include: writing stamina, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, handwriting, and – in particular – phonics

knowledge. One school noted that the latter had negatively affected pupils' ability to properly access other subjects, which all require reading.

School leaders said that most pupils had some gaps in mathematics knowledge that they had identified and were addressing this term. In primary schools, teachers identified common gaps in key stage 1 pupils' knowledge of place value, number and symbol recognition, and number bonds.

As we identified in last year's [COVID-19-themed briefings](#), schools found it challenging to teach practical skills remotely. Some pupils are still catching up on missed teaching of practical skills in subjects such as geography, science, music, technologies and art. In the early years, schools had noticed delays in children's fine motor skills. Many schools also identified that pupils had missed out on PE and general physical activity. Leaders said that some pupils have returned to school unfit, more overweight and lacking physical resilience and stamina.

A smaller number of school leaders said that the pandemic continued to affect the teaching of history and languages during the autumn term. This is due to these subjects having more to catch up on as some content was not taught while schools were closed or was difficult to teach remotely. In history, this has resulted in gaps in pupils' knowledge of chronology and their ability to use sources, as well as pupils missing out on history school trips. In languages, pupils have found speaking and listening tasks more challenging.

Many secondary school leaders said that key stage 4 pupils had missed out on careers education and work experience opportunities. Schools are trying to catch up on this. However, in some schools, careers education and work experience opportunities have not yet restarted, remain virtual or are reduced compared with before the pandemic.

Catch-up strategies

Identifying gaps in learning

School leaders mentioned 2 issues emerging from the time when schools were partially closed: they had not been able to teach some of their usual curriculum, and some of what was taught was not well remembered by pupils. These issues had led to gaps in pupils' learning.

Many leaders said they had reviewed the previous year's curriculum plans to establish the breadth and depth of what they had been able to cover and what had been missed. They did this so that teachers could 'plug the gaps' in coverage where necessary.

In addition, curriculum leaders in some schools said they had used assessment information at the beginning of the academic year (or at the end of the summer term) to understand:

- which knowledge pupils had not learned well
- which concepts pupils were finding difficult
- which knowledge pupils could not remember

Teachers were using this assessment to pinpoint areas of their curriculum that were a priority for catch-up and to identify what knowledge pupils needed to be taught or to recap before they could progress with new learning. Leaders said they were also using both formative and summative assessments (in formal and informal ways) to identify individual pupils who may need additional support.

Informal assessment included low-stakes testing and teacher questioning to understand gaps in pupils' learning. Teachers were then amending lessons 'as we go' and continually planning additional support for specific pupils. For example, some primary schools described how their frequent assessments in phonics lessons were leading to: additional afternoon catch-up sessions for small groups; 'pre-teaching' before the next scheduled lesson; or recapping lessons for the whole class. Leaders said this approach to assessment enabled teachers to respond quickly when they identified new gaps in learning or when they needed to adapt to ongoing absences due to COVID-19.

Some schools referred to more formal assessment methods to measure attainment, such as standardised testing at the start of the autumn term in reading or mathematics, baseline testing of new Year 7 cohorts and mock examinations for Year 11 pupils. These broad measures of performance usually cover a wide range of content, which can be less helpful than focused assessment when trying to identify specific gaps in knowledge.^[footnote 3] Most schools mentioned informal targeted assessment rather than formal assessment approaches.

Intervention classes, such as one-to-one sessions or group work, were also a very common approach used to help specific pupils to catch up. In primary schools, interventions seemed to focus on the core subjects of mathematics and English, and especially phonics and reading skills.

Inspectors noted that some schools were using frequent assessments to ensure that gaps were identified and further support provided. However, in a few schools, inspectors found that assessment needed to be more robust. For example, at times it did not focus on gaps in learning or was not being used effectively to ensure that pupils were catching up.

Curriculum adaptations

School leaders wanted to 'pick up the pieces from the pandemic' and were pleased to be getting back to their normal curriculum. A small number of school

leaders said that they were not making any adaptations to their usual curriculum because they were confident in the remote learning they had provided and in their catch-up work after fully reopening. However, many schools were adapting their curriculum plans to address gaps in learning. Some leaders referred to this as their 'recovery curriculum'.

As previously mentioned, many leaders had been reviewing the curriculum to identify what had been taught and what had been missed. This enabled staff to adjust the curriculum and prioritise missed learning. As one primary school leader put it, this ensured that staff were not 'building on sand' when teaching new content.

Leaders also talked about providing opportunities across the curriculum for a lot of repetition, retrieval and revision of previous learning. This was to help pupils consolidate their knowledge. Some schools were specifically revisiting topics that had been taught remotely either because some pupils had not engaged well or because some topics had been challenging to teach in this way.

In many primary schools, leaders were focusing on the core subjects for their catch-up work, particularly phonics, reading and mathematics. Many phonics leaders talked about their regular recaps and 'backtracking'. Approaches included:

- increasing the number of sessions for all key stage 1 pupils
- re-teaching last year's content to cover gaps
- continuing phonics in lower key stage 2 classes to cover content that had not been learned well

A few schools had purchased new programmes and resources to support their catch-up work in phonics or had provided additional staff training in this area. A few others had employed extra staff to focus on supporting phonics teaching. As previously mentioned, most phonics leaders talked about providing additional, sometimes daily, interventions to support catch-up for targeted pupils. Many primary schools were also focusing on reading in other ways, for example:

- providing additional opportunities for specific pupils to read to an adult
- working to 'reignite reading' with new books or reading areas
- sending recommended reading lists home
- having 'drop everything and read' sessions

Most primary schools were also focusing on catch-up work in mathematics, including:

- recapping and regular retrieval of prior learning (for example, through regular 10-minute sessions)
- focusing on problem-solving and reasoning tasks that they had not been able to explore through remote teaching
- breaking down topics into smaller steps and taking more time to cover content
- using more manipulatives to support initial understanding of concepts

Curriculum adaptations in other subjects included: prioritising practical work in science; re-sequencing topics in subjects such as history, geography and personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education; and altering swimming schedules. On occasion, inspectors noted that leaders should remain mindful of their curriculum goals to ensure that these were not lost when making adaptations.

Many secondary school leaders were using targeted interventions for catch-up and mentioned the importance of regularly reviewing and repeating prior learning in all subjects.

In English, many secondary schools were focusing on pupils' catch-up in reading. For example, some were targeting key stage 3 pupils who had been identified as needing additional phonics work. Others had introduced new reading programmes for whole cohorts, such as Year 7. English curriculum leaders also talked about adaptations made to support pupils' writing skills. Some were providing more extended writing opportunities and others were focusing on grammar and punctuation, for example through explicit attention in lesson starters.

In mathematics, secondary school leaders appeared to be strongly focusing on regularly reviewing and recapping prior learning. In particular, they revisited areas where gaps in pupils' learning had been identified or topics that had been taught remotely, in order to consolidate knowledge. A few leaders mentioned focusing on certain areas during this term, such as core number skills (with Year 7), algebra or place value.

Secondary school leaders also said that they had made adaptations in other curriculum areas to respond to pupils' gaps in learning. For example:

- in science, many curriculum leaders were prioritising enquiry and practical work to catch up on the opportunities missed due to COVID-19 restrictions. Some leaders were having to focus on Year 7 pupils in particular, due to varying key stage 2 experiences
- in languages, some schools were concentrating on speaking tasks because of the limited opportunities for spoken-language communication in remote learning. Leaders were using a lot of repetition and drills. Some were also focusing on aspects of grammar, such as tenses
- in PE, a few schools were revisiting skills or teaching missed units. For example, one school was spending more time on 'game situations' as this had been difficult to cover remotely

Many school leaders talked about their enrichment programme and extra-curricular activities. In some schools, these were still suspended or were just restarting, but other schools had fully restored their programme.

Use of tutors

In some primary and secondary schools, leaders said they were using funding to

provide one-to-one or group interventions. Many schools used their own staff, including teaching assistants, for these. A few said they were using academic mentors or National Tutoring Programme tutors. Some school leaders talked about their plans to begin a tutoring programme in the near future.

Many schools' tutoring and intervention work targeted specific pupils. Schools varied in how they were targeting this support. For example, some schools were targeting disadvantaged pupils; others mentioned examination cohorts and specific year groups. Some leaders said they were using their assessment tools to identify individual pupils who had gaps in learning or were not catching up quickly and would benefit from targeted support. The intervention activity often focused on the core subjects of mathematics, English (usually phonics and reading) and science.

Extending school time

Some school leaders mentioned that they were offering after-school provision, such as intervention groups, 'catch-up clubs' or revision sessions. The extended provision usually focused on core subjects. Once again, these interventions were often for specific pupils identified as needing extra support.

A few schools were using time before school for extra support. For example, some offered targeted one-to-one English tuition; some held reading comprehension booster sessions with large groups of pupils; and some were starting the day early with 10 minutes of whole-class fluency work in mathematics. A small number of schools were offering Saturday sessions and a few secondary schools used summer school programmes as part of inducting new Year 7 cohorts.

Some secondary school leaders had extended the school day for all pupils. The additional time allowed for enrichment activities, pastoral sessions and support with homework, as well as catch-up work or tutoring.

Pupils with SEND

Some schools were prioritising their assessment of pupils with SEND. Our research on the [experiences of children with SEND at the height of the pandemic](#) showed that access to some external services and local authority support was affected during the pandemic.

Primary school leaders talked about their catch-up strategies for pupils with SEND. These included more personalised one-to-one support, extra pre-teaching activities or interventions in areas such as reading, writing or specific aspects of mathematics. Many secondary school leaders were also using additional group interventions or one-to-one support from teaching assistants. This often focused

on the core subjects but some schools also offered pastoral, social and emotional support for pupils with SEND who were finding the return to school difficult. A few leaders said additional training had been put in place to help staff support pupils with SEND.

Pupils' personal development

Mental health and well-being

Many schools said that the pandemic continued to impact negatively on the mental health and well-being of some of their pupils. Primary schools were more likely to say that some pupils were not as resilient as they were before lockdown, while secondary schools tended to report increased numbers of pupils suffering from anxiety and self-harming.

Some of this is the direct impact of the pandemic on pupils, for example pupils being anxious about catching COVID-19 and others being affected by the deaths of people close to them. However, the pandemic is also likely to have had an indirect impact on pupils because time out of school has hindered the identification and support of children with mental health needs.

Schools were continuing to support pupils with mental health and well-being. Many were embedding well-being into their curriculum or increasing individualised support available to pupils. A few schools increased staff training, for example in mental health first aid. Some leaders had also expanded pastoral support and employed additional staff, including counsellors. A couple of schools explained that a small number of pupils needed ongoing support or a phased timetable to support their return to school full-time.

Schools work with external agencies to support pupils with mental health needs. In some schools, leaders said they were making more referrals to external agencies compared with before the pandemic. A few leaders mentioned long waiting times for services in their area. This was the reason that one school decided to employ its own support staff.

Behaviour and expectations

Staff at a few schools said that pupils' behaviour had improved compared with before the pandemic. Pupils were happy to be back in school and showing a positive attitude to learning. However, some school leaders said that pupils' behaviour continued to be a challenge in the autumn term as pupils settled in and became familiar with the school routine.

Schools reported children struggling with social skills, such as how they related to and collaborated with other pupils. A few schools said that the current Year 7 cohort felt a lot younger than they normally do, including displaying more immature behaviour.

A small number of secondary schools mentioned a rise in exclusions since fully reopening. The reasons for exclusions often centred around pupils fighting with or bullying other pupils. However, the most challenging behaviour tended to be among a small minority of pupils who had challenging behaviour before the pandemic. Staff in one school described how the pandemic had 'undone' a lot of the school's good work on behaviour.

In response, schools were focusing on re-establishing boundaries and routines, and communicating their expectations of pupils. Due to COVID-19 restrictions affecting the usual transition into Reception, one school had created a video of the school environment so that the newest intake of children knew what to expect when they started school. A few leaders said staff had been on additional training courses due to the increased behavioural challenges they had faced.

School leadership

School improvement plans

A few school leaders said that the pandemic had not caused any delays or disruption to their school improvement plans and that they had been able to continue with curriculum development. In a few schools, the partial school closures had given staff an opportunity to reflect and time to develop their curriculum.

However, other school leaders said the pandemic has had a negative impact on their development plans. Due to competing demands, putting plans into action had been slowed or delayed. Some areas that leaders said were affected include:

- curriculum development
- introducing new assessment and monitoring systems
- changing staff structures
- anti-bullying work
- lesson observations (these had been prevented because of 'class bubbles' introduced as part of COVID-19 restrictions)

Staffing

Schools were also affected by COVID-19-related staff absence. In a few cases, leaders said that they had experienced multiple members of staff off work at the same time during the autumn term. Although having several absent staff members creates a challenge for all leaders, we recognise that, in smaller schools, even one member of staff absent with COVID-19 can be difficult to overcome.

In many schools, staff said they felt supported by their colleagues and senior leaders. Some believed that the difficulties of the last year had brought staff teams closer together. A few teachers said that their workload had increased as a result of the pandemic, but that senior leaders were supporting them, for example by reducing the number of meetings and allocating time for planning. Staff well-being, like pupils' well-being, continued to be a priority.

There was a mixed picture about how the pandemic was affecting staff training this term. A few schools had found training more accessible due to online opportunities, but more said they were behind on training because it had been cancelled or postponed due to the pandemic. The negative impact of the pandemic on early career teachers was reported across several schools. Early career teachers had missed opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills during lockdowns.

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1. [‘Teaching a broad and balanced curriculum for education recovery’](#), Department for Education, July 2021. ↵
 2. [‘Elective home education survey report 2021’](#), Association of Directors of Children’s Services, November 2021. ↵
 3. [‘Teaching a broad and balanced curriculum for education recovery’](#), Department for Education, July 2021. ↵

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