



BRIEFING PAPER

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Coronavirus and schools: FAQs

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1. School closures and re-openings

1.1 School closures

Schools in all parts of the UK were closed to most children by the start of the week commencing Monday 23 March 2020. In England, some schools remained open where necessary for the children of critical workers, and vulnerable children, including:

- Those with a social worker
- Looked-after children
- Those with an education, health and care (EHC) plan because they have complex special educational needs.

Information on attendance rates can be found in section 2, below.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also put similar arrangements in place for the children of critical workers, and vulnerable pupils.

1.2 A phased re-opening in England

In his [address to the nation](#) on 10 May 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that if the Government's conditions were met, more children and young people could begin returning to school from 1 June 2020, at the earliest.¹

The DfE published [further guidance](#) on 11 May 2020. Initially, and for mainstream settings, the focus would be on children in the following year groups:

- Nursery
- Reception (aged 4 to 5)
- Year 1 (aged 5 to 6)
- Year 6 (aged 10 to 11 – in the final year of primary schooling in two-tier systems).
- Year 10 (aged 14 to 15 - the year before GCSE or equivalent exams)
- Year 12 (aged 16 to 17 - the year before A level or equivalent exams)

¹ [PM address to the nation on coronavirus](#), 10 May 2020.

2 Coronavirus and schools: FAQs

The DfE subsequently said it would encourage middle schools² to open to year 6 pupils first, “to ensure national parity for children in this year group.”³

Special schools would work toward a phased return, but without a focus on specific year groups.

From 15 June 2020, secondary pupils in years 10 and 12, and their equivalents in colleges, have been able to partially return.⁴ The DfE guidance is that schools may have a quarter of their year 10 and 12 cohort in school at any one time; similarly, colleges can have a quarter of their 16-19 learners in the first two years of their study programmes on site, at once.⁵

In an oral statement to Parliament on 9 June 2020, Gavin Williamson said:

While we are not able to welcome all primary children back for a full month before the summer, we continue to work with the sector on the next steps, where we would like schools that have the capacity to bring back more children—in those smaller class sizes—to do so if they are able to before the summer holidays.

We will be working to bring all children back to school in September.

He also confirmed that “exams will take place next year” and said that the Government was working with exam regulator, Ofqual, on the arrangements for this.⁶

Speaking about the remaining groups of primary-aged children on 10 June 2020, Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, said:

It is because the rate of infection is not yet quite low enough, and because we are not able to change our social distancing advice including smaller class sizes in schools, that we are not proceeding with our ambition to bring back all primary pupils at least for some weeks before the summer holidays. Instead we are working with teachers to bring back as many pupils as we can within those smaller class sizes.

We do fully intend to bring all children back to school in September, provided the progress we are making continues, which I hope it will. That is our focus and it is consistent with the approach that has been taken by many other countries in Europe.⁷

On 23 June 2020, Mr Johnson confirmed that “primary and secondary education will recommence in September with full attendance”.⁸

Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, told LBC Radio on 29 June 2020 that attendance at school would not be at parents’ discretion (as it has been in the summer term). Parents would be expected to send in their children unless there were good reasons not to – for example, a local spike in infections. Fines for non-attendance, suspended during the stricter lockdown period, would be re-introduced.⁹

² Some areas of England have three-tier systems of schooling, with first, middle, and upper/ higher schools. Middle schools typically cater for pupils aged 9 to 13.

³ Department for Education, [‘Actions for education and childcare settings to prepare for wider opening from 1 June 2020’](#), updated 1 June 2020.

⁴ Department for Education, [‘Opening schools and educational settings to more pupils from 1 June: guidance for parents and carers’](#), updated 1 June 2020.

⁵ Department for Education, [‘Actions for education and childcare settings to prepare for wider opening from 1 June 2020’](#), updated 1 June 2020.

⁶ [Oral Statement to Parliament](#), 9 June 2020, Col 176 onward.

⁷ [PM statement at the coronavirus press conference: 10 June 2020](#)

⁸ [HC Deb 23 June, 2020 Col. 1167.](#)

⁹ [‘Penalty fines for missing school next term’](#), *BBC News*, 29 June 2020.

1.3 2 July 2020: DfE publishes information about full opening in September

The DfE has provided further details on how schools will be expected to operate in September 2020. Key points are that:

- Current restrictions on group sizes will be lifted – but schools “should not put in place rotas”.¹⁰
- Schools will be asked to create whole-class or whole-year-group ‘social bubbles’.
- Older children will be encouraged to keep a distance from others, and staff, where possible.
- Schools would be required to resume offering a broad and balanced curriculum again, in all subjects.
- Public Health England local support teams will advise schools where there is one or more cases within a school.
 - Where one case is identified, actions could include “small groups of young people and staff being asked to self-isolate for up to 14 days”.
 - If there are two or more confirmed cases in a two-week period, “health protection teams may ask a larger number of other children or young people to self-isolate at home as a precautionary measure”.
- If an outbreak in a particular school is confirmed, mobile testing units may be dispatched, with tests focusing first on the person’s class, then on their year group, and then the whole school “if necessary”.¹¹
- Where children are not attending because they are following clinical or public health advice, then absence will not be penalised.
- Routine school inspections would remain suspended during the autumn term.
- The planned introduction of a statutory reception baseline assessment would be postponed to September 2021.¹²

The DfE has updated its [guidance for parents and carers](#), and published new [guidance for schools on full opening](#), in light of these announcements.

It has also published [guidance for schools in areas with local lockdowns](#), and separate guidance for special schools.

1.4 Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

On 5 May 2020, Scotland’s First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, was reported as saying that reopening schools in Scotland “might not be possible at all this side of the summer holidays ... We know that for younger children social distancing is very difficult.”¹³ Scottish school summer holidays normally start at the end of June, so earlier than in England.

Also on 5 May, the Scottish Government published [further information](#) on easing Coronavirus restrictions. On schools, this said:

¹⁰ Department for Education, [Guidance for full opening: schools](#), (2 July 2020).

¹¹ Department for Education press release, ‘[Schools and colleges to reopen in full in September](#)’, 2 July 2020.

¹² Department for Education, [Guidance for full opening: schools](#), (2 July 2020).

¹³ ‘[Scottish schools may not reopen until August, Sturgeon suggests](#)’, in the *Guardian*, 5 May 2020.

4 Coronavirus and schools: FAQs

[I]n the 'better' scenario, primary schools and nurseries in Scotland would be able to re-open without causing a resurgence in the virus. However, given the current level of infections and R,¹⁴ [...] in the 'most likely' scenario, full re-opening would cause a resurgence in the virus such that hospital capacity in Scotland would be overwhelmed in less than two months. A 'worse' scenario would further exacerbate the situation. These scenarios illustrate the risks we face in considering different options and the merit in delaying a decision to re-open until transmission of the virus is much reduced from the current level.¹⁵

On 21 May 2020, the Scottish Government published [further details](#) of how the lockdown could be eased in Scotland.¹⁶

It subsequently [published guidance](#) for local authorities and schools on planning for the phased reopening¹⁷. Most recently, on 23 June 2020, Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, confirmed that the aim was now for Scottish schools to re-open full-time in August, with no social distancing, dependent on the course of the pandemic. This represented a change from the previous plans, which foresaw a blended model of learning – i.e., a combination of some in-person attendance with online or home learning.¹⁸

In Wales, First Minister, Mark Drakeford, said on 10 May 2020 that schools there would “not return to normal on June 1.” He added that the Welsh Government would “continue to make decisions, which are right for Wales, using information and expert advice about how coronavirus is circulating here to keep us safe.”¹⁹ On 15 May 2020, it published its [decision framework for the next phase of education and childcare](#).

On 3 June 2020, Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams, announced that schools and alternative provision settings in Wales should plan to “increase their operations” from 29 June 2020. She also proposed that schools should open for an additional week, ending on 27 July, before the summer holidays. She said she expected that no more than a third of pupils would be present at once, but recognised that “some schools may not be able to reach this level of operation”.²⁰ The Welsh Government published [further guidance](#) in support of the plans on 10 June 2020.²¹

Northern Ireland’s [Executive Approach to Decision-Making](#), published 12 May 2020, did not set specific dates for any easing of restrictions, including in relation to schools.²² The Education Minister, Peter Weir, was earlier quoted as saying that it was “extremely likely” there could be a phased return of schools in Northern Ireland in September.²³ In an Oral Statement on 21 May 2020, Mr. Weir said:

Subject to medical guidance and safety it would be my aim to see a phased reopening of schools, beginning with a limited provision for key cohort years in late August, followed by phased provision for all pupils at the beginning of September. This will not be a return to school as it was prior to COVID, but rather a new normal reflective

¹⁴ R is the reproduction number – i.e., the number of people that one infected person will pass the disease on to, on average.

¹⁵ Scottish Government, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): framework for decision making - further information](#), 5 May 2020, p13.

¹⁶ Scottish Government, [‘COVID-19 – Framework for Decision Making Scotland’s route map through and out of the crisis’](#), 21 May 2020.

¹⁷ Scottish Government, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): re-opening schools guide](#), 28 May 2020.

¹⁸ See: [‘Coronavirus: Scottish schools aim to reopen full-time in August’](#), 23 June.

¹⁹ Welsh Government, press release, [‘First Minister of Wales’ message to the people of Wales’](#), 10 May 2020.

²⁰ Kirsty Williams, [Oral statement: Update on Education Provision](#), 3 June 2020.

²¹ Welsh Government, [Keep Education Safe: guidance on learning over the summer term](#), 10 June 2020.

²² Northern Ireland Executive Office, [‘Coronavirus - Executive Approach to Decision-Making’](#), 12 May 2020.

²³ [‘Coronavirus: September target for re-opening of NI schools’](#), *BBC News*, 7 May 2020.

of social distancing and a medically safe regime. For all pupils it will involve a schedule with a mixture of school attendance and remote learning at home.

Finally, in line with the Executive Strategy, contingent upon medical guidance and scientific evidence around susceptibility and transmission, consideration may be given to a full return for cohorts of younger pupils.²⁴

The Northern Ireland Executive confirmed that the new term would start on 24 August 2020 for children and young people in primary 7, year 12 and year 14, as well as for vulnerable children across all year groups. The Department of Education is asking schools to provide a minimum of 40% face-to-face time for primary pupils, and 50% for post-primary (secondary) pupils, with blended learning for the rest of the time.²⁵

2. School attendance rates: England

The DfE has [published](#) national **estimates** of the number and proportion of children attending schools in person since 23 March based on the daily attendance figures which [schools have provided](#) to them. This data is for England only.

Government guidance as of 1 June encouraged certain year groups in primary schools to attend. This means it is not appropriate to compare attendance data from before and after this date. In addition, changes were made to the reporting of vulnerable pupil attendance. For these reasons the available attendance data has been presented in two separate sections (data after 1 June, and data between 23 March and 29 May).

The published figures are **estimates** because they have been adjusted for non-responses using certain assumptions. Lower response rates from schools can make these estimates less accurate.²⁶

2.1 School attendance rates since 1 June

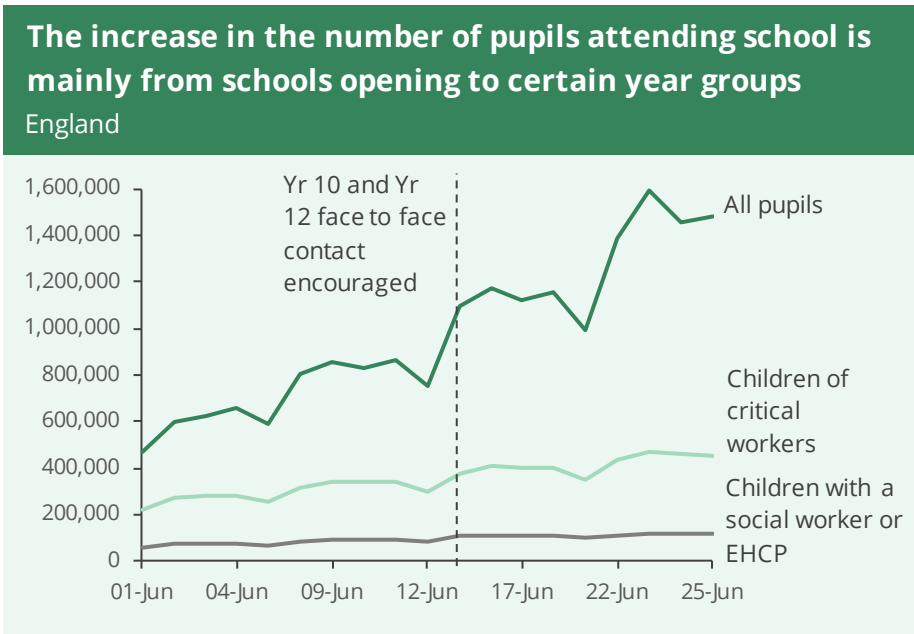
Government guidance as of 1 June encouraged nursery, reception, year 1, and year 6 pupils to attend school in person. From 15 June schools were encouraged to provide some face to face contact time for year 10 and year 12 pupils. For more details please see section 1.2.

Since 1 June, the response rate of schools to the DfE's request for daily attendance data has varied between 62% and 77% of establishments.

²⁴ [Oral statement to the Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID 19 response by Peter Weir MLA, Minister of Education](#), 21 May 2020

²⁵ ['FAQs on Education Restart Programme'](#) – 24 June 2020.

²⁶ [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 28 May 2020, DfE](#) (p4)



Notes: All figures are estimates because they have been adjusted by the DfE for non-responses. From 1 June the year groups encouraged to attend school were reception, year 1, and year 6. From 15 June schools have been encouraged to provide some face-to-face contact time in school for those in year 10 and year 12.

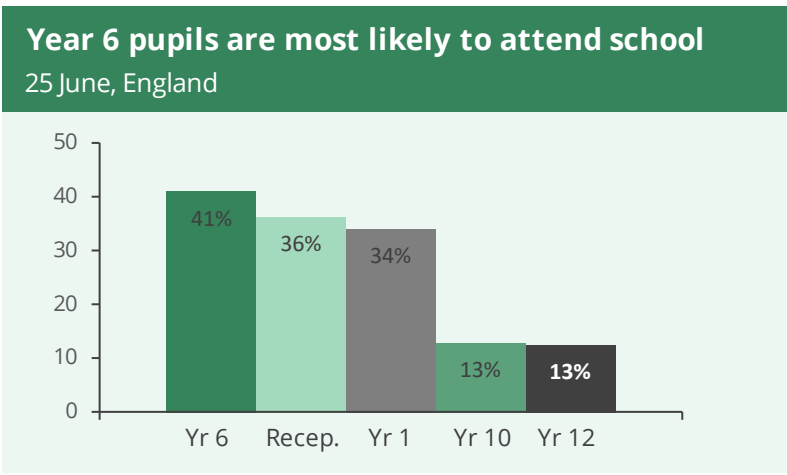
Education Health and Care plan is known as an EHCP.

Source: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 25 June 2020, DfE](#)

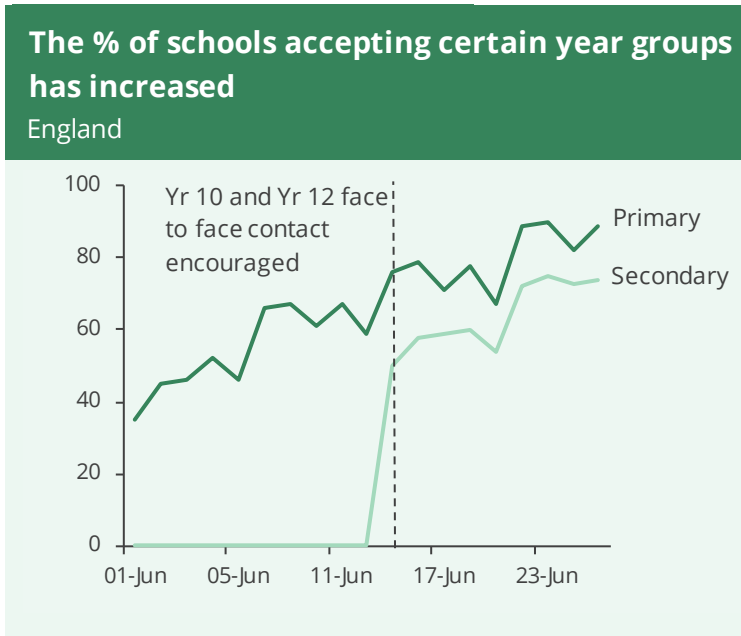
Summary Statistics

As of Thursday 25 June 2020 (the most recent data available): ²⁷

- Around 1,483,000 pupils attended schools in England. This was an estimated 15.6% of pupils that would normally attend. This was an increase from an estimated 12.2% the previous week.
- Around 17,800 schools were open to nursery, reception, year 1 **or** year 6 (an estimated 89% of the schools that are normally open to these year groups). This was an increase from 78% the previous week.
- Around 4,300 schools were open to year 10 **or** year 12 (an estimated 74% of the schools that are normally open to these year groups). This was an increase from 60% the previous week.
- Around 23,300 schools in total were open (an estimated 93% of schools that are normally open). This was an increase from 92% the previous week.



²⁷ [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 4 June 2020, DfE](#) (p5-6)



Notes: All figures are estimates because they have been adjusted for non-responses. From 1 June reception, year 1, and year 6 were encouraged to attend. From 15 June schools have been encouraged to provide some face-to-face contact time in school for those in year 10 and year 12.

Source: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 25 June 2020, DfE](#)

2.2 School attendance rates prior to 1 June

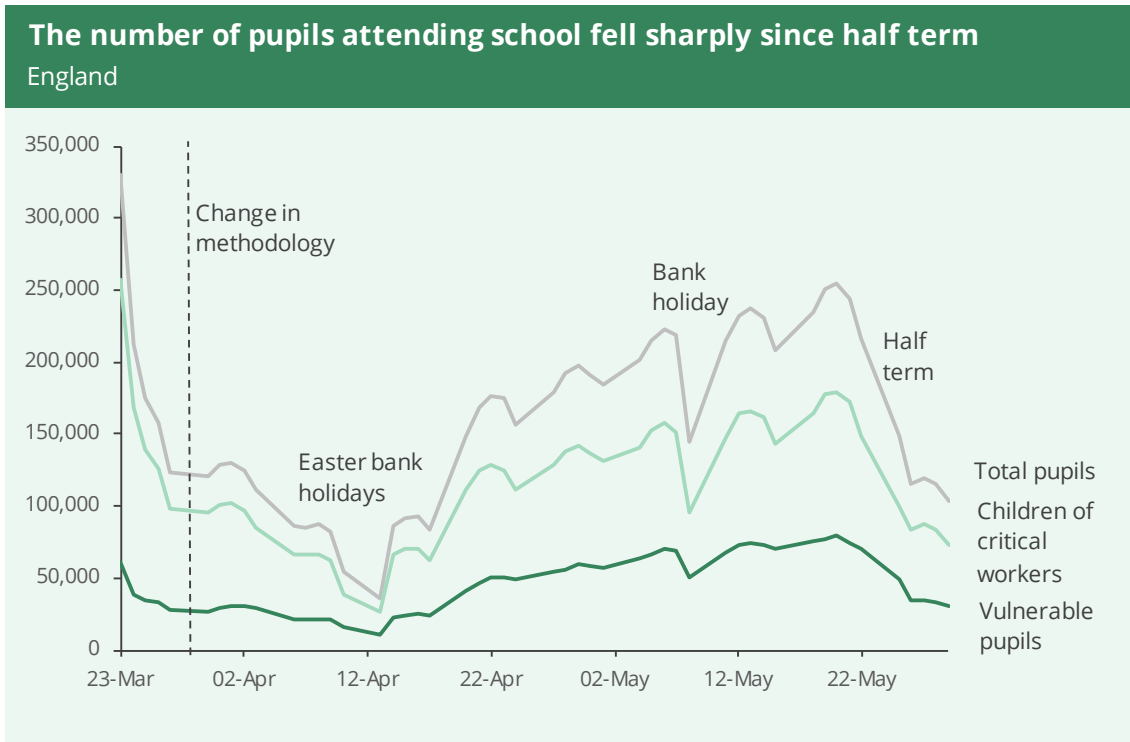
From Monday 23 March, the Department for Education (DfE) [asked schools to report](#) daily attendance figures for vulnerable children, and the children of critical workers. Due to the reasons outlined above it is not appropriate to compare attendance data from before and after 1 June.

Over this comparable period (27 March to 29 May), the response rate of schools varied between 12% and 74% (the low response rate was on 25 May, a bank holiday during what is usually half term).

Summary Statistics

As illustrated in the following chart, in the first two weeks of the comparable period (27 March to 29 May), the number of pupils attending school in person followed a downward trend in general, but this reversed rapidly after the Easter bank holidays among both children of critical workers and vulnerable pupils. Attendance increased (excluding the dip on the Early May Bank holiday) and peaked at around 254,000 pupils on 20 May. The following week was what is usually half term. During this week attendance levels declined and erased much of the increases in attendance since Easter.

In addition to these trends, attendance levels also tend to fluctuate within the week. In general, the highest numbers of pupils attended in the middle of each week.



Notes: All figures are estimates because they have been adjusted by the DfE for non-responses. The methodology for the adjustment changed from Friday 27 March, this means like for like comparisons before this time cannot be made. Caution should be taken for the results of 1 May, 13 May, 15 May. Due to technical issues with the DfE sign-in, lower rates of establishments were able to record attendance. The response rates were also lower on the bank and school holidays. The DfE cautions that vulnerable children attendance figures are underestimates.

Source: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 28 May 2020, DfE](#)

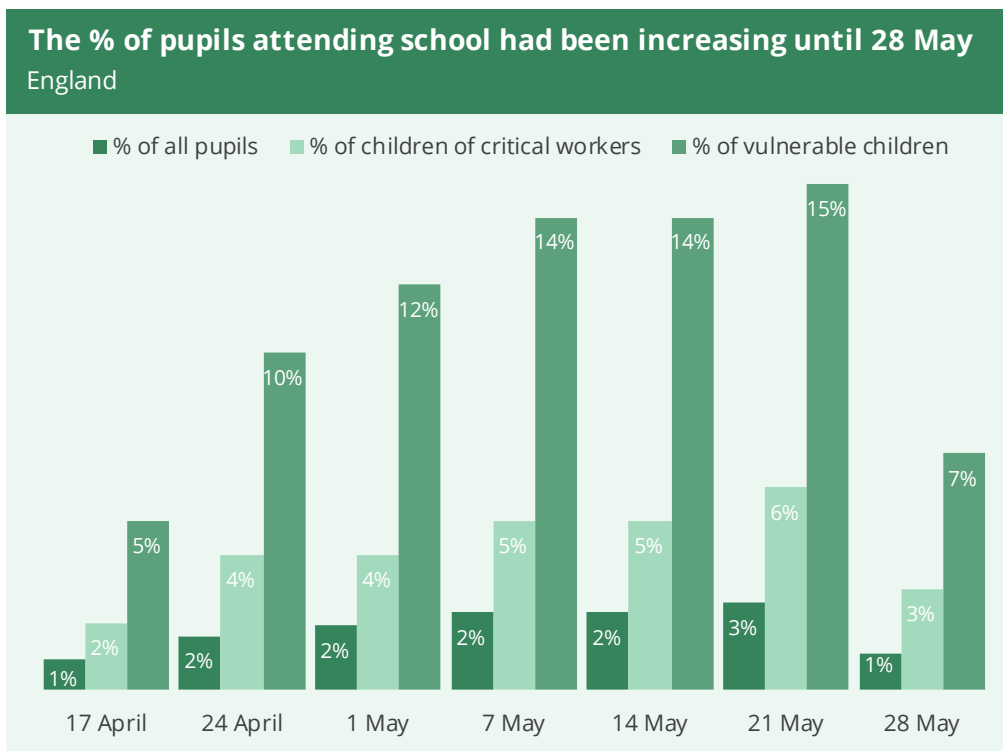
The number of pupils attending school in person expressed as a proportion of the children that would normally attend followed similar trends as above. Overall it remained consistently low. During the comparable period (27 March to 28 May) this proportion ranged between 0.4% and 2.7%.

The DfE also estimated the number of pupils attending school expressed as a proportion of those that are eligible to attend on a weekly snapshot basis since Friday 17 April. The most recent snapshot within the comparable period was as of 28 May, which recorded lower rates of attendance from the previous week.

As shown in the following chart, between Friday 17 April and Thursday 28 May, the proportion of both vulnerable pupils and children of critical workers attending school had been increasing gradually, until 28 May (which would usually have been half term).

Tom Hunt MP stated in an Education Select Committee [oral evidence session](#) that the uptake of school places among children of critical workers and vulnerable pupils is lower than the Government's initial expectations of "around 20%".²⁸

²⁸ Education Select Committee, [The impact of covid19 on education and children's services](#), 22 April 2020. (Q16)



Notes: All figures are estimates because they have been adjusted by the DfE for non-responses. Due to technical issues with the DfE sign-in, on 1 May only 14% of establishments were able to record attendance. The DfE cautions that attendance rates of vulnerable children are underestimates.

Source: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 28 May 2020, DfE](#)

A breakdown was also published by setting type on a weekly snapshot basis since 30 April, the most recent snapshot within the comparable period was 28 May. Unsurprisingly, pupil attendance rates were highest in non-mainstream settings and lowest in mainstream settings for older pupils. The attendance rate varied between less than 0.5% in further education and secondary school settings, and 20% in special post 16 institutions.

Pupil attendance is highest in non-mainstream settings

28 May 2020, England

| | Establishment Response rate | % of open establishments | % of pupils attending |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Special post 16 institution | 21% | 49% | 20% |
| Alternative provision | 17% | 40% | 2-4% |
| Special | 25% | 48% | 3% |
| State-funded nursery | 21% | 41% | 3% |
| State-funded primary | 36% | 53% | 2% |
| Independent school | 10% | 40% | 1% |
| State-funded secondary | 40% | 60% | <0.5% |
| Further Education | 15% | 28% | <0.5% |
| Total | 33% | 52% | 1% |

Notes: All figures are estimates because they have been adjusted by the DfE for non-responses. Figures are ranked in the table by % of pupils attending. The DfE estimated a range of pupil attendance for alternative provision to communicate the uncertainty involved. This is due to pupils at these settings often being enrolled in other settings as well.

Source: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 28 May 2020, DfE](#)

3. Survey evidence about differences in home learning

3.1 Teacher Tapp

[Teacher Tapp](#) have asked a range of survey questions to a sample of around 7,000 teachers several times per week during the school closures. The results are then adjusted to provide national **estimates**.

The survey found very large differences between teachers' perceptions of state and private sector pupils' home learning environments, and also the average amount of online learning time.²⁹

For example, 5% of private school teachers thought that more than 20% of the children in their class did not have access to an electronic device for learning (as of 25 March). In contrast, 15% of state-funded teachers thought the same.

In addition, 13% of private school teachers thought that pupils were learning less than one hour per day (as of 27 March). In contrast, 42% of state-funded school teachers thought the same.

The following charts show that there were also large differences in responses within the state-funded sector when schools are broken down by deprivation.³⁰

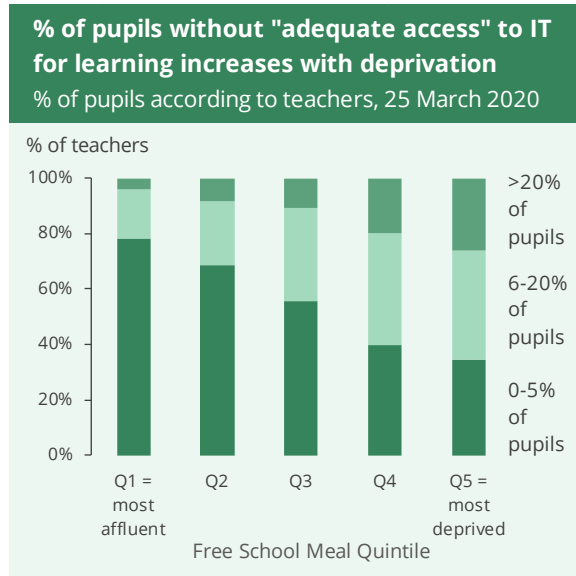
For example, in the least deprived state-funded schools 4% of teachers thought that more than 20% of the children in their class did not have access to an electronic device (as of 25 March). In contrast, 26% of teachers in the most deprived schools thought the same.

In addition, in the least deprived state-funded schools 27% of teachers thought that pupils were learning less than one hour per day (as of 27 March). In contrast, 57% of teachers in the most deprived schools thought the same.

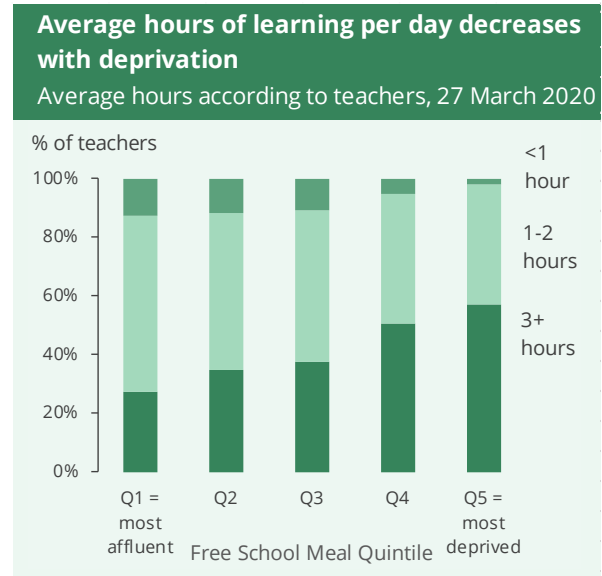
Some disadvantaged pupils without digital devices or internet access are eligible for Government support. Further details about this scheme are available [here](#).

²⁹ NA responses have been excluded

³⁰ As above.



Notes: All figures are estimates
6,877 teachers responded to this survey question
NA responses have been excluded (3-5% of sample)
Source: [Monitoring Covid-19 readiness in schools: Q3144 25 March, Teacher Tapp \(Google doc\)](#)



Notes: All figures are estimates
2,068 teachers responded to this survey question
NA responses have been excluded (4-7% of sample)
Source: [Monitoring Covid-19 readiness in schools: Q3143 27 March, Teacher Tapp \(Google doc\)](#)

3.2 Institute for Fiscal Studies

Between 29 April and 12 May, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) surveyed around 4,000 parents with children aged 4-15 about their home learning activities and resources. The results were then adjusted to provide national **estimates**.

The IFS survey found large differences between state and private school parents' responses about the provision of online learning resources from schools. The results also showed large differences within the state sector when broken down by family deprivation levels.³¹

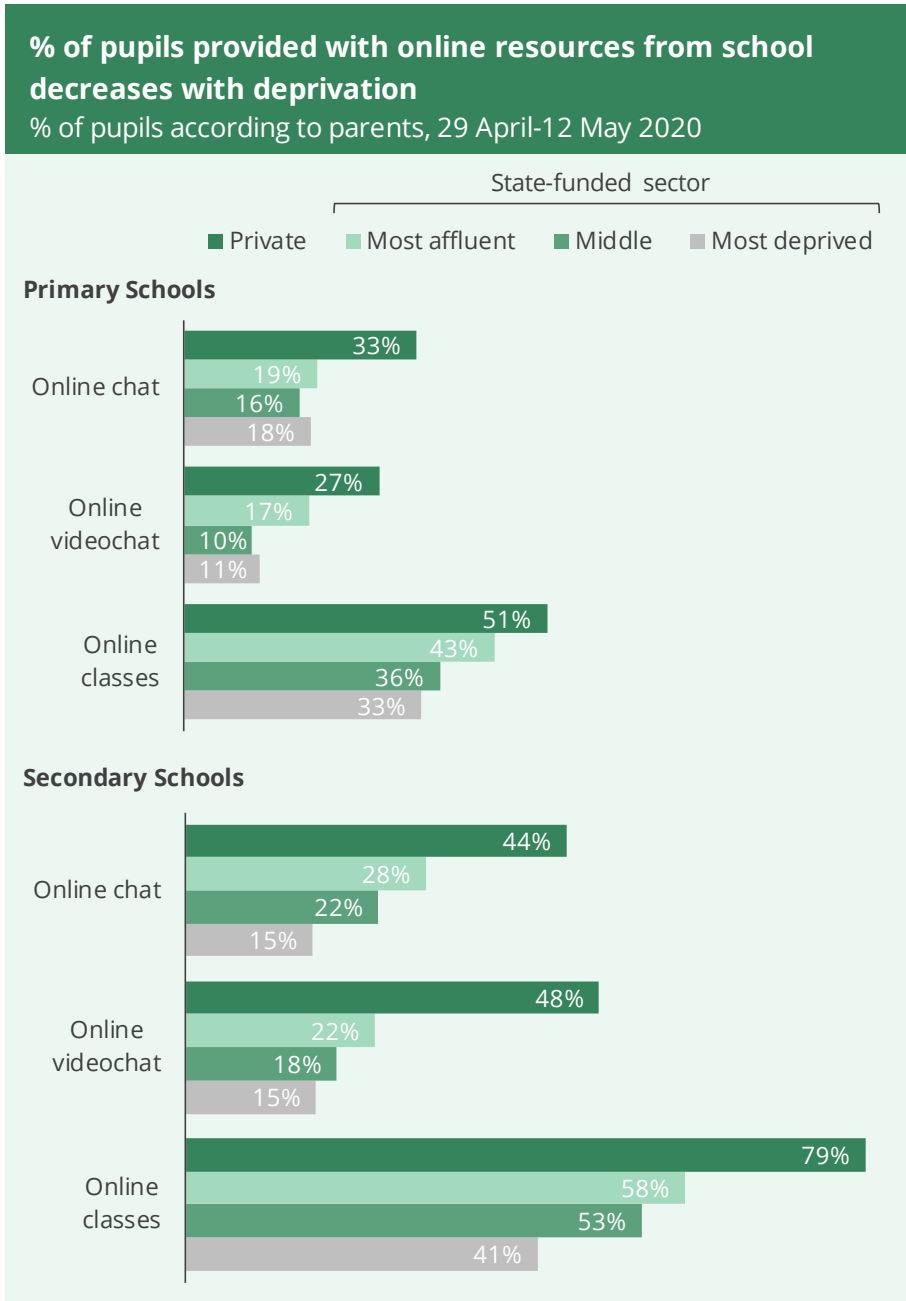
For example, the proportion of parents that report their child's primary school has provided online classes³² (regardless of whether or not the child has attended them) is 51% for children attending private schools, 43% for the most affluent in state-funded schools and 33% for the most deprived in state-funded schools.

The differences are more pronounced in secondary schools. For example, the proportion of parents that report their child's school has provided online classes is 79% for children attending private schools, 58% for the most affluent in state-funded schools and 41% for the most deprived in state-funded schools.

The IFS concluded from the survey results findings overall that "school closures are almost certain to increase educational inequalities".³³

³² There may be differences in the way parents from different groups interpret what is meant by 'online classes'. Some schools are offering short online catch-ups while others are running full lessons.

³³ IFS, [Learning during the lockdown](#), 18 May 2020, p3



Notes: All figures are estimates based on a survey sample of 3,091 primary parents and 1,554 secondary school parents. Parents were asked, 'Which of the following activities has [child]'s school provided while schools are closed? Please tick all that apply.' Deprivation quintiles are based on equivalised pre-pandemic family earnings, only most affluent, middle, and most deprived quintiles are shown here.

Source: [Learning during the lockdown](#): 18 May 2020, IFS ("Underlying data", Fig4)

4. How will GCSE and A Level grades be calculated (England)?

There will be no GCSE or A Level examinations this summer. Instead, a different process will be used to provide most candidates in England with grades in summer 2020.

Schools and colleges were asked to provide a centre assessment grade. This is the grade a student would have been most likely to have achieved if they'd sat their exams and

completed any non-exam assessment. They were also asked to supply awarding bodies with a list of candidates in rank order, within each grade, for each subject.

Standardisation

Following a [consultation](#), Ofqual has also decided that exam boards should standardise grades. This will involve the use of:

a statistical model which will include the expected national outcomes for this year's students, the prior attainment of students at each school and college (at cohort, not individual level), and previous results of the school or college.³⁴

The consultation set out the aims of standardisation as:

- i. to provide students with the grades that they would most likely have achieved had they been able to complete their assessments in summer 2020;
- ii. to apply a common standardisation approach, within and across subjects, for as many students as possible;
- iii. to use a method that is transparent and easy to explain, wherever possible, to encourage engagement and build confidence;
- iv. to protect, so far as is possible, all students from being systematically advantaged or disadvantaged, notwithstanding their socio-economic background or whether they have a protected characteristic;
- v. to be deliverable by exam boards in a consistent and timely way that they can quality assure and can be overseen effectively by Ofqual.³⁵

In response to the consultation, Ofqual confirmed that the standardisation process would:

place more weight on a centre's historical performance in a subject than the submitted centre assessment grades where that will result in students getting the grades that they would most likely have achieved had they been able to complete their assessments in summer 2020.³⁶

4.1 Appeals

If a candidate is unhappy with their calculated grade, there will be an appeals process. Following the consultation, Ofqual confirmed that students will **not** be able to appeal on the basis of their centre's professional judgement or rank ordering. Further details on the general rules surrounding appeals can be found in section 3.10 (p31 onward) of Ofqual's [consultation response](#).

Ofqual has also published further guidance in the form of [a consultation](#) on the appeals process for the summer 2020 series. The consultation will run until 14 July 2020.

Students may also choose to sit exams in the anticipated autumn 2020 exam series, or in summer 2021. Ofqual launched a [consultation](#) on the arrangements for the autumn series on 28 May 2020, and confirmed the exceptional autumn exam series would go ahead. Students will have access to the full suite of GCSE, AS, and A Level exams.³⁷

³⁴ Ofqual news story, '[Ofqual GCSE and A level consultation outcomes and autumn exam series proposals](#)', 22 May 2020.

³⁵ Ofqual consultation, '[Exceptional arrangements for assessment and grading in 2020](#)', 24 April 2020, p7.

³⁶ Ofqual news story, '[Ofqual GCSE and A level consultation outcomes and autumn exam series proposals](#)', 22 May 2020

³⁷ Ofqual news story, '[Ofqual publishes more details on appeals and confirms autumn exam arrangements](#)', 30 June 2020.

4.2 When will students get their results?

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, A and AS level results will be published on 13 August 2020. GCSE results will be published a week later, on 20 August 2020.

4.3 What about exams in summer 2021 (England)?

Students currently in school years 10 and 12, and their equivalents in colleges, are due to take GCSE, A Level and equivalent qualifications in Summer 2021, yet will have missed a considerable amount of face-to-face teaching owing to school and college closures. This has led to some in the sector advocating that adjustments are made for next year's exam series.

As noted above, the Education Secretary stated on 9 June 2020 that "exams will go ahead next year". Chief Regulator for Ofqual, Sally Collier, reportedly told the Education Committee on 10 June 2020 that Ofqual would consult on next years' exams "in the coming weeks".³⁸

³⁸ See: ['Schools need to know 2021 exam plans before summer, says Ofqual chief'](#), in *Schools Week*, 10 June 2020.

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