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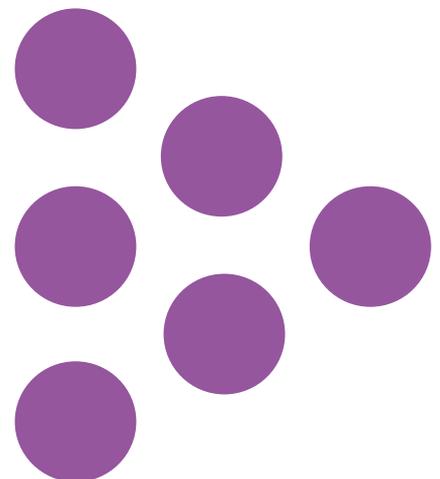
## Report

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# **The impact of Covid-19 on schools in England: experiences of the third period of partial school closures and plans for learning recovery**

Graphs and commentary on questions posed to the  
NFER Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey panel, March  
2021

**National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)**



# **The impact of Covid-19 on schools in England: experiences of the third period of partial school closures and plans for learning recovery**

Graphs and commentary on questions posed to the NFER Teacher Voice  
Omnibus Survey panel, March 2021

Julie Nelson,  
Joana Andrade  
Angela Donkin

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## Contents

About the research	i
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Teaching was more 'active'	1
1.2 The curriculum was still not covered in full	3
1.3 Pupils were more engaged, but there was still variability	4
1.4 Digital access improved, but was still unequal	5
1.5 Supporting learning recovery	6
1.6 Summary	8

## About the research

Between 12 and 17 March 2021, we invited NFER’s Teacher Voice panel to respond to eight questions about the impact of Covid-19 on their pupils and schools, and about the Government’s learning-recovery strategies.

A total of 1,535 panellists responded to the survey:

- 573 (37 per cent) were senior leaders and 962 (63 per cent) were classroom teachers
- 251 (16 per cent) were based in secondary schools and 1,284 (84 per cent) were based in primary schools.

We applied weights to the data to ensure that the results were nationally representative at school level (primary or secondary), and in terms of school-level deprivation (measured by the proportion of the school’s pupils that were eligible for free school meals in 2019 (FSM ever)<sup>1</sup>).

Some of the survey questions were repeat questions from [earlier surveys](#) administered by NFER during the first and second periods of partial school closures. In order to make comparisons between the first and second datasets, and the new dataset, we had to account for the fact that teachers and senior leaders were surveyed separately in the first two surveys, whereas in the third survey, they were surveyed together.

We therefore applied teacher and senior leader weights, to ensure that the three datasets were comparable.

Please note that in the following charts, percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

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<sup>1</sup> The schools were banded into quintiles of school-level deprivation and an extra category was included to classify schools with no available FSM data: Lowest 20%, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lowest 20%, Middle 20%, 2<sup>nd</sup> Highest 20%, Highest 20%, and Missing FSM.

# 1 Introduction

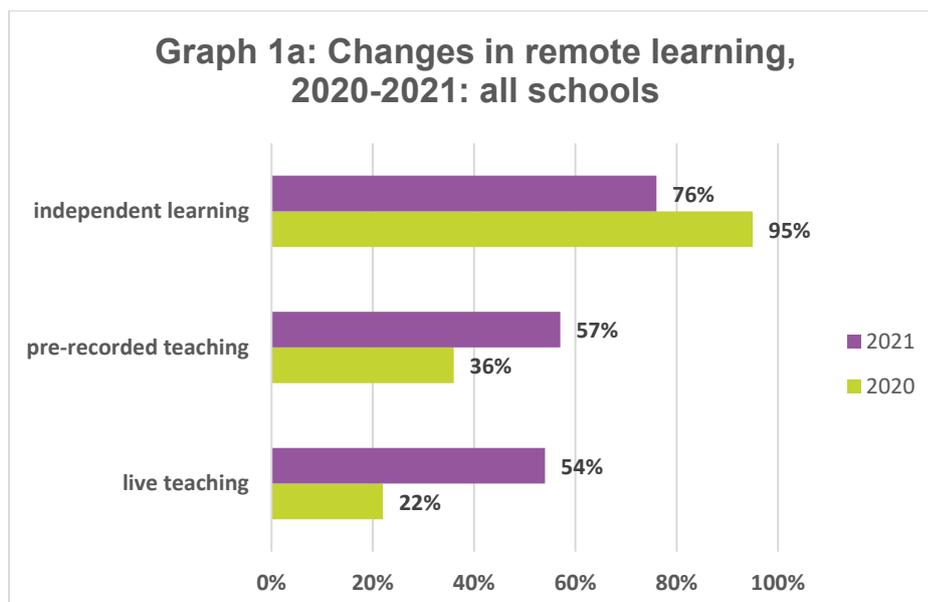
Since March 2020, NFER has tracked the impact of the pandemic on England’s schools. We have now completed our third survey of school leaders and teachers using NFER’s Teacher Voice panel. The results show some encouraging changes in practice during the most recent (January to March 2021) period of partial school closure. They also provide evidence of the teaching profession’s views and intentions in relation to the Government’s learning recovery plans.

## 1.1 Teaching was more ‘active’

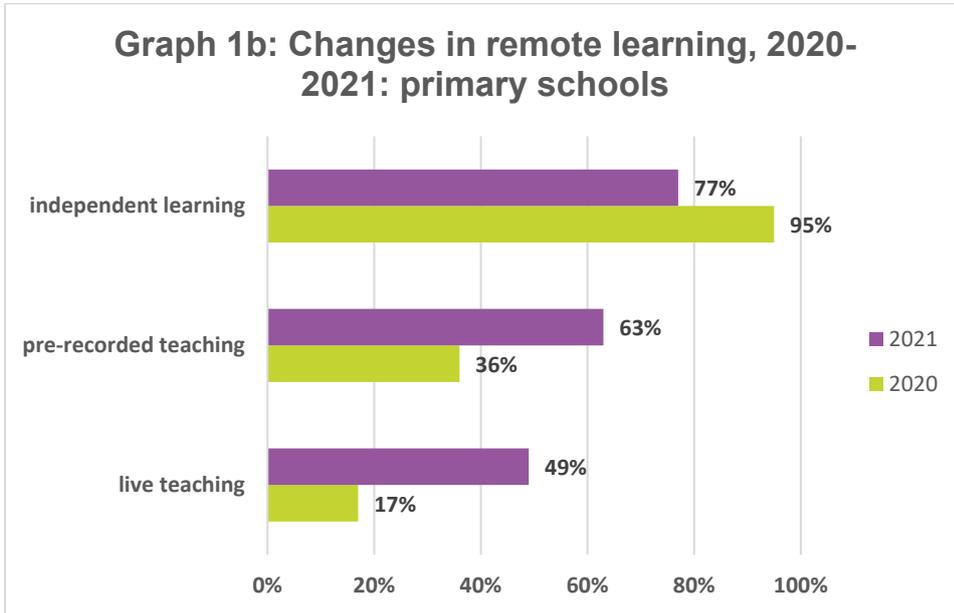
[Research](#) on [effective remote teaching and learning](#) shows that one of the most effective ways for teachers to help pupils learn remotely is to actively *teach* them, applying similar pedagogical principles to those they would use in the classroom. [Our own 2020 research](#) also found that active teaching approaches (such as live or pre-recorded lessons and discussions) were positively associated with higher levels of pupil engagement.

In 2020, few schools were using these active forms of teaching, but by the third period of partial school closures, there was a change in practice, as shown in Graphs 1a-1c. In terms of the active teaching elements, live teaching was most prevalent in secondary schools; while pre-recorded teaching was favoured by primary schools.

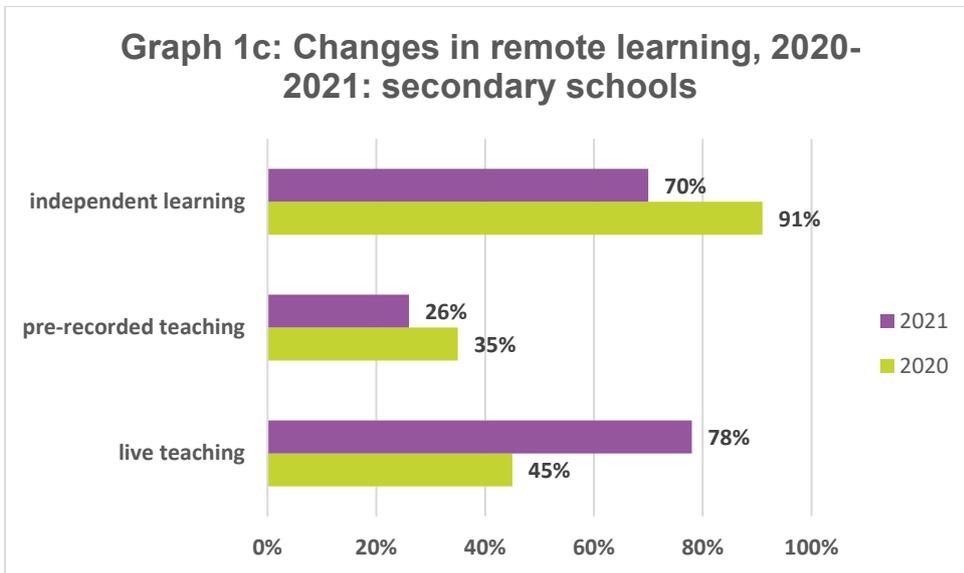
In the following graphs, the x axis represents the percentage of respondents who said their schools were offering each type of teaching and learning. Respondents could give more than one response, so percentages do not sum to 100.



n= 1463 (2020) and 1029 (2021)



n= 1463 (2020) and 1029 (2021)

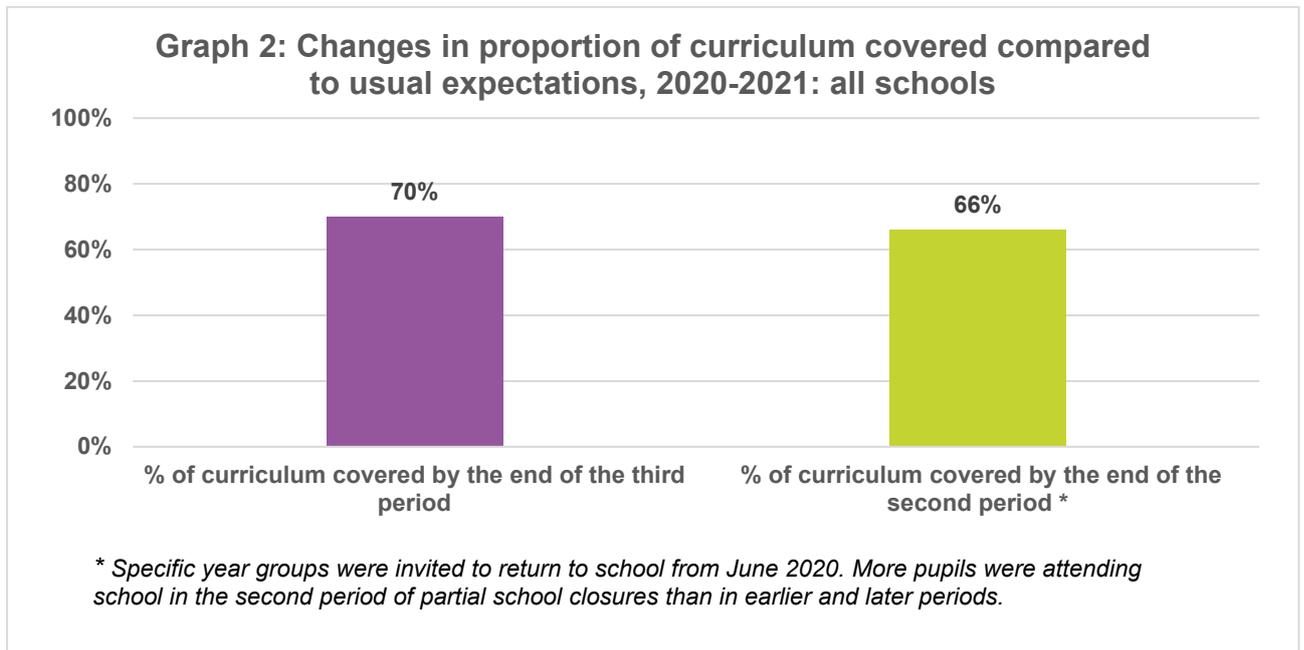


n= 1463 (2020) and 1029 (2021)

There were no significant differences between the teaching and learning offered by the most and least deprived schools, as measured by FSM quintile. This tells us that *all* schools were committed to improving the quality of remote teaching and learning for their pupils – irrespective of the make-up of their communities.

## 1.2 The curriculum was still not covered in full

In July 2020, survey respondents had covered approximately two thirds (66 per cent) of their usual curriculum. Between January and March 2021, there was a small (but significant) rise in this figure, to 70 per cent (see Graph 2<sup>2</sup>). However, it seems that schools were still unable to cover all of the curriculum content that they would normally have expected to. This may have been because some content was too difficult to cover remotely (for example, elements of subjects, or whole subjects, with practical elements requiring specialist resources) or because teachers were unable to progress through the curriculum at their usual pace remotely.



n= 1782 (2020) and 1029 (2021)

There was also disparity according to the level of disadvantage in the school. Respondents in the most affluent schools were significantly more likely to report a higher proportion of curriculum coverage than those in the most deprived schools (74, compared to 66, per cent). It seems that, while the style of teaching and learning offered during the third period of partial school closures was similar across the board, the volume and type of content covered differed – with pupils in the most deprived schools most likely to have missed more of the expected usual curriculum coverage.

<sup>2</sup> In Graphs 2, 3 and 4 'first period' refers to the period March-May 2020; 'second period' refers to the period June-July 2020; and 'third period' refers to the period January-March 2021.

## **1.3 Pupils were more engaged, but there was still variability**

### **1.3.1 Headline findings**

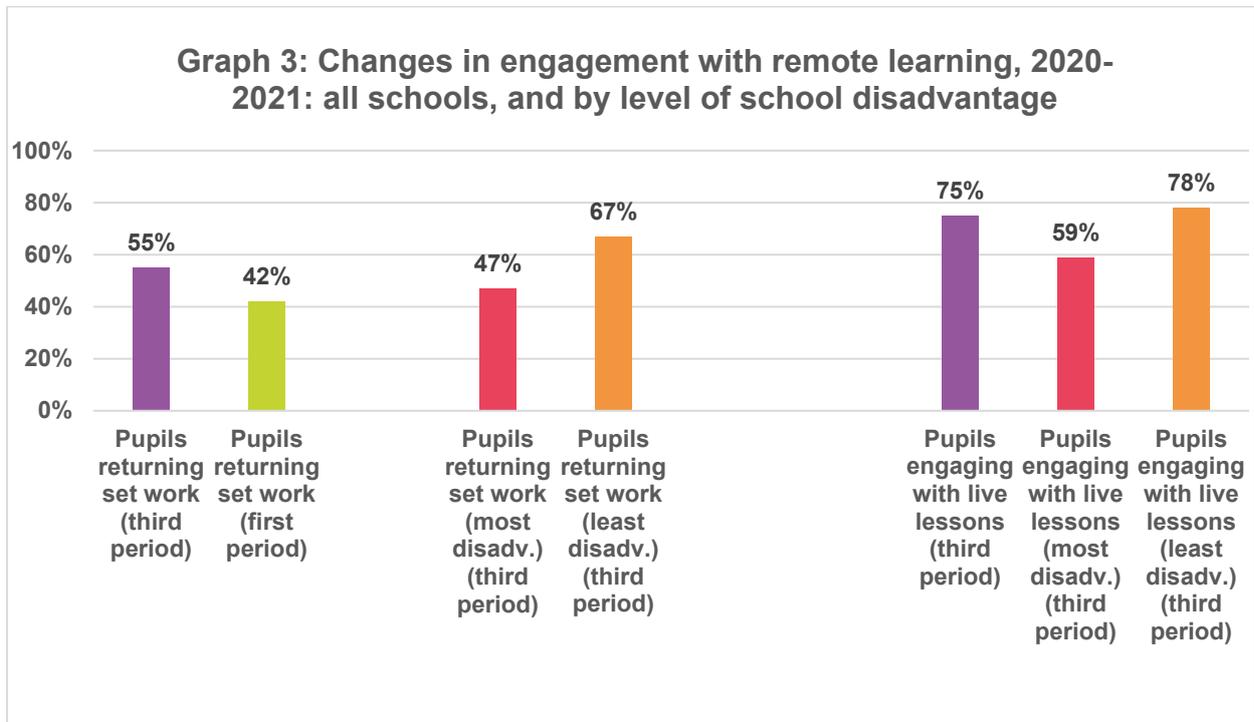
Graph 3 shows that the richer teaching and learning experiences in the third period of partial school closures seem to have had a positive impact on pupils' engagement. In March 2020, the percentage of pupils returning their last piece of set work to their teacher was 42 per cent, but in the most recent period, this figure had risen to 55 per cent – a statistically significant change (although still representing only just over half of all pupils).

In our most recent survey, we also asked respondents with a live learning offer to tell us the proportion of their pupils that attended most of their live lessons during one day in March. On this different measure, pupils seemed to be much more engaged. The senior leaders in our sample told us that three quarters (75 per cent) of pupils attended their live lessons. This positive finding suggests that live teaching was more engaging for pupils than independent learning, although clearly one quarter of pupils still did not attend. Primary schools were much less likely than secondaries to offer live teaching, but when they did, their pupils' attendance was just as high.

### **1.3.2 Pupil engagement differed substantially according to disadvantage**

Respondents in the least deprived schools reported that around two thirds (67 per cent) of their pupils returned their last piece of set work. This compared to less than one half (47 per cent) of pupils in the most deprived schools. Additionally, although the most deprived schools were just as likely as the most affluent schools to be offering live learning, their pupils were considerably less likely to attend (59 per cent, compared to 78 per cent in the most affluent schools).

This situation is likely to have come about due to a host of factors that combine to hamper learning equity, including poor home learning environments and digital access. This is discussed in the section below.



Return of set work: n= 1821 (2020) and 1029 (2021)

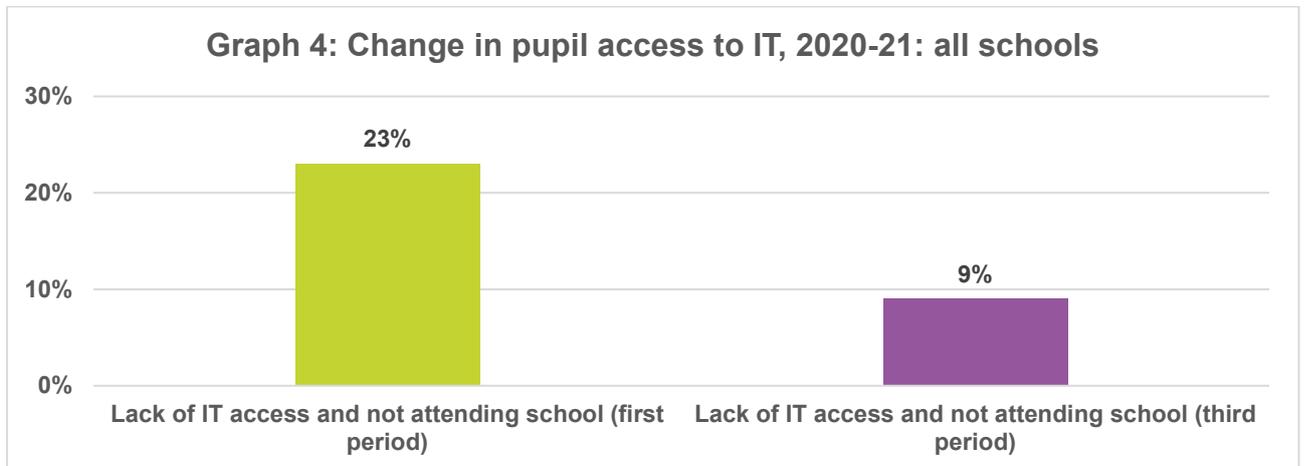
Attendance at live lessons: n= 573 senior leaders (2021 only)

## 1.4 Digital access improved, but was still unequal

In our first survey in 2020, almost one quarter (23 per cent) of pupils were reported to have insufficient IT access at home to enable them to engage with online teaching. During the most recent period this situation improved, with the proportion of pupils with insufficient IT access at home falling to 17 per cent. This suggests that various schemes to improve digital access (both those rolled out by government and by schools themselves) had some positive effect, although the Government’s laptop scheme ultimately [fell short of its target](#) and progress was not as great as it might have been. Additionally, pupils in the most deprived schools (25 per cent) were still far more likely to have poor access at home than those in the second least deprived schools (10 per cent) and least deprived schools (15 per cent).

At the start of the third period of partial school closures, the government extended the definition of ‘vulnerable children’ to enable those still without IT access at home to attend school to access their learning. According to the senior leaders in our sample, 45 per cent of the 17 per cent with poor IT access at home attended school. Although this is an encouraging figure, it does mean that there were still approximately nine per cent of pupils with limited IT access during this period.

Additionally, pupils in the most deprived schools with limited access to IT were less likely to attend school to access their learning (44 per cent) than those in the same position in the most affluent schools (53 per cent).



N= 1023 senior leaders (2020) and 485 senior leaders (2021).

## 1.5 Supporting learning recovery

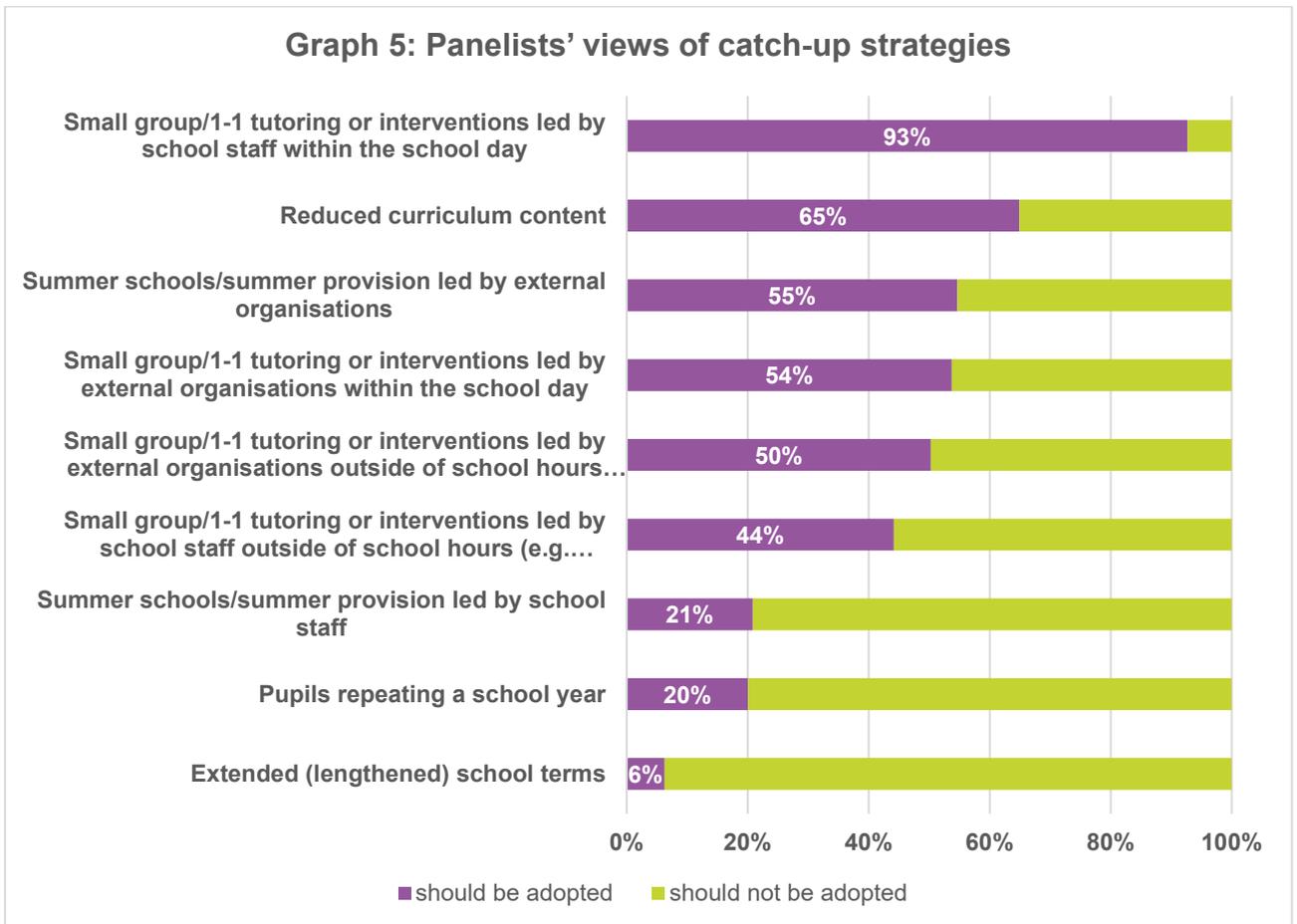
### 1.5.1 Panelists' views of learning recovery proposals

Graph 5 shows panelist's views on a number of government proposals and others' ideas for learning recovery, and the extent to which they believed these should, or should not, be used.

The findings show very limited support for ideas such as extending the school term or pupils repeating a school year. Views of tutoring were influenced by two factors: delivery agent, and timing. Tutoring has high support when it is delivered by school staff within the school day, but less support when delivered by external organisations, or outside of school hours.

There was limited support for summer schools (especially those run by school staff). Findings related to summer schools differed significantly by phase, which is not surprising given that government guidance suggests that summer schools should be targeted towards upcoming Year 7 pupils, and therefore there is more expectation that they will operate at secondary level. Over one third of secondary panelists (37 per cent) believed that summer schools led by school staff should be used compared to 18 per cent of primary panelists. Similarly, two thirds of secondary panelists (65 per cent) thought that summer schools led by external organisations should be used, compared to just over half (53 per cent) of primary panelists.

**Graph 5: Panelists' views of catch-up strategies**



N=1526 (2021 only)

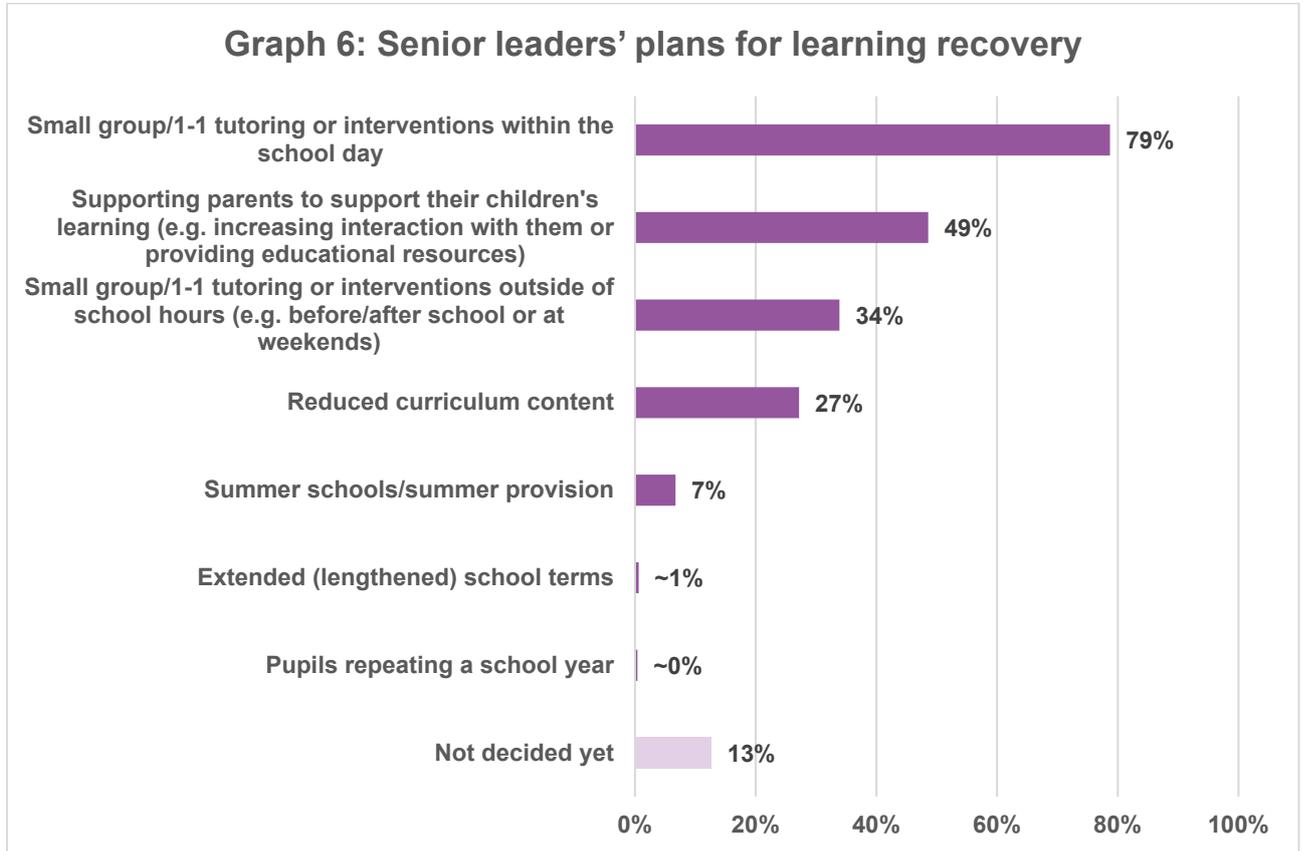
One approach, which does not feature in the Government's strategy is reducing curriculum content (a mitigation, rather than a recovery, approach). Almost two thirds of respondents believed this approach should be used.

### 1.5.2 Senior-leaders' learning recovery plans and intentions

The main strategies that school leaders planned to use to support learning recovery (Graph 6) were tutoring/interventions within the school day, and working with parents. Over one quarter (27 per cent) were also reducing, or intending to reduce, curriculum content, in spite of the fact that OFSTED has specified that schools should still be delivering a broad and balanced curriculum. More investigation is needed to understand this practice and its acceptability.

Only a small proportion were planning summer schools. In spite of the fact that government summer school funds are aimed at secondary schools for upcoming Year 7s, only one in five secondary leaders (22%) intended to run one. This compared to a very small proportion of primary leaders (four per cent). Intention also varied by disadvantage (hardly any leaders in the most affluent schools planned summer schools, compared to 13 per cent in the most deprived schools).

The number of school leaders intending to extend the school term, or enable pupils to repeat a school year, was negligible.



N= 494 senior leaders (2021 only)

## 1.6 Summary

During the third period of partial school closures, there were positive changes in overall levels of curriculum coverage, pupil engagement and pupil IT access, and in the provision of remote teaching and learning. However, the disadvantage gap continued to persist across all of these measures. Pupils in the most deprived schools missed the most learning; and were therefore likely to be the least well equipped to perform well at school generally and in national assessments specifically. The need for learning recovery is therefore particularly pressing for these pupils.

None of our findings show a high level of support for proposals with a weak evidence base, such as pupils repeating a school year, or extending the school term. Such plans are unlikely to gain traction with the profession, and summer schools have limited take up. The profession is more committed to tutoring, but its views of the terms under which this should operate are quite different to those proposed and funded by the Government.

# Evidence for excellence in education

## Public

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The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berks SL1 2DQ

T: +44 (0)1753 574123 • F: +44 (0)1753 691632 • [enquiries@nfer.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@nfer.ac.uk)

[www.nfer.ac.uk](http://www.nfer.ac.uk)

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