IMPACT REVIEW
2020/21
Teachers are a truly incredible community and we are extremely grateful to all the schools and colleges that have so generously given their time to support our work.

Read on to learn just some of the ways your engagements with NFER have helped to support the education sector in 2020 and 2021.

With kind regards,

Carole Willis
Chief Executive

A BIG THANK YOU!

58,726 teachers and senior leaders, 17,849 schools and colleges, and 1,340,864 pupils in England supported NFER’s mission by taking part in research, assessment trials and projects, and utilising our products in 2021.
The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was founded in 1946 with the aim of building a body of evidence that would help to transform education for children and young people.

NFER has grown from a small organisation into one that has a significant influence on education policy and practice. Over the years we have broadened our remit to become a global organisation, working with governments and agencies in the UK, and around the world.

The lives of children and young people worldwide are inextricably linked to the quality of education they receive. At NFER, we use our influence as a leading independent provider of education research and insights to improve outcomes for future generations everywhere and to support positive change in education.

We are home to 250 staff and work with many more associates and experts, who conduct and lead more than 100 projects a year across the globe. We focus our work where it can make the greatest difference, identifying and exploring the key issues and challenges facing our education system.

We can’t do any of this without your support, so thank you for helping us to help educators worldwide over the last 75 years.
The Covid-19 pandemic has put huge strain on pupils, students, teachers, school leaders, college leaders, and parents. During this hugely challenging period, NFER has been focusing its efforts on supporting the sector in delivering insights into the scale and nature of the pandemic’s impact while evaluating and recommending approaches to aid the recovery process.

Our objective has been to bring the big issues (such as the vulnerability of disadvantaged pupils during the partial school closures) to the fore and to encourage solutions which are based on evidence and will deliver impact in the longer term as well as addressing short-term issues.

We are grateful for the support of the Nuffield Foundation and the Education Endowment Foundation in funding aspects of this work.

Read on to learn about some of the project highlights.
**Schools' responses to Covid-19**

Research in the early stages of the pandemic found that only 18 per cent of primary school leaders thought it was feasible to open their schools to more pupils from June 2020. School leaders told us they had fewer teaching staff available at a time when they needed more. This survey from April and May 2020 showed the early signs that disadvantaged pupils were already being more adversely affected.

**Pupils' engagement in remote learning: school perspective**

Teachers in mainstream primary and secondary schools in England reported that on average just over half (55 per cent) of their pupils' parents were engaged with their children’s home learning, while school leaders said that 23 per cent of their schools' pupils had limited access to IT at home.

**Support for vulnerable children**

This report, which looked at pupil engagement, in-school provisions, remote provision and welfare support, found that a lack of engagement and parental support were the most important challenges that senior leaders and teachers faced in supporting vulnerable pupils. In-school attendance for these pupils was also low, while many were not engaging in remote provision.

Meanwhile, 54 per cent of senior leaders in deprived schools reported significant concerns for the safety and well-being of vulnerable pupils, relative to 35 per cent of senior leaders in the least deprived schools.

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**Home learning during Covid-19: a parent perspective**

This study, based on data from Understanding Society (a longitudinal study of a representative sample of 40,000 UK households), found that almost all pupils received some remote learning tasks from their teachers but that almost half of exam-year students in Years 11 and 13 were not given work by their school. NFER called for targeted interventions and the weighting of catch-up funding towards schools in disadvantaged areas.

**Implications of Covid-19 for student recruitment to T Levels**

This paper presented perspectives from a webinar run by NFER in July 2020, which brought together key sector stakeholders and decision-makers, including the Director of Technical and Professional Education at the Department for Education (DfE) and further education providers, to explore the implications of Covid-19 for the recruitment of students on T Level courses.

Covid had affected the promotion of T Levels by reducing providers’ face-to-face access to schools and pausing the national ‘NexT Level’ campaign.

However, providers told us they had been using a range of innovative virtual strategies to raise students’ awareness of T Levels and maintain the interest of current applicants.

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**Challenges facing schools and pupils**

Findings from a survey of almost 3000 teachers and school leaders in July 2020 revealed their feelings about the term ahead. Ninety-eight per cent of teachers reported that their pupils were behind where they would normally expect them to be in their curriculum learning. Teachers estimated their pupils were three months behind on average.

**The impact of Covid-19 on teacher training**

Before the pandemic, England’s school system was facing an increasingly severe challenge of recruiting enough trainees to initial teacher training (ITT) to meet growing teacher demand and shortages in key subjects. We have been closely tracking the pandemic’s impacts on the ITT sector and on teacher supply more broadly.
The implications of Covid-19 on the school funding landscape

Our research at the early stages of the pandemic revealed growing anxiety from school leaders about its impact on their financial situation. Schools had lost significant amounts of income and incurred substantial additional costs.

The research identified 1,500 schools as being at particular risk of great financial hardship due to Covid-19 and these schools were disproportionately likely to be deprived. The exceptional costs associated with the coronavirus scheme covered only some of the additional costs that schools incurred during the 2019/20 academic year.

The impact of school disruption on attainment and socio-emotional well-being of Key Stage 1 pupils

*Funded by the Education Endowment Foundation*

The first report in a study set up to track the attainment and well-being of Key Stage 1 pupils across the 2020/21 academic year found that Year 2 pupils’ attainment in reading and mathematics was significantly lower in autumn 2020 (following periods of partial school closures) compared to a representative sample from autumn 2017.

This report was the first to offer rigorous insights and an estimate of the scale of the Covid-19 gap. It also highlighted a worrying growth in the disadvantage gap in reading and mathematics, which was measured as equivalent to 7 months’ progress. Diagnostic detail and support for schools was also provided as part of this project, highlighting common errors and misconceptions from pupils to assist teaching practice.

The impact of school disruption on attainment and socio-emotional well-being

*Funded by the Education Endowment Foundation*

The second report reviewed Key Stage 1 pupil attainment data from spring 2021. Year 1 pupils had made on average 3 months’ less progress for both reading and mathematics compared to previous cohorts.

The gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils in spring 2021 for Year 1 was around 7 months for both reading and mathematics. Year 2 pupil performance had not changed from the autumn 2020 study.

Recovering from Covid-19: what pupils and students need now - a policy briefing

*Funded by the Nuffield Foundation*

This study provided insights into pupils’ and schools’ needs in summer 2021, based on in-depth interviews with senior leaders in 50 mainstream primary and secondary schools predominantly serving deprived populations across England.

Most senior leaders reported that at least some of their pupils were suffering from anxiety and related mental-health conditions and it was proving difficult to access support services.

Social distancing in classrooms was also causing difficulties with teaching and learning practices. The overriding message from school leaders at this point was that they needed more funding and autonomy to make tailored decisions in the best interest of their pupils.
Recovery during the pandemic: the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 on schools serving the most deprived communities

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation

Following the July policy briefing, a more in-depth report was published in September sharing more detail about the curriculum modifications schools had been making to deal with the challenging circumstances and to support recovery.

The research also highlighted the challenges school leaders expected to face at key transition points and called for the disruption schools have faced to be reflected in the accountability system. It also reinforced the importance of developing a proper digital access plan.

The reported effects of the pandemic on special schools and what they need now

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation

NFER was pleased to support this important project led by ASK Research and to work with University College London. It involved a representative survey of headteachers in special schools and colleges in England, followed by in-depth interviews with a sample of headteachers and parents of pupils in these settings.

The survey highlighted just how significant the impact had been on pupils in special schools, with many having gone without therapeutic care services. They had experienced significant developmental and academic losses and their mental health was suffering.

Impact of school closures and subsequent support strategies on attainment at Key Stage 1

Funded by the Education Endowment Foundation

In this final report of the study, there was evidence of recovery from both Year 1 and Year 2 pupils. Year 1 pupils were still 3 months behind their pre-pandemic peers in reading but had recovered to just 1 month behind in mathematics. Year 2 pupils were 2 months behind their pre-pandemic peers in reading by the end of the summer term, but had recovered to above pre-pandemic standards in mathematics.

To support recovery, schools reported using small group work in reading and mathematics with a notable focus on well-being and personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE).

NFER’s research has documented the enormous challenges of the last 18 months.

Many children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, did not have the technology, quiet places to study or parents who were confident to support them to make as much progress as usual.

NFER is playing a key role in the development of a rich evidence base on how best to tackle these challenges. Quality teaching, enabled by a properly resourced and supported teaching workforce, has never been more important.

We have identified that significant investment over multiple years is required to enable children to recover – in academic terms and in terms of their well-being and mental health.

Current evidence on the potential impact of small group tutoring is strong. We are contributing to calls for the government to look again at the funds available to support education recovery over the next few years. This is a vital foundation towards creating skilled and confident citizens and employees who can play a crucial role in the country’s future success.
Supporting teachers
In addition to publishing our findings on the impact of Covid-19, NFER has developed a range of practical insights on how school leaders and policymakers might address teacher retention challenges. We have also ensured that our insights are used by those in the sector to make positive changes. We have continued our influential series of teacher labour market reports, which explore trends in teacher supply and working conditions, including recruitment, retention, and workload (kindly funded by the Nuffield Foundation).

School funding
In relation to the critical area of school funding, we kept our focus on the impact of Covid-19 on school finances, to support timely decision-making about the deployment of resources. Our research highlighted the funding challenges being faced by many schools in the context of the pandemic and demonstrated that existing and additional funding would be insufficient to cover the additional costs of Covid-19, at least for a number of at-risk schools. We fed into discussions and debates about the sufficiency of school funding – particularly among the most disadvantaged schools – and contributed to wider calls in the sector for additional targeted funding to support recovery.

Classroom practice
In addition to our Covid-19 research examining the impact of the adjustments schools have had to make on their delivery of the curriculum because of the pandemic, our Trials Unit continued to evaluate the impact of different classroom interventions. A number of these evaluations focused on interventions designed to target the disadvantage gap. Trials included a mentoring pilot for Early Career Chemistry Teachers (ECTs) that aimed to increase their confidence and chemistry-specific pedagogical knowledge. It also supported better management of workload and stress, to ultimately boost talent retention. Other trials in primary teacher training aimed to assess the impact of the Teach First Primary Programme on pupil attainment, and another covered direct instruction in Key Stage 2.
Assessment services

Since 2017, NFER has had responsibility for the development and delivery of the National Reference Test (NRT) on behalf of Ofqual. In 2020, the NRT went ahead before the disruption of the pandemic. In February 2021, however, schools were closed to most pupils and the testing window was moved to the summer term. Despite the continued Covid-19 disruption, we were able to secure participation from more than 200 schools and thanks to their support we were able to ensure this important longitudinal study remained unbroken.

Responding to teachers’ and policymakers’ needs for data about the breadth of children’s educational experiences and outcomes, we focused on developing ways to assess harder-to-measure aspects of children’s school and college life. A key area of development was assessment of younger children, as exemplified through our leadership and management of England’s participation in the International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study.

In autumn 2021, NFER successfully delivered the new Reception Baseline Assessment to more than 600,000 pupils. This assessment has been designed to provide a snapshot of children’s starting point at primary school to credit teachers and schools with the progress they make across their primary school career.

Assessment resources

**NFER Tests**, our standardised assessment products for primary schools, have proved an essential component of supporting teachers’ understanding of how pupils’ attainment and progress may have been impacted by Covid-19 disruption, as well as aiding recovery planning. We supported more than 4,000 schools throughout 2020 and 2021 with practical and high-quality tools and supporting materials, to ensure they can get the maximum benefit from their assessments and assessment data.

In 2021, we launched a new product, Bite into Writing, developed specifically to support schools with Year 6 writing development and moderation. We understand from our conversations with schools that this is a particularly challenging area, and our assessment experts have been pleased to work with former Standards and Testing Agency moderators to ensure that this range can make the most positive contribution for teachers and pupils alike.

We have also continued to provide free guidance on all aspects of in-school assessment on our popular **NFER Assessment Hub**
NFER’s international work

We have continued to grow our portfolio of research, evaluation and assessment projects delivered in collaboration with international development partners. We have been able to bring our long history of undertaking educational research, evaluation and assessment into the global arena to support worldwide challenges in education. We are working with governments in Uganda, Australia, North Africa, the Middle East, and Iraq; and with agencies such as UNESCO and the Global Campaign for Education.

Making a difference

NFER provides a global and national voice for teachers. We work with the UK Government and governments globally, with organisations such as the Office for Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and the Standards and Testing Agency (STA). We share our expertise through a wide range of panels, steering groups, and advisory groups, and through regular strategic meetings with leaders in education. We fiercely defend our independent status and are committed to a transparent and honest approach to the sharing of evidence and insights.

Engaging schools, always a central feature of NFER’s work, was the basis for establishing our Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey in 2007/08, to provide a regular method for gathering teachers’ and school leaders’ views. We also value nothing more than speaking directly with teachers and school leaders to understand your current priorities, challenges and achievements.

You are why NFER exists and we would like to thank you for your support and engagement over the last 75 years. As we look forward to the next 75 years, we remain committed to partnering with teachers to improve outcomes for future generations everywhere and to support positive change in education.

Here are a few ways you can continue to receive updates on the work you help us achieve:

- Follow @NFERClassroom on Twitter
- Sign up to NFER Direct for Schools e-updates
- Browse our full range of research reports