Recovering from Covid-19: What Pupils and Schools Need Now

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Summary

Though most pupils have been back in school full time since 8th March 2021, education is not back to normal. Schools are supporting children to recover both academically and in terms of their wellbeing, but this is a long-term undertaking made more challenging by measures to reduce Covid-19 infection. This study provides insights into pupils' and schools' needs, based on interviews with senior leaders in 50 mainstream primary and secondary schools serving predominantly deprived populations across England.

Most senior leaders report that some of their pupils are suffering from Covid-related anxiety. Concerningly, a substantial minority report an increase in incidents of self-harm. Schools are putting measures in place to promote pupils' emotional and mental health, but cannot always get the support they need from specialist services, such as Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), speech and language and social services.

School leaders note that the pupils most affected by the pandemic were already vulnerable, including those with challenging home circumstances and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). However, wellbeing and mental health issues are affecting pupils not previously identified as vulnerable too.

Some senior leaders say that pupils' behaviour is as good as or better than before, but some report an increase in incidents of poor behaviour and lack of self-control.

Most senior leaders say that social distancing is posing a variety of challenges to the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers are unable to circulate round their classes to provide feedback on pupils' work, and there is little interaction between pupils. Some secondary pupils have limited access to practical activities or specialist areas (such as science labs).

Some senior leaders report a reduction in enrichment (such as creative arts, sports, visitors and trips) due to infection control measures and/or prioritising academic work. They want to provide more variety for pupils, within the school day and through extra-curricular activities.

School leaders feel the Government's current approach to learning recovery is misconceived and inadequate. They see the emphasis on academic 'catch up' as unhelpful and want an equal focus on emotional recovery and enrichment alongside academic support. They want the Government to provide adequate funding for recovery over a period of years and to allow schools to use it flexibly.

The over-riding message from these school leaders serving deprived areas is that they need the funding, support and autonomy to make decisions in the best interests of their pupils. They want the Government to provide clear guidance on future plans for assessment and accountability, and to take urgent action to free up capacity in critical health and social services for children and their families.

Introduction

Since the initial closure of schools to most children on 20th March 2020, mainstream education has been disrupted as a result of Covid-19. When most pupils returned to school in March 2021, they regained some of their usual routines, but schooling was far from 'back to normal'.

Building on NFER's 2020 Covid-19 school surveys, this policy briefing reports headline findings from in-depth qualitative interviews in May and June 2021 with 50 senior leaders in mainstream primary and secondary schools[1]. The study focused on schools serving deprived populations because we know from our previous work and other evidence that these schools and pupils have been most seriously affected by the pandemic. Further findings are planned for release in September 2021.

Key findings

There are widespread concerns for pupils' wellbeing and mental health

Large-scale national research indicates that the pandemic has prompted a decline in children's emotional wellbeing. Blanden *et al*. (2021) identified a significant rise in emotional and behavioural difficulties among primary school children following school closures in 2020. Paul *et al*. (2021) found the emotional difficulty scores of primary-age children were ten points (or 0.8 standard deviations) higher in summer 2020 compared with pre-pandemic data.

There is a corresponding increase in mental disorders among children and young people. NHS digital (2020) found that one in six children aged five to 16 years in England were identified as having a possible mental disorder in 2020, representing an increase from one in nine in 2017. In a national survey of secondary leaders and teachers in March 2021, more than three quarters reported increased levels of anxiety and depression among pupils[2].

Most of the senior leaders who took part in this research report that their pupils' wellbeing and mental health has deteriorated since the pandemic. Symptoms worsened among pupils who are already vulnerable (for example, due to their family environment or SEND), but senior leaders also have concerns about pupils who had no previous history of issues with their wellbeing or mental health before the pandemic. They report a wide range of issues affecting some of their pupils. These include: reduced cognitive abilities (such as poor concentration, memory and stamina); lack of motivation and withdrawal; poor social skills and fractured friendships; lack of sleep; poor physical fitness, weight gain; and speech and language problems.

Some primary leaders say that younger children (in Nursery and Reception) are particularly affected and put this down to the fact that the pandemic has impacted on such a large proportion of their young lives. Primary leaders notice the impact on younger children's emotional and social development – their ability to listen, to share, to be sociable and independent. There are particular concerns about the impact of lockdown on children's speech and language development and also their writing, as some children have had limited opportunities to develop these skills during lockdown.

> *Quite a significant amount of [our nursery children] can't fully articulate sentences and have very blurred speech.*
>
> Primary leader

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[1] A parallel Nuffield-funded investigation into Special Education is being undertaken by Ask Research.

[2] See https://www.eif.org.uk/press-release/only-4-of-secondary-school-teachers-have-seen-no-major-changes-in-a-pupils-mental-health-in-the-last-year

Anxiety is the most common issue

According to senior leaders, anxiety is the most common mental health issue affecting both primary and secondary pupils. Senior leaders report an increase in separation anxiety (including an increase in school refusal), hyper-vigilance, germ-phobia and performance anxiety (fear of failure). They identify a range of Covid-related reasons for this, including: social isolation during lockdown; pupils experiencing illness and death in the family; and increased parental anxiety, job insecurity and conflict. Some secondary pupils are worried about what the future holds for them, including high-achieving pupils who are anxious about the implications of changes to national assessments.

There's been a lot of tearfulness which we've not had previously. Quite a few children… are worried about something awful happening.

Primary leader

Schools cannot rely on specialist services to support their pupils

We tear our hair out about the lack of children's [mental health] services being proactive - following up, communicating and putting in support… When we say there is a real issue, there really is… Schools keep the world going with this level of needs because without us, it falls apart.

Primary leader

The system is close to breaking. There is just a backlog… whether that is with social care, whether that is with CAMHS… That's almost why we're trying to have the first level of intervention through school. Access to those services is just not fast enough'.

Secondary leader

Concerningly, a substantial minority of our interviewees report an increase in instances of actual or threatened self-harm, including suicide. This is more common among older pupils, but is not confined to secondary schools: for example, one primary leader said the number of children referred to CAMHS increased from one child before the pandemic to 11 afterwards.

Several senior leaders say they are unable to get the help their pupils need. Issues include high thresholds and long delays in gaining a professional assessment. There is frustration with CAMHS services in particular, but also educational psychology, speech and language therapy, special needs teams and social care. Examples include: a special needs team telling a school that they are not taking any new referrals for Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs) during the summer term; counsellors and educational psychologists substituting video or phone calls for face-to-face consultations with young people; and three senior leaders reporting that long waiting lists have prevented pupils threatening suicide getting timely support from CAMHS.

Senior leaders point out that this situation is seriously affecting pupils and their families, and that issues can easily escalate if left untreated. Many schools are responding by trying to support pupils and families themselves (as outlined in the table below), but they do not feel adequately equipped for the task. School leaders value specialist services and want the Government to provide additional funding for them so that children and young people with more severe issues can get the specialist help they need.

Schools have responded to pupils' wellbeing and mental health issues in a variety of ways

Issues for pupils	Responses from schools
Lack of exercise and weight gain	Physical exercise, outdoor learning and good nutrition
Disruption to routines/lack of sleep	Re-establishing routines and communicating with parents about the importance of adequate sleep
Social isolation and lack of adult support	Reinforcing social skills, helping children form friendships and nurturing their self-esteem
Low engagement with education during lockdown	Addressing barriers to attendance and engagement; prioritising engagement now and in future
Addressing trauma, anxiety and mental health issues	Staff training to provide wellbeing sessions for all, establishing a calm environment and providing enrichment activities. Providing targeted individual/group support, employing Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) and counsellors. Providing family support. Working with charities and specialist organisations. Referring pupils to social services, CAMHS; local authority or mental health support teams
Reduction in basic skills for learning (e.g. listening, concentration, memory and self-regulation)	Assessing children's skills for learning, reducing cognitive load, adopting a recovery curriculum – shorter sessions, repetition and reinforcement, recall and retrieval across the curriculum
Uncertainty about the future and feeling unable to control their lives	Making school life as consistent and predictable as possible. Promoting a positive concept of the future Addressing fears and teaching techniques for handling uncertainty. Providing opportunities for pupils to exercise control over their lives
Boredom/lack of motivation towards education	Helping pupils build up their basic skills so they can access the curriculum; providing variety and enrichment; identifying and building on pupils' interests
Negative exposure to social media/pornography	Running sessions on social media/pornography and bullying; communicating school policy to pupils and parents; enlisting specialist support, such as police and social services
Concerns for vulnerable children, including those with SEND	Reviewing support for individuals already identified and identifying others who may be at risk. Providing training for staff. Seeking additional support from charities and specialist services. Accessing support from the local authority for poor attendance and school refusal. Referring pupils for EHCP assessment.

Staff wellbeing is an issue too

When talking about pupil wellbeing, several senior leaders point out that staff wellbeing is important too. Staff have been affected by a variety of Covid-related issues including bereavement, illness and concerns about their potential exposure to infection at work. School leaders are worried about the cumulative impact of the pandemic on staff wellbeing, workload and job satisfaction.

It isn't just the children, it's the staff. If you have a member of staff who is affected by death… or long Covid, you have a responsibility to support the staff in order to give the best support to children.

Primary leader

Recommendations on wellbeing and mental health

The Government needs urgently to review the provision in place to address the surge in Covid-related anxiety and mental health issues among children and young people. Further research could help to quantify quite how much additional funding and support is needed across the country; however we can be clear, given existing surveys and the consensus in this study, that there is a case for action now.

The Government should consider how best to support schools – particularly those serving deprived communities – in providing health and wellbeing services as part of a joined-up plan.

Though the Government's announcement of £79 million investment to help children access community mental health is welcome, there appears to be a need to increase investment in specialist mental health (CAMHS), speech and language and social care for children, young people and families, so they are not left without support.

The Department for Education should recognise the pressures that school staff are still facing and ensure that staff wellbeing and workload are properly considered in policy development.

Social distancing is impacting on the quality of teaching and learning

In line with current Government guidance[3], schools are implementing a number of measures to reduce the spread of infection. School leaders are asked to consider how to minimise contact across their sites and maintain social distancing wherever possible. Pupils are grouped into bubbles of a class or year group, and separated from other bubbles. The Government recommends schools should seat pupils in front-facing rows. Secondary teachers are asked to stay two metres away from pupils, and schools are encouraged to minimise the amount of pupil movement around the school.

The school leaders we spoke to say these measures are having a largely negative impact on pupils' wellbeing and learning.

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[3] See: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/schools-coronavirus-covid-19-operational-guidance

Feedback and differentiation: The need for teachers to keep a physical distance from their pupils, and having classes seated in front-facing rows, restricts teachers' ability to differentiate their teaching by ability, observe pupils' learning, or provide individual feedback. Restrictions on touching pupils' books have led to a reduction in marking. This means that pupils are not getting the quality of teaching and learning they would normally receive.

Pupil interaction: Infection control measures are stopping pupils working with their peers. This reduces pupils' ability to learn from each other, including those from different classes or year groups. Concerns about a loss of group work include: reduced pupil engagement overall and a reduction in social skills and speech and language development among younger pupils in particular. School leaders observe that pupils who joined their school in 2020/21 have missed out on feeling part of the wider school community.

> *The support for our SEND students, and for the higher attainers who need stretching, isn't going to be as good as in normal times… Being a teacher and being able to move around the classroom and pick things up, having a corrective conversation with a child about a misconception… that's your bread and butter… and it's very artificial not being able to do that.*
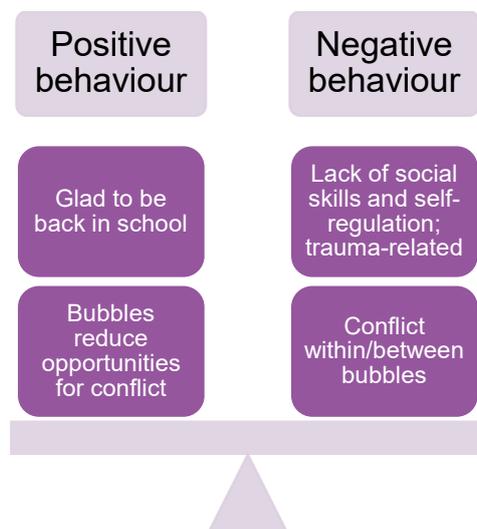>
> Secondary leader

> *The children used to mix together, and know each other, and now they don't. It's negative in terms of their personal and social skills.*
>
> Primary leader

Schools often use targeted interventions (most commonly for pupils who need extra support with reading), which involve a member of staff working with children from different classes. Several schools have stopped running these due to concerns about spreading infection through breaking bubbles and sharing resources. School leaders are concerned that these pupils are missing out on the individual attention they need.

Practical work: Secondary pupils are used to moving around the school to specialist areas for subjects such as science, design and technology, creative subjects and PE. But because many secondary schools are keeping pupils in their base classrooms, they are not able to access specialist areas or undertake practical activities. Schools are attempting to find alternatives, such as outdoor learning or showing videos of experiments and demonstrations, but school leaders say the curriculum has become more static, and less varied, engaging and complete as a result.

Enrichment: Many school leaders report that, due to infection control measures, their schools have had to reduce or cease activities such as whole-school assemblies and performances, outside visitors, visits and extra-curricular clubs. They say that this is having a negative effect on pupils' wellbeing and the community feeling of the school. Several point out that such experiences contribute to pupils' 'cultural capital', and are particularly important for children from deprived backgrounds who may only be able to access them through school.

Though a few of our interviewees identify some positive aspects of the social distancing measures[4], the majority say that they are detrimental to learning. A few have modified their approaches (for example to form larger bubbles, abandon front-facing seating and/or enable hands-on activities) because they are so concerned about the negative impact on their pupils' education. Senior leaders recognise the important role of social distancing in reducing infection, but most cannot wait for restrictions to be lifted so they can 'get back to normal'.

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[4] Positive aspects mentioned by a few senior leaders are that pupils are less distracted or likely to misbehave in class, and that some teachers enjoy mixed-ability teaching.

Schools are noticing different trends in pupils' behaviour

There are mixed experiences of pupils' behaviour since returning to school in March 2021. Some senior leaders say that pupils' behaviour is good or better than before the pandemic, but others report increased issues with pupils' behaviour and lack of self-control.

Positive behaviour	Negative behaviour
Glad to be back in school	Lack of social skills and self-regulation; trauma-related
Bubbles reduce opportunities for conflict	Conflict within/between bubbles

Positive behaviour: the main reason senior leaders give for good behaviour is that pupils are so happy to be back in school. They appreciate seeing their friends and getting back into a predictable routine. Several senior leaders describe the role of school as providing a 'safe place' for children and young people, in contrast to the more turbulent environment they encounter outside school. A few senior leaders, particularly in secondary schools, say that social distancing has improved pupils' behaviour because when pupils are physically separated they have fewer opportunities to annoy one another.

Negative behaviour: the main reasons for an increase in incidents of poor behaviour are a lack of social skills and pupils 'acting out'. Several leaders point out that bad behaviour is often a sign of underlying issues, such as pupils experiencing trauma and being unable to self-regulate or communicate their feelings in more appropriate ways. These issues have been exacerbated by pupils' experiences during lockdown. Several leaders feel it is inappropriate to respond to these as purely behavioural issues because: 'behaviour is a communication tool' (i.e. pupils are communicating their distress through their actions).

> *We know that some of our students have lived through really difficult times… that issue of not being able to get out and away from it [because they were constantly at home during lockdown]… can lead to behaviour issues, but we know that underneath it, it's their wellbeing that is the problem.*
>
> Secondary leader

A few senior leaders describe examples of social distancing measures leading to aggression – either because pupils are getting fed up with spending so much time with the same classmates, or because of aggression between pupils in different bubbles (for example in the playground or outside school).

Self-isolation is having a negative impact on pupils

Children need emotional social regulation, and that comes through consistency… It is fundamental to their academic achievement, it is fundamental to their well-being… They need consistency with no bubble closures… what is crippling is the isolation period.

Primary leader

The interviews took place in May and early June, before the increase in Covid-19 infections due to the Delta variant. At that time, about half of the school leaders we spoke to reported that some of their pupils were self-isolating (typically one or two pupils, but two schools had over 100 pupils off school for this reason). Senior leaders say that this is having a particularly negative effect on their pupils' wellbeing and learning.

Recommendations on infection control measures in schools

The harmful effects of social distancing and self-isolation on pupils' education and wellbeing need to be understood and acknowledged. Schools will need time to reorganise and recover from these effects when the restrictions are lifted.

If it is necessary to impose stricter infection controls again, on either a local or national basis, the negative consequences for wellbeing and learning need to be mitigated as far as possible.

DfE and Ofsted need to do all in their power to enable schools to focus on all elements of the curriculum, including practical activities, and to provide a range of extra-curricular activities which enrich pupils' learning experiences.

It will take several years for schools to get back to normal

I don't think that sticking them into loads of catch up and extending the school day is actually going to help. I think they want to enjoy school and want to be here.

Primary leader

If we don't get the mental health bit right, we won't get any learning. They've got to go hand-in-hand.

Primary leader

School leaders say that it will take time for schools and pupils to recover from the effects of the pandemic. Estimates vary, ranging from about another year (i.e. until the end of the 2021/22 academic year) to seven years or more. Senior leaders also point out that recovery at individual level will depend on: the extent of pupils' engagement with learning during lockdown; how quickly schools can resume normal teaching, learning and operational practices; and the impact of Covid-19 on an individual's development, wellbeing and mental health. In any case, there are unlikely to be any 'quick fixes'.

Schools need timely decision-making and clear communication from the Government

Curriculum, assessment and accountability: school leaders want the Government to make well-considered decisions about curriculum, assessment and accountability both immediately, and over the next few years. In recognition of the extent of the learning time pupils have missed and the damage there has been to pupils' wellbeing, they want clear guidance on which aspects of the curriculum to prioritise. Some are also calling for a halt to Ofsted inspections, or at least for the accountability system to make allowances for the issues that some schools and pupils are facing.

Communication: school leaders emphasise the need for timely announcements about assessment arrangements, so they can plan, help their pupils to prepare and avoid any escalation in pupils' anxiety. Some primary leaders want the Government to announce a suspension of formal assessments, whereas secondary leaders want to know now what the arrangements for GCSEs, A Levels and other qualifications will be for 2022 and beyond.

If SATs had been in place, with the amount of education that these children have missed, I think from January, all they would have been focused on would have been their SATs, and that's just wrong.

Primary leader

We need to reassure young people who are insecure… If I tell Year 11s they are doing exams [and exams are cancelled] my trust has been compromised.

Secondary leader

The school leaders in our research feel that the Government's current approach to learning recovery is misconceived and unbalanced

Funding: The Government has provided funding to schools for general Covid recovery, academic tutoring and summer schools. In addition there is funding to train mental health leads and to establish wellbeing and mental health support teams in some schools. Total Covid-related spending on education between 2020-22 and 2024-25 is estimated to be around £3.1 billion[5] (National Audit Office, 2021).

The amount of money we've received for COVID top-up hardly skims the surface unfortunately.

Primary leader

We have put in an additional member of staff to support mental health [but] it's always at the expense of something else.

Secondary leader

Many of the school leaders we spoke to say that the current level of funding is inadequate, and additional funding for recovery needs to be provided in the longer term. Our previous research (Julius *et al*., 2021) identified the fact that some schools' finances have been badly hit by the pandemic and those at particular risk of greater hardship are disproportionately likely to be serving the most deprived communities. Several of the school leaders interviewed for this study are very concerned about their finances. Some had few reserves prior to the pandemic and were further impacted when their spending on infection control measures was not fully reimbursed. Some say that continued spending on these measures is diverting resources away from important pupil welfare and academic support.

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[5] This does not include £195 million for exceptional Covid-19 costs, but it does include £408 million for teacher training and development, which would arguably be needed regardless of the pandemic.

Recovery: School leaders have a number of criticisms about the Government's approach to learning recovery (see also Nelson *et al.*, 2021). Our interviewees feel that the specific focus on academic tutoring as the main 'catch up' strategy is unhelpful because it does not reflect their priorities or adequately address pupils' wellbeing needs. Senior leaders are calling on the Government to define recovery more broadly and understand the need to balance academic tuition with enrichment and support for emotional and mental health. As many point out, pupils who are poorly motivated, anxious or disturbed are not in a good state to engage with academic study. 'Learning' must, therefore, be viewed holistically.

Flexibility: school leaders want to be able to use any additional funding flexibly, in the best interests their pupils. Several feel the National Tutoring Programme is ill-suited to their pupils' needs and would like to see the funding given to schools instead, without the obligation to use it on tutoring or academic 'catch up'.

School leaders highlight the pressing need to support pupils' wellbeing (as well as that of their own staff). They want to invest in pupils' wellbeing support through enrichment activities and additional staffing (such as counsellors and ELSAs).

I get what the Government are trying to do, but actually delivering that money directly into schools, so we can appoint more staff to work with children that we know need it, would have a far greater impact than doing it through a third-party organisation.

Primary leader

We need to be left alone to get on with it… Heads need to be given the autonomy to spend it [Government money] on their students, in the most appropriate manner.

Secondary leader

Recommendations on recovery

The impacts of Covid-19 on teaching and learning in 2021 mean that there will be pupils moving through the system for years to come who did not have a fully-rounded educational experience, despite the very best efforts of their schools.

'Catch-up' funding should be viewed and provided more holistically – not confined to academic needs. Senior leaders want the freedom and flexibility to deploy funds to support their pupils in the most appropriate ways within their contexts – for example schools with many anxious pupils may need to devote more resources to wellbeing support.

There needs to be a long-term proactive assessment and support plan – focused on all affected cohorts as they move through the system. This should encompass curriculum, assessment and accountability; and include plans for a variety of different scenarios (e.g. in the event of further periods of school closure).

Funding needs to be adequate and ongoing – these issues will not be 'fixed' within a year and some schools will need continued funding to enable them to provide longer-term support for pupils who have been the most affected.

About the research

This research is funded by the Nuffield Foundation and NFER. This part of the research set out to take an in-depth look at the continuing impact of Covid-19 on schools and pupils in England. It has the following objectives:

1. To identify the immediate and longer-term impacts of the pandemic on teaching and learning, and on pupils' wellbeing and mental health (acknowledging the relationship between mental wellbeing and effective learning).
2. To identify priorities for schools and pupils as they emerge from the pandemic, including support needs in the immediate-, medium- and longer-term, and positive developments that should be capitalised on.
3. To consider how the sector can best prepare itself for future shocks, preserve high quality teaching and learning and protect pupils' mental health and wellbeing.

The interview sample was drawn from senior leaders who took part in the previous stages of the research (based on national surveys in May and July 2020), and agreed to be contacted again. The 50 people who took part were senior leaders working in 34 primary and 16 secondary schools[6] across England. The research intentionally focused on schools serving deprived populations, because previous research (Andrew *et al*., 2020; Nelson and Sharp, 2020; Sharp *et al*., 2020) found that the pandemic has had a particularly negative impact on both pupils from deprived backgrounds and schools serving high proportions of deprived pupils.

The contributing senior leaders were based in predominantly deprived schools: 49 were in the highest two quintiles of pupils with free school meals (FSM) nationally and one was in the middle category for FSM[7]. As disadvantaged populations tend to be located in urban areas, the majority of interviewees were working in urban schools, though the sample included three senior leaders of primary schools in rural areas.

Interviews took place by telephone and video calls in May and June 2021. We are very grateful to all the senior leaders who agreed take part.

Note that as this is a qualitative study, the findings are not necessarily typical of leaders of disadvantaged schools nationally.

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[6] These proportions mirrored responses to the original surveys by phase.
[7] This senior leader had recently moved from a more deprived school.

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