

RETURN TO SCHOOL SURVEY

Summary report,
July 2020

Unicef UK invited schools from the Rights Respecting Schools network to take part in a short survey about schools reopening.

1,573 individual school staff members took part over the course of one week.

Participants were encouraged to send the survey out to partner schools and other staff members. The survey was launched on 12 May, shortly after the Government's announcement that schools in England may reopen from 1 June, 2020.

Sixty-nine per cent of respondents were from primary schools, eighteen per cent from secondary schools and eight per cent from special schools.

Twenty-nine per cent characterised their school catchment as having a high level of deprivation, forty-four per cent as having a mixed or moderate level of deprivation, and twenty-five per cent as having a low level of deprivation.

Respondents' schools were based across the UK – sixty-one per cent in England, twenty-six per cent in Scotland, eight per cent in Wales and two per cent in Northern Ireland.

WHAT ARE SCHOOLS' TOP PRIORITIES WHEN PUPILS RETURN?

Schools' biggest immediate concern was keeping pupils and staff safe from coronavirus

Respondents were asked what their single biggest concern was around reopening. Overwhelmingly, respondents identified the safety of pupils and staff. Responses suggested that social distancing was not feasible, either due to space and staffing, or because of the age of the children involved.

Respondents were concerned that pupils may contract or spread the virus, both within the school and back to their own families and the wider community.

Schools were also concerned about staff members, particularly those who are vulnerable or who have vulnerable family members at home.

"The logistics of social distancing are impossible and it will harm children's mental health being put under pressure to social distance while learning."

Scottish primary school

"Trying to keep the children safe. Staff members having vulnerable people at home and being worried about taking illness home"

English primary school

"Though I do want schools to reopen, my main concern is that it will not be possible to socially distance with younger children. When being in school, we have tried our best to do this and set in routines, this has just not been possible. While trying to help children with their work, all teachers have to break the 2m distance rule. In addition to the government saying that they will not be having masks in school then this will pose an even greater risk."

English primary school

"Social distancing is not possible for most schools but particularly special schools and those that have younger children. The return to school does not seem to be an education priority but a childminding priority so that other people can go back to work. This means there will be higher risk to pupils, staff and any family members at home - particularly those with underlying health conditions"

Welsh primary school

Beyond immediate safety, respondents identified mental health support as the biggest priority when schools reopen.

Respondents were then asked to identify up to five key priorities from a list. After keeping pupils and staff safe from coronavirus (which ninety-one per cent identified as a top priority), the most common priority for schools was supporting children's mental health and wellbeing, including bereavement support for children who had lost someone during the period of school closure. Eighty-one per cent identified this as a top priority. This was followed by supporting the mental health and wellbeing of staff (63%).

Supporting children who may have suffered from trauma or abuse during school closure was a top priority in more than half the schools (53%), as was supporting children to return to school routines and expectations (52%).

"How children will cope emotionally and socially having spent so long in isolation, away from friends and other children, in particular our most vulnerable children."

Scottish primary school

"Children becoming upset at the changes in the school environment, potentially it won't be the same nurturing safe space as previously - particularly for the younger children"

English primary school

While schools are concerned at the growing attainment gap, catching up on academic learning is a lower priority for most respondents.

Less than a third of schools placed catching up on lost learning for all pupils (32%) or narrowing the gap for pupils who had fallen behind (22%) as a top five priority. These were a little higher among secondary schools (44% and 34% respectively), but were still ranked below safety, pupil mental health, staff mental health and support for pupils who suffered from trauma or abuse.

"[I am] more concerned over mental health and safety than closing the gap at this time with learning. Children need to feel safe again and build relationships with friends and teachers before school learning can take place."

English primary school

In secondary schools only, supporting pupils with upcoming exams was a significant concern (54% placed this as a top five concern).

"Teaching and Learning will be a mix and match and really difficult to get right for small groups as opposed to the usual class size. Lessons will need to be repeated. Pace of work will be slower and there will be extensive pressure on pupils to catch up on work missed. Effectively running out of time ahead of next year's exams, if they indeed take place."

Scottish secondary school

CAN SCHOOLS PROVIDE THE SUPPORT THAT PUPILS WILL NEED?

Schools suggest that the challenging learning environment on return, and the amount of learning lost during closure, will make it hard for children to catch up.

On the whole, respondents were confident that they could support children as they returned. However, a quarter (25%) were not confident that they could help pupils to catch up on the learning missed during lockdown, and over a third (36%) were not confident that they could secure help from health or social services for children and families who need it.

"With so many people struggling with the ongoing issues related to lockdown, coronavirus, being out of work, it's going to be an uphill struggle to support everyone who needs it. And with the low engagement numbers, I wonder how many year 10 and 12 pupils will be able to catch up, and how many will end up dropping subjects"

Welsh primary school

"I feel confident that the school I work at will do its utmost best to support pupils and staff but I don't know if it will be able to achieve everything, I feel that would be almost impossible to do."

Scottish secondary school

Some respondents described an 'almost impossible' challenge of providing effective learning support while keeping children socially distanced. Comments highlight that smaller class sizes and staggered break times require more staff to supervise, meaning that there will be less support staff capacity within a class to help pupils one-to-one or in small groups. Pupils are likely to have engaged in homeworking to varying degrees, leading to increased gaps in learning within classes. In addition, respondents anticipate high levels of pastoral, social and emotional support needs which they will need to address.

"We need to support the children emotionally first and then think about their academic attainment - unhappy children do not learn."

Scottish primary school

"With limiting the classes to 15 children and 1 adult, it will be difficult to offer the levels of support for all children as there will be no opportunity to have 1:1 time with children. It will also be difficult to offer the appropriate support in the right way whilst practising social distancing and keeping everyone physically safe."

English primary school

"The school is providing as much work as possible for the pupils but it will be difficult initially to plug the gaps in learning due to some pupils not engaging with the work and the exam boards should consider making alterations to next year's exams to account for this."

Scottish secondary school

WHAT SUPPORT DO SCHOOLS ALREADY HAVE TO HELP PUPILS?

Most schools have some support in place already, but the anticipated increase in demand means that most respondents are not confident that they can meet the needs of all pupils.

- Fewer than one in five respondents (18%) believed that they had adequate mental health counselling services to meet the expected needs of children returning. Nearly one in five respondents (19%) said they had no mental health counselling available through the school at all.
- Just over a quarter (26%) of respondents felt they had adequate mental health and wellbeing support for staff available through the school.

“The reality is that primary mental health service provision pre-covid was woefully inadequate [...] I feel ill at the thought of how many pupils are going to need additional support who are going to be turned away, or be told that they’re on a waiting list (which pre-covid was already 4 months long for PMH input and 6 months to even receive a CAMHS consultation). This was the picture before we were warned of cuts and before our children experienced a period of fear, isolation, and sadly in some cases, increased exposure to harm and or neglect. As teachers we will do everything we can to plug the gaps and act as social workers, counsellors, care-givers, but either we need to receive a massive amount of training in providing mental health support or the government will have to find the money and the staff to ensure our children receive the mental health support they need.”

Scottish secondary school

What do schools think is most needed for pupils when schools return?

Respondents were asked what one additional support they would want to provide if money was available to do so. The most common response (32%) was additional mental health and emotional support available within the school.

“Mental health counselling, many pupils are already struggling with structure and getting work done, and are feeling stressed and overwhelmed. Even more so when we start back to school and they will feel behind their peers.”

English secondary school

“For me going back to school is about rebuilding relationships with our children and looking after everyone’s mental health and wellbeing. Learning will come later.”

English secondary school

“Mental health counselling. We are lucky to have Counsellors at the school but they were struggling to cope with workload before this started”

Welsh secondary school

The second most common response (27%) was additional staff capacity to allow schools to address the learning, pastoral and mental health needs of pupils. Concern was frequently expressed that staff would be spread thinly to manage social distancing, and numbers may be reduced due to sickness or the need to isolate vulnerable individuals.

"I am very concerned about pupils and staffing levels going back. I am concerned about the huge gaps in pupils' learning and although I plan to start with mental health and well-being activities the learning for all pupils concerns me."

Scottish primary school

Eight per cent of respondents wanted specific provision for catch-up learning for pupils who had fallen behind. Seven per cent wanted PPE and hygiene services to make the school safer from coronavirus, and six per cent wanted improved facilities and space to allow for social distancing and prevent pupils having to share books and other equipment. Other responses included more pastoral support, better technological provision in or outside school, staff training and support, support for children's health and nutrition, SEN support and practical or financial support for parents and families who are struggling.

Are schools in a position to meet the higher needs of pupils when they return?

Nearly half (49%) of respondents said that they did not have the financial resources available to provide the support pupils would need when they return. Sixty-two per cent said they were not confident that they would receive the support they needed from either national or local government.

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES ARE THERE FOR INNOVATION?

Many schools felt that there were some innovations and learning that had developed during the period of closures that could have positive impacts on children's future learning. Most of these centred around the increased use of technology and potential for remote learning. However, these were often accompanied with caveats about not leaving disadvantaged pupils behind.

Digital learning, platforms and tools

The most common positive highlighted was the proliferation and increased use of digital learning. In some respects, this is an overarching theme, as online learning at home was felt to facilitate many of the other positives that were highlighted below, including engagement with parents and encouraging independent learning.

Participants highlighted a number of tools by name and many said they planned to continue using these to support homework once schools return to normal provision or in the event of future school closures. Many new resources have been created to support learning, including video and apps. Online learning was felt to provide more creativity and to be more engaging for some pupils.

However, there was an acknowledgement that not all pupils could engage in learning this way as effectively. The lack of access in some households meant some pupils could fall behind.

"Utilisation of online platforms can help to reduce impacts on students in the future who are non-attenders, have a lengthy period of absence or are school refusers."

Scottish secondary school

"We have improved our online learning dramatically but lower income families are struggling to access it."

Welsh secondary school

"As a teacher I have built up a good bank of resources and found more linking games/videos etc for our topics that are engaging for the children."

Northern Irish primary school

Digital literacy

The increase in dependence on online learning was felt to have increased the digital literacy and skills of staff, pupils and parents. In particular, it meant that staff who had previously been reluctant, or who had not found time to develop this way of working had been forced to do so.

"Online learning has given me so many new skills and learning different ways to teach. Children also love being on iPads etc and have enjoyed the process - it meets them at their level and their interests."

Scottish primary school

"As a teacher I developed my IT skills and feel like I will be more able to support my kids online as well as at school in the future."

English secondary school

Creativity and new ways of learning

Beyond the online learning, participants talked about developing new ways of teaching and learning, creating new resources to support home learning, and being able to be more imaginative in the kinds of activity that could be done. Some described this as being forced to be creative to adapt to the situation; others talked about being 'freed' from the national curriculum.

"I think children have had the opportunity to become more tactile and creative in their learning and I would like to see more of this in school. I am certainly going to plan more outdoor lessons"

Scottish primary school

"I think this period has shown teachers the truly different ways in which children learn - going forward I would expect to see staff really embrace the creative curriculum."

English primary school

Life skills and wellbeing

One of the ways in which a freer curriculum and engagement with parents was felt to benefit children was an increased focus on life skills. Participants talked about cooking, gardening, cycling and other skills which children were learning from their parents, either linked to school-set tasks, or simply through having more time at home.

Some also felt that school closure had allowed a greater focus on children's wellbeing, through removing some of the pressure of school and encouraging explicit conversations about how they were feeling.

"Open communication with children regarding their wellbeing, mental health and the importance of getting outdoors and exercising to boost mood [and] health."
Scottish primary school

"Allowing children to get away from the national curriculum. We've seen some great examples of children learning problem solving skills [...] Some families have spoken positively about being able to spend more time with their children and do activities they usually wouldn't do like baking."
English primary school

Independent learning skills

One of the impacts of home learning and use of digital tools was a sense that many pupils had developed greater skills in independent learning. They were able to find resources for themselves, and to manage their own time on tasks, learning at their own pace. It also allowed more 'child led' learning, with children pursuing their own interests. Again, however, there was an acknowledgement that this will have benefited some children more than others.

"I think that for the students who have access to the internet and a laptop to work on, gains will have been made in independent working, using digital technology, resilience."

English secondary school

"Higher levels of independent learning and learning at a pace that suits them."
Welsh secondary school

Family engagement

Many participants talked about improved contact with parents during school closures and greater parental involvement in their children's learning. This is linked to several benefits. Teachers felt they had a better understanding of the situation children are in at home. They also felt that parents had a better understanding of what their children were learning, where they might be struggling, and how they can support them. Some expressed hope that this level of engagement would help parents to support their children in their future learning. Once again, however, they acknowledged that not all children were getting the same level of support from parents at home.

"Some children and parents have benefited from an insight into how we teach, and what their children are capable of - for some families this has been a lovely experience that has realigned priorities within families. Some of the teaching and experiences children have been party to at home has been excellent - like we've had a family re-set. It's unfortunate not all children benefit from this."

English primary school

"Staff have become much more aware of the resources and space children have at home and so can plan to help them overcome barriers."

English primary school

"The close communication via weekly phone-calls with parents and the sending of work remotely each week and parent feedback. Many useful conversations where parents able to be advised of teaching and behavioural strategies directly on a one to one basis."

Northern Ireland special school

Staff development

In addition to improved digital literacy and considering new ways of teaching, some staff have had greater opportunity to pursue CPD and staff development opportunities. Some mentioned new training resources being made available.

Digital skills and online learning look like they are becoming an important part of many schools' approach to teaching once children return. In doing so, there is a desire to encourage more child-led learning, embracing more creative methods to respond to the way in which different children learn. There is also a desire to refocus on a broader curriculum, to include more focus on wellbeing, on outdoor learning and general life skills. Schools also want to capitalise on the improved engagement with parents, bringing them in as informed partners in their children's education. Many teachers have welcomed the opportunity to adapt and learn new skills to support this change.

However, these changes carry a risk of leaving some pupils behind. While schools embrace those tools that work for children who are engaged, with parents who have the time and willingness to support, and who have access to digital resources, it will be essential to monitor those who are not benefiting from these new ways of working and to provide them with the support they need.

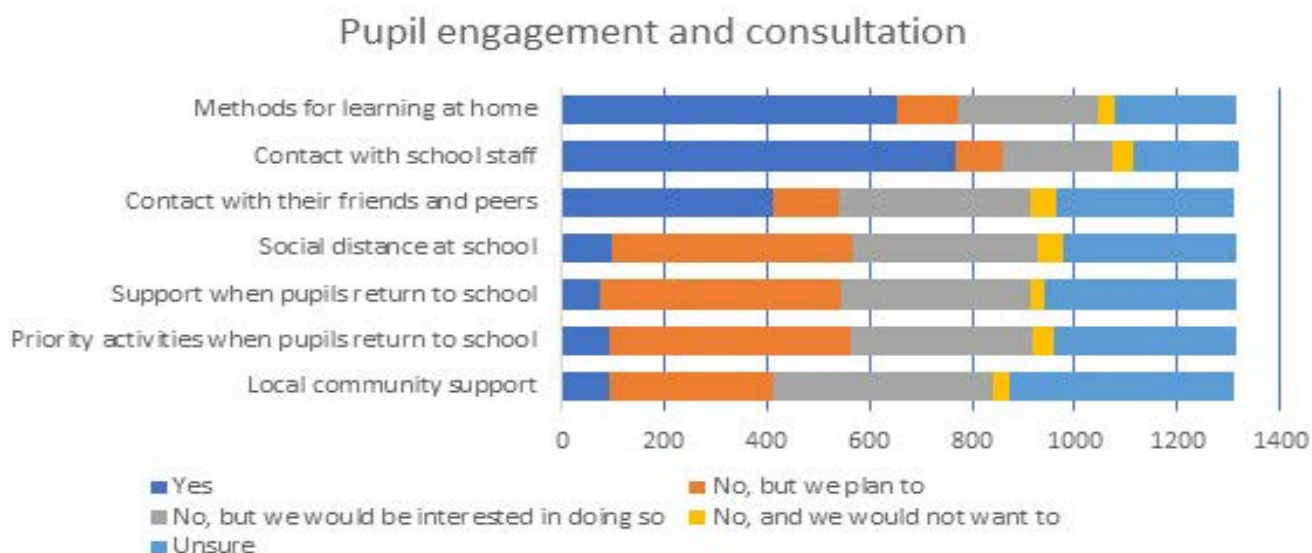
"We have received lots of behaviour training and trauma based teaching training. These will be useful within our school."

English special school

Pupil Engagement

The last three months have seen an unprecedented change in the way that children are supported and taught by schools. These changes have happened rapidly and with limited information available to guide schools' decisions. Across the UK, policy and guidance from the national Governments has been different and often controversial.

We wanted to know about the role that children were asked to play in helping schools to make decisions that would best meet their needs. We asked participants how far they had engaged with their pupils on key decisions.



As we would expect from Rights Respecting Schools, there is generally a large appetite for engaging with pupils and hearing their views on key decisions during and after school closures. Over half of schools had already consulted with pupils about how they wanted to maintain contact with the school, and nearly half had asked for views on how to deliver home learning. Just under a third had consulted about how children wanted to maintain contact with their peers during school closure.

Unsurprisingly, given the timing of the survey, fewer schools had already consulted about decisions for reopening, as announcement about timings for reopening in England had only just been made. However, most schools wanted to consult with pupils about how return to school would be managed, including how to maintain social distancing, what support should be available to them and the priority activities for the school once they return.

Many Rights Respecting Schools are proud of the part they play in their local community, and many schools want to consult with pupils about the best way to provide local support. Engaging with pupils around key decisions can be hugely valuable for schools and for children. Gathering their views provides an important perspective on how best to support children and understanding what is in their best interests. It can help schools to target their efforts towards those activities which will have the greatest impact on improving children's experiences and flag issues that might otherwise be missed. It can also be an important way of maintaining contact with pupils and fostering their sense of belonging at school, even when they are not attending. Being listened to is also important for pupils' wellbeing and self-esteem and can help them to feel less out of control during this crisis.