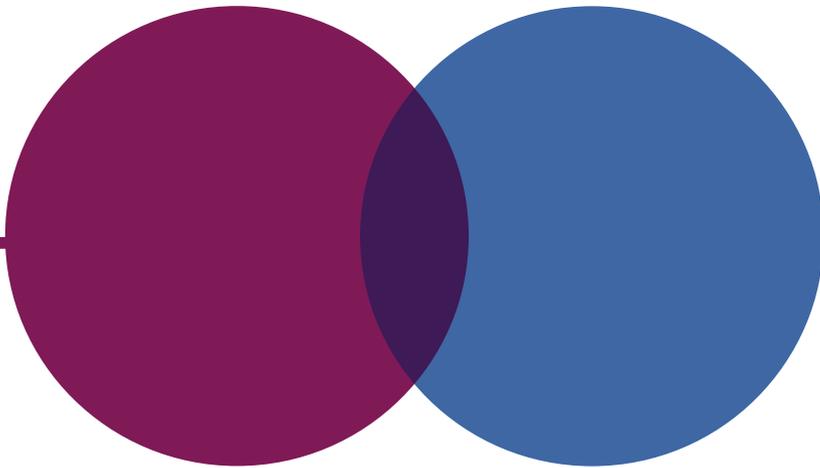




National Audit Office



Support for children's education during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic

Department for Education

REPORT

**by the Comptroller
and Auditor General**

SESSION 2019–2021

17 MARCH 2021

HC 1239

Key facts

**23
March
2020**

date from which schools first closed to all pupils except vulnerable children and children of critical workers

98%

proportion of pupils whom teachers reported in a survey were behind where they would normally expect them to be in their curriculum learning at the end of the 2019/20 academic year

£1bn

amount of funding the Department for Education announced in June 2020 that it would provide for catch-up learning, with a further £700 million announced in February 2021

26% weekly average proportion of vulnerable pupils who were attending school or college by the end of the summer term in July 2020

15% decrease in the number of referrals to children's social care services during the weeks surveyed between 27 April and 16 August 2020, compared with the average for the same period over the previous three years

29% proportion of primary school leaders who reported in May 2020 that their main approach to in-school provision was extra-curricular activities such as arts, crafts or games rather than curriculum content

220,000 average number of daily users of Oak National Academy, the online learning resource funded by the Department for Education, between 20 April and 12 July 2020

30% estimate in May 2020 of the additional amount of time that children from higher-income families spent on remote learning, compared with children from lower-income families

36% median estimate of the possible growth in the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers from March to September 2020 as a result of school closures in the 2019/20 academic year

All dates in this report relate to 2020 unless otherwise stated.

Throughout this report, central government financial years are written as, for example, '2020-21' and run from 1 April to 31 March; school academic years are written '2020/21' and run from 1 September to 31 August.

Summary

1 In March 2020, there were almost 21,600 state schools in England, educating 8.2 million pupils aged four to 19. Around 12,500 of these schools (58% of the total), with 3.8 million pupils, were maintained schools, funded and overseen by local authorities. The remaining 9,000 schools (42%) were academies, with 4.4 million pupils. Each academy school is part of an academy trust, directly funded by the Department for Education (the Department) and independent of the relevant local authority.

2 The Department is responsible for the school system, and is ultimately accountable for securing value for money from the funding provided for schools. For 2020-21, the Department's budget to support schools' core activities totalled £47.6 billion. The Department works with the Education and Skills Funding Agency (the ESFA), which distributes the funding and provides assurance about how the money has been used. Ofsted inspects schools and provides independent assurance about their effectiveness, including the quality of education.

3 On 18 March 2020, the government announced that, to help limit transmission of the COVID-19 virus, from 23 March schools would close to all pupils except vulnerable children and children of critical workers. Education for most children would therefore take place remotely at home. The Secretary of State also announced that Ofsted would suspend routine inspections, to help schools focus on their core functions.

4 Schools faced a range of uncertainties in responding to COVID-19 – for example, it was unclear how long the pandemic would last and what children's role in transmitting the virus was – and had to respond to rapidly developing events. The school workforce had to adapt to new ways of working and continue educating pupils in stressful and uncertain circumstances. Schools also had fewer staff available, since some contracted the virus while others had to shield at home.

5 Schools partially re-opened on 1 June, to children in reception classes and years 1 and 6. In mid-June, schools began providing face-to-face support to students in years 10 and 12 to supplement their remote learning. However, most children did not return to school until the new academic year began in September.

Focus of our report

6 The closure of schools to most children between March and July 2020, and the associated switch to remote learning, was unprecedented. It formed an important part of the wider effort to reduce transmission of COVID-19 by means of a national 'lockdown'. The change had a major impact on schools and children, both those who continued to attend school and those who learnt remotely, and their parents or carers. It raised concerns about the potential effect on children's education and well-being, and many observers believed that vulnerable and disadvantaged children, in particular, would be adversely affected.

7 During this period the Department had to deal with significant operational challenges, particularly in the weeks immediately before and after the national lockdown began, which tested its capacity and resilience. These challenges included: dealing with uncertain and fast-moving circumstances as the pandemic evolved; managing with higher levels of staff absence as a result of the virus; adapting to new ways of working, including the shift to remote working; putting in place arrangements where key staff worked for extended periods to cover evenings and weekends; and identifying priorities across the whole range of its policy responsibilities.

8 This report examines the Department's support for children's education during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic between March and July 2020, and its action to help children catch up on the learning they lost during that period. We focused particularly on disadvantaged and vulnerable children.¹ Also, where appropriate, the report refers to the additional guidance, support or requirements that the Department continued to roll out for the 2020/21 academic year. We did not assess the Department's actions during the second major period of disrupted schooling that began in January 2021.

9 The report covers: the Department's overall response to the pandemic (Part One); the support provided for children's learning, both in school and remotely (Part Two); and the impact of disrupted schooling on children (Part Three). We set out our audit approach in Appendix One and our evidence base in Appendix Two. A timeline of key events in the school system between March and July 2020 is in Appendix Three.

¹ This report covers the Department's efforts to support disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils. In this context, 'disadvantage' refers to economic deprivation, and disadvantaged pupils are often categorised as those who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals. The concept of 'vulnerable' pupils is broader, but typically means children who have been assessed as 'in need' under the Children Act 1989, or have an education, health and care plan because they have complex special educational needs and disabilities, as well as children assessed as 'otherwise vulnerable' at local level.

Key findings

The Department's response to COVID-19 in the school system

10 From April 2020, the Department prepared COVID-19 response plans for its support for schools and vulnerable children, but it did not develop an overarching departmental plan until June. The Department had no pre-existing plan for managing mass disruption to schooling on the scale caused by COVID-19. Its emergency response function was designed to manage localised disruption – for example, in the event of floods. It activated this function in late January. In early April, it established nine regional education and children's teams, which had a particular focus on vulnerable children. Without an established plan, the Department's response to the pandemic was largely reactive. It prioritised continuing to fund schools and other education providers, and communicating with the sectors it oversees. From April, the Department developed COVID-19 response plans for its support for schools and vulnerable children, including high-level milestones, risks and dependencies. However, it was not until the end of June that it began to formulate a plan that set out objectives, milestones and risks at a departmental level. At the time of our work, the Department had not carried out a systematic exercise to evaluate its response during the early stages of the pandemic and identify lessons for potential future disruption to schooling (paragraphs 1.4, 1.5, 1.8, 1.9 and 1.20).

11 In the early stages, the Department set no requirements for in-school and remote learning, but became more directive as the pandemic progressed. The school system is devolved, with power resting at local level, and the Department does not control schools. Early in 2020, the Department was unsure whether it would be able to persuade schools to close if that became necessary. In the event, schools closed to most children voluntarily from 23 March and the Department did not use the powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020, which took effect on 25 March. Between March and July, the Department's approach was to offer guidance and support to schools, rather than to mandate requirements, recognising the challenges that schools were facing, including staff shortages. In guidance published in July, which focused on schools re-opening in September, the Department emphasised that it expected pupils learning at home to have access to high-quality online and offline resources linked to the school's normal curriculum. The Department decided that, for 2020/21, it needed to make clearer schools' responsibility to provide remote learning, given the risk of continued disruption to normal schooling. It therefore placed a legal duty on schools, which came into force on 22 October. The suspension of routine Ofsted inspections reduced the level of independent assurance about schools' effectiveness during the period (paragraphs 1.10 to 1.14).

12 At January 2021, the Department had paid, or intended to pay, schools £133 million (73%) of the £181 million they had claimed for exceptional costs arising from COVID-19 between March and July 2020. The Department made funding available only to schools that could not meet their additional costs from existing resources, or could do so only by drawing on reserves and undermining their long-term financial sustainability. The amount that schools could claim was limited. For the 2019/20 summer term, the Department funded schools for three categories of exceptional costs: providing free school meals; opening school premises during the Easter and summer half-term holidays; and additional cleaning due to COVID-19 outbreaks. Within the £181 million total, schools made £42 million of claims outside these categories, for example for costs relating to personal protective equipment, technology for children's home learning, and additional staff. The Department did not reimburse schools for any of these other claims relating to the 2019/20 summer term (paragraphs 1.16 to 1.18, and Figure 2).

13 The timeliness and volume of the Department's guidance caused difficulties for schools. The Department published many guidance documents and often updated them, as government developed its response to the evolving pandemic. For example, the Department calculated that, between mid-March and 28 April, it published more than 150 new documents and updates to existing material. Stakeholders told us that guidance was often published at the end of the week or late in the evening, putting schools under pressure, especially when guidance was for immediate implementation. They also said that, when the Department updated guidance, schools were not always clear what changes it had made. An informal survey of its members by the Chartered College of Teaching found that 67% of respondents thought the Department's guidance on remote learning was unhelpful or very unhelpful. The figure for in-school learning was 58% (paragraphs 1.23 and 1.24).

14 Governments in other countries generally responded to the pandemic in a similar way to the Department. Our research suggests that most countries were largely unprepared for widespread disruption to schooling, and most closed schools and moved to remote learning. Education ministries commonly made educational resources available online, and many countries distributed electronic devices to support disadvantaged children. Where digital education was already an established part of the school system, this facilitated the move to remote learning (paragraph 1.27 and Figure 3).

Support for children's learning

15 Most vulnerable children did not attend school between late March and the end of the summer term, increasing risks to their safety and welfare. The Department viewed continued school attendance as an important way of safeguarding and supporting vulnerable children. The proportion of vulnerable children who attended school or college remained below 11% from 23 March to late May. Attendance increased gradually after schools partially re-opened in June and reached a weekly average of 26% by the end of the summer term. The Department and Ofsted were concerned that low school attendance could result in increased levels of hidden harm. A survey of local authorities found there were 82,890 referrals to children's social care services during the weeks surveyed between 27 April and 16 August, around 15% less than the average for the same period over the previous three years. Referrals remained generally lower than usual between September and early November (paragraphs 2.3 to 2.8, and Figure 4).

16 Provision for children attending school varied widely, with evidence suggesting those in the most deprived schools were less likely to be taught the curriculum. The Department told schools they were free to determine the type of provision they offered to children, but they should consider factors such as the children's mental health and well-being, and specific learning needs. A survey by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in May 2020 found that just less than half of schools reported teaching those pupils attending school the same curriculum content as was being sent to those learning remotely; 29% of primary school leaders reported their main approach was extra-curricular activities such as arts, crafts or games, compared with 7% of secondary schools. Leaders in the most deprived schools were twice as likely (37%) to report their main approach was providing extra-curricular activities as those in the least deprived schools (17%) (paragraphs 2.12 and 2.13, and Figure 5).

17 The Department funded a well-received national online resource to support schools and pupils with remote learning from April onwards. The Department initially provided £500,000 to help fund Oak National Academy, which was launched on 20 April. In June, it agreed to give a further £4.34 million to expand the material on offer for the 2020/21 academic year. Oak National Academy offers video lessons and other online resources. Its data indicate that, on average, 220,000 people used its website daily from 20 April to 12 July, mainly to access content for primary school pupils. Stakeholder groups we consulted felt Oak National Academy was a helpful, high-quality resource (paragraphs 2.15 to 2.17).

18 The Department provided laptops, tablets and 4G routers to a proportion of the children in need of support, but did not deliver most of the equipment until June. In early April, the Department considered providing devices for vulnerable children and those in priority year groups who did not have digital access. This would have involved providing 602,000 laptops or tablets and 100,000 routers in total. Due to the practical difficulty of supplying devices on this scale, the Department decided to focus on all children with a social worker and care leavers, alongside disadvantaged pupils in year 10 – a total of 220,000 laptops and tablets, and 50,000 routers. In total, it spent £95.5 million on IT equipment in the summer term. Most of the equipment was sourced from overseas. The Department received an initial 50,200 laptops and tablets by 11 May. It distributed most of the equipment to local authorities and academy trusts during June, meaning that many children may not have been able to access remote learning until well into the second half of the summer term. By the last full week of term, starting on 13 July, the Department had delivered 212,900 laptops and tablets, and 49,700 routers. It also trialled three schemes to provide enhanced internet access to children learning at home. The most successful approach involved mobile network operators providing extra data to existing customers at no additional cost. By January 2021, 10 operators had signed up for the scheme (paragraphs 2.18 to 2.23, and Figure 6).

19 Children had contrasting experiences in terms of the remote learning resources schools provided and the level of contact teachers maintained. A survey by Parentkind found that: 22% of parents were satisfied with the number of live online lessons provided by the school, while 50% were dissatisfied; and 38% were satisfied with the frequency of check-ins with parents, while 45% were dissatisfied. Resources that pupils accessed at a time of their choosing, rather than live online lessons, made up a significant part of schools' provision. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (the IFS) found that, at secondary level, the type of school-led provision varied by economic status. Some 82% of secondary pupils in private schools had received active help, such as online classes, or video and text chat. By contrast, 64% of secondary pupils in state schools from the richest one-fifth of households received active help, compared with 47% of pupils from the poorest one-fifth. Schools in more deprived areas may have held back from adopting online activities to limit the impact of pupils' unequal digital access at home (paragraphs 2.25 to 2.27).

20 Remote learning presented children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with a range of challenges. There is no consistent evidence about how long children spent on remote learning, with estimates ranging from around five hours to less than two hours a day on average. The barriers to effective home learning include having no quiet space to work, shortage of IT equipment and a lack of motivation. The IFS found that children from disadvantaged families had less access to study space and IT equipment, and the activities they did were less likely to benefit their educational attainment. It concluded that children from higher-income families spent around 30% more time on remote learning than children from lower-income families. It projected that, if normal schooling did not return until September and these rates of remote learning continued, the gap would represent 15 full school days (paragraphs 2.28 to 2.30).

Impact of disrupted schooling on children

21 The period of disrupted schooling is likely to have longer-term adverse effects on children's learning and development, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a growing body of evidence on the detrimental impact of the disruption to schooling. For example, in a July 2020 survey, NFER found that 98% of teachers considered their pupils were behind where they would normally expect them to be in their curriculum learning at the end of the 2019/20 academic year. On average, teachers estimated their pupils to be three months behind. Ofsted reports in late 2020 found primary school leaders most commonly identified that pupils had lost some of their knowledge and skills in reading, and that younger children were worst affected, with negative impacts on, for example, social and communication skills, speech and listening skills; in secondary schools, literacy and maths were also a concern. Early assessments expect disadvantaged children to have lost out disproportionately compared with their peers. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has projected that school closures in the 2019/20 academic year might widen the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers by between 11% and 75%, with a median estimate of 36%, likely reversing progress made to narrow the gap since 2011 (paragraphs 3.2 to 3.6).

22 In June 2020, the Department announced a £1 billion programme to help children and young people catch up on learning lost during the period of disrupted schooling. The programme consists of a £650 million universal catch-up premium allocated to schools on a per-pupil basis, and a £350 million National Tutoring Programme targeted at disadvantaged children. The National Tutoring Programme includes three elements: support for five- to 16-year-olds; a fund for students aged 16 to 19; and an early years language intervention. The support for children aged five to 16 comprises two schemes: a tuition partners scheme, which covers 75% of the costs of one-to-one and small-group tutoring; and an academic mentors scheme in disadvantaged schools. To get the schemes running quickly, the Department looked first to organisations with whom it had existing relationships to assess whether they had the capacity and capability to lead the schemes, rather than carrying out a competitive procurement exercise. For the tuition partners scheme, it appointed EEF, and for the academic mentors scheme, it appointed Teach First. In February 2021, the Department set out a further £700 million of funding to help children catch up on missed learning and development (paragraphs 3.7 to 3.10 and 3.19, and Figure 8).

23 The National Tutoring Programme schemes may not reach the most disadvantaged children. The Department initially expected the tuition partners scheme to support between 200,000 and 250,000 children. At February 2021, 125,200 children had been allocated a tutoring place across 3,984 schools. Although aimed at disadvantaged children, the Department has not specified what proportion of children accessing the scheme should be disadvantaged (for example, eligible for pupil premium funding). Schools are encouraged to focus on disadvantaged pupils, but are free to use their professional judgement to identify the children who would benefit most. Of the 125,200 children allocated a tutoring place, 41,100 had started to receive tuition, of whom 44% were eligible for pupil premium. This raises questions over the extent to which the scheme will reach the most disadvantaged children. Demand for the academic mentors scheme for disadvantaged schools has outstripped supply. At January 2021, Teach First had received requests for mentors from 1,789 eligible schools. By February 2021, it had placed mentors in 1,100 schools, meaning more than 600 schools that requested a mentor had not received one (paragraphs 3.15 and 3.16, and Figure 8).

Conclusion

24 The COVID-19 pandemic presented the Department with an unprecedented challenge in the form of wholesale disruption to schooling across the country. With no pre-existing plan for dealing with disruption on this scale, the Department's approach was largely reactive. In the early months of the pandemic, it allowed schools considerable discretion in how they supported in-school and remote learning. This helped to reduce the demands on schools at a very difficult time, but also contributed to wide variation in the education and support that children received.

25 The Department took action to support schools and pupils, including ensuring that schools remained open for vulnerable children and funding online resources for those learning at home. Aspects of its response, however, could have been done better or more quickly, and therefore been more effective in mitigating the learning pupils lost as a result of the disruption. For example, it could have set clear expectations for in-school and remote learning earlier and addressed the barriers that disadvantaged children faced more effectively. It is crucial that the Department now takes swift and effective action, including to learn wider lessons from its COVID-19 response, and to ensure that the catch-up learning programme is effective and reaches the children who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, such as those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Recommendations

26 We recommend that the Department should:

- a** **conduct a full evaluation of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic**, covering both the early stages and the more recent disruption to schooling, including seeking input from schools and other stakeholders;
- b** **put in place effective monitoring to track the longer-term impact of COVID-19 disruption on all pupils' development and attainment**, with a particular focus on vulnerable and disadvantaged children, and take action in light of the results;
- c** **work with Ofsted to reintroduce arrangements for obtaining independent assurance about schools' provision**, while recognising the additional pressures that schools are under during the pandemic;
- d** **act quickly on its early assessments of the catch-up programme during 2020/21**, to ensure that the funding is achieving value for money and the National Tutoring Programme schemes are reaching disadvantaged children as intended; and
- e** **identify lessons for remote and online learning from innovative practice developed during the pandemic** and take account of these in its programmes to improve the use of educational technology.