Introduction and background

The conditions children experience when learning at home during lockdown and school closures differ considerably. Before the pandemic, Ofcom estimated that up to 1.78 million children in the UK had no home access to a laptop, desktop, or tablet. Up to 559,000 children lived in households with no access to the internet, and up to 913,000 were only able to access the internet through a mobile network. A total of 1.6 million children in the UK also live in overcrowded homes, where they are likely to struggle to find space to work, and additional concerns have now been raised that some low-income households may struggle to pay for heating.

During the first lockdown and into the autumn term, disadvantaged pupils were more likely to lack access to appropriate devices or to the internet. When schools opened in September, those in disadvantaged areas were still more adversely affected, with all 10 local authorities with the highest number of lost learning days since September having an above average proportion of FSM eligible pupils. This pattern looks set to continue in the second round of school closures, although schools are now better prepared, and more pupils have access to devices and internet.

This research brief from the looks at the situation for pupils during the latest round of school closures, with survey data from Teacher Tapp on teachers and YouGov on parents.

Key points

Attendance in schools

- As in the previous lockdown, schools remain open for the children of key workers and for vulnerable pupils. The definition of vulnerable pupils has been expanded to include pupils without adequate study space or adequate equipment.
- At the beginning of the current lockdown, 11 per cent of parents reported their child was attending school full time, and a further 8 per cent were attending school for some of the week. The figure is much higher in primary schools, with 27 per cent of primary school age children reported to be at least partially attending, compared to just 8 per cent of secondary age children. Twenty per cent of children in middle class households were reportedly attending school, compared to 16 per cent of those in working class homes.
- Fifty-six per cent of primary schools had 5 per cent or lower attendance in March, compared to just 11 per cent in January 2021. In January, 60 per cent of secondary schools had attendance of lower than 5 per cent, compared to 88 per cent last March.
- Parents who had not sent their children to school in March, but who are now doing so, cited work-related reasons, including their status as a key/critical worker (26%), a change in working status (14%), or a less flexible employer (8%). Thirteen per cent reported that they had been struggling to combine support for home learning with other responsibilities.
- Although schools were open in the autumn term, there was frequent disruption in the form of self-isolation periods, necessitating some remote learning. Schools in disadvantaged areas were much more susceptible, with secondary school pupils in some local areas losing up to 13 days.
- Year 11 students in state schools suffered much more disruption up to November than those in private schools. While just over half (51%) of private school teachers report being fully open to Year 11 during the autumn term, this was just 33% for state schools, and 28% for schools with the highest levels of deprivation.

The digital divide

- Overall, 77 per cent of parents report having enough internet enabled devices suitable for online learning, with 17 per cent reporting that they have some, but not enough
Learning and support at home

- In the current lockdown, schools are making much greater use of online platforms and live online interaction with pupils.
- Fifty-four per cent of teachers are using online videoconferencing, compared to just 4 per cent in the first lockdown. The use of other online methods has also risen, with 41 per cent now using online video clips compared to only 19 per cent in March.
- While two thirds of children in the first weeks of last spring’s lockdown were receiving no live or recorded lessons, now just 10 per cent of children are reported to receive no such learning.
- Parents report that the volume of work completed by children has increased substantially in the current lockdown, with the proportion of primary pupils doing more than 5 hours a day of learning rising from 11 per cent to 23 per cent, and for secondary students from 19 per cent to 45 per cent.
- However, while provision in the state sector has changed substantially, it has been outpaced by the private sector. For example, 86 per cent of private schools are now using online videoconferencing, compared to 50 per cent of state schools, a gap of 36 percentage points. In March, the figures were 28 per cent for private schools and 2 per cent for state schools. Where schools are not delivering live lessons, it is likely this is because they have encountered barriers, including resources, and their pupils’ access to appropriate technology.
- There are large socio-economic gaps in terms of hours spent learning. Forty per cent of children in middle class homes are currently doing over 5 hours a day, compared to 26 per cent of those in working class households. There are also significant differences between the state and private sector. Seventy-six per cent of teachers in state secondary schools said their average Year 8 students were spending 3 or more hours a day learning, compared to 90 per cent in private schools.
- Forty-one per cent of parents with children learning at home report that they have not very much time or no time at all to help their children with online learning, with parents of secondary age children having less time. Twenty-eight per cent of those on low incomes were finding home learning more difficult in this lockdown, compared to 15 per cent of those on the highest incomes.

The attainment gap

- Over half (55%) of teachers at the least affluent state schools report a lower than normal standard of work returned by pupils since the shutdown, compared to 41 per cent at the most affluent state schools and 30 per cent at private schools.
- Twenty-four per cent of teachers in private schools said all their students have returned work set, compared to just 4 per cent in state schools. This is a larger gap than in March, when 11 per cent of teachers in private schools reported this, compared to just 2 per cent in state schools.
- Forty-nine per cent of teachers in the least advantaged schools said that the lockdown would cause a substantial increase in the attainment gap, compared to 25 per cent in the most advantaged state schools and 8 per cent of those in private schools.
- Teachers were asked what would help disadvantaged pupils most of the next 6-8 weeks. Fifty-two per cent cited a faster rollout of laptops as the single most helpful intervention and 24 per cent cited measures related to internet access.

Recommendations

- Laptops, internet dongles, and other learning devices should continue to be rolled out at speed through the government programme.
- Educational websites and online learning services should be ‘zero rated’ by internet data providers.
- The cumulative impact of the new school closures on top of 9 months of disrupted schooling on learning and the attainment gap is likely to be enormous. Schools should receive a £750m ‘boost’ for their disadvantaged pupils via the pupil premium, as part of a new package of catch-up funding.
- The pupil premium should, at the very least, be protected in per head terms from 2022/23.
- Funding for the National Tutoring Programme should be extended in the next Comprehensive Spending Review, to establish it as a long-term contributor to narrowing the attainment gap.
- Pupils beginning post-16 courses this autumn are at a critical stage in their education, and will have faced huge disruption to their learning, including the cancellation of their GCSEs. There needs to be a renewed focus on 16-19 year olds, with eligibility for the National Tutoring Programme extended to students in post-16 education, alongside targeted funding support.
- Assessment for A Levels and GCSEs and other qualifications in 2021 must be as robust, respected, and equitable as possible in the circumstances, with a focus on facilitating progression.
- Despite the huge efforts by schools and teachers, nothing can replace face to face teaching and learning. If partial re-openings are considered, vulnerable and disadvantaged learners should be prioritised.

The full document can be downloaded from: