Institute for Public Policy Research

IPPR

THE 'NEW NORMAL'

THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION
AFTER COVID–19

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ABOUT IPPR

The progressive policy think tank

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SUMMARY

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented disruption to schools and learners in England. Schools were closed from March 2020, with only the children of key workers and those identified as vulnerable being invited to attend. Most children in England were instead expected to learn remotely, with most schools providing learning materials for home use and/or digital lessons. External exams did not take place in the 2019/20 academic year and performance league tables for the year will not be published. Meanwhile, Ofsted inspections and reports were suspended throughout the pandemic.

There has been significant focus on 'recovering' the existing system but there is also an opportunity to 'build back better'. There is a growing sense of urgency about the need to recover the education system and 'lost learning' among students after the pandemic. But less has been said about the pandemic as an opportunity for us to reimagine our education system going forward. England's education system undoubtedly has strengths that we must seek to retain in the future. But it also suffers from a number of longstanding weaknesses that pre-date the pandemic. The pandemic provides us with an opportunity to stand back and reflect on these weaknesses. How can we 'build back better'? What do we want the 'new normal' in schools to look like? And what do we need to do now to achieve that?

This research has identified three areas where the pandemic has the potential to open up new conversations about the future of schooling in England. These are set out in more detail in the chapters that follow but can be summarised as:

- a conversation about how our education system can prepare children for life, not just exams
- a conversation about where and how learning takes place – as well as who is involved in it
- a conversation about the need to tackle inequalities outside, as well as inside, the classroom.

CONVERSATION 1: PREPARING CHILDREN FOR LIFE, NOT JUST EXAMS

We must take the opportunity provided by the pandemic to reassess the role of accountability and assessment in education. In recent years, England has embraced an increasingly narrow academic curriculum combined with high-stakes assessment and accountability. The pandemic provides us with an opportunity to evaluate whether we want to revert to the same systems of assessment and accountability after the pandemic. Most system stakeholders agree that there is a place for both external assessment and accountability. But the evidence also suggests that the status quo results in too many unintended consequences – in particular, 'teaching to the test' rather than focusing on learning in the round, and gaming the system (such as 'off-rolling' or narrowing the curriculum) – with limited evidence that it results in better outcomes.

Where next?
Curriculum, accountability and assessment
As a first step, we argue that:

- The government should urgently review the publication of school performance tables, moving to a multi-year model to avoid the high-stakes win/lose dynamic of the current system.
- The government should undertake a review of assessment and accountability mechanisms across our education system in light of the pandemic (in particular key stage 2 standard assessment tests and GCSEs) and investigate the use of other accountability mechanisms, including via the submission of school-assessed performance and a robust school-to-school peer-review model.

CONVERSATION 2: WHERE AND HOW LEARNING TAKES PLACE
The pandemic has completely changed where and how learning takes place, with digital technology being at the centre of teaching and learning for the first time. This has increased interest in how technology can improve learning both inside and outside the classroom after the pandemic. Our research highlights four opportunities:

- enhanced teaching in the classroom
- improved learning outside the classroom
- personalised education where possible
- reduced teacher workload.

However, to achieve this we will have to: ensure that every young person has access to digital technology; understand and spread best practice in using technology to improve learning; and provide teachers with support in utilising technology in schools.

The pandemic has also fundamentally shifted who is involved in education. Formal learning primarily involves students and teachers. The pandemic has fundamentally changed this, with children having been at home and parents, on the whole, taking a much greater role in shaping what, when and how their children learned. While many working parents will be relieved that children are now back to school, most want a bigger role in their children's education in the future. This should be embraced, as most studies conclude that increased parental engagement leads to better outcomes. We must take the opportunity we have been given to reset the relationship between schools, parents and their children.

Where next?
Digital technology and blended learning
As a first step, we argue that:

- The government's digital strategy in schools should be focussed on four key objectives: enhancing teaching in the classroom; improving learning outside the classroom; personalising education where possible; and reducing teacher workload.
- The government should create a national transformation fund and support unit, with a focus on spreading best practice, supporting procurement and implementation, and training teachers to adapt to new ways of working.
- The government should use the pandemic as an opportunity to end the digital divide – with 1 million children still without access to the internet at home – by providing schools with the funding to ensure that all young people have the infrastructure required to benefit from technology-enabled schooling.

Where next?

Parental engagement

As a first step, we argue that:

- The government should work with schools and parents, drawing on Parentkind's 'Blueprint for Parent-Friendly Schools', to set out an ambitious new parental engagement strategy.

- The government should commit to building on Ofsted's Parent View survey to create a regular published parent survey to embed parent voice and transparency in the system.

- The government should provide funding to ensure that all teachers have access to training on effective parental engagement and all schools provide access to support activities for parents.

CONVERSATION 3: TACKLING INEQUALITIES BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

The pandemic has highlighted that schools will have to reach 'beyond the classroom' to narrow educational inequalities. We went into the pandemic with yawning inequalities in educational outcomes. The pandemic is likely to have widened this 'attainment gap'. Recent government efforts – including the government's Covid-19 recovery plan – largely focus on academic support to close this gap. But the pandemic has demonstrated that the government needs to take inequalities beyond the classroom just as seriously. Such inequalities include disparities in parental support, the home environment, access to learning resources and exposure to vulnerabilities such as mental health problems (either children's own or their families'), violence, neglect, abuse, bereavement and caring responsibilities. This demands that schools work with other public services to address the barriers to learning 'beyond the classroom' that children experience.

Where next?

Narrowing inequalities

As a first step, we argue that:

- The government should endorse 'parity of esteem' between academic and wellbeing outcomes in schools. This should involve supporting schools to adopt a 'whole-school' approach to wellbeing and mandating an annual wellbeing assessment for every student and teacher across the country. This should form part of any accountability structures going forward.

- The government should revisit the vision behind community schools and set out a national entitlement, alongside additional funding for schools, to the core elements of this, including: an extended school day (pre- and post-school activity); a comprehensive programme of parental engagement and activities; and, crucially, embedded mental health and social work support.

To help take these conversations forward, Big Change and IPPR are working together to establish a new kind of Co-Mission on Education and Learning. This will put the users of education – particularly young people – at the heart of the change process. It will aim to bridge the divides within education policy, align stakeholders around an ambitious vision and pave the way for long-term system change. In the coming months we will be working with key groups from across the sector to take this forward in the hope that it will help to build a better future for young people in England.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented disruption to schools and learners in England. Schools were closed from March 2020, with only the children of key workers and those identified as vulnerable being invited to attend. Most children in England were instead expected to learn remotely, with most schools providing learning materials for home use and/or digital lessons (Cullinane and Montacute 2020). In addition, external exams did not take place in the 2019/20 academic year: standard assessment tests (SATs) for key stage 1 (KS1) and key stage 2 (KS2) were cancelled, while GCSEs and A-levels were ultimately replaced with the submission of centre-assessed grades based on school-moderated teacher assessment. Meanwhile, Ofsted inspections and reports were suspended throughout the pandemic and performance league tables for the 2019/20 academic year will not be published (DfE 2020a).

There is a growing sense of urgency about the need to 'recover' the education system and 'lost learning' among students after the pandemic. The government committed to ensuring that all year groups were back in school in September 2020 (DfE 2020a). There has also been a significant policy debate about when and how existing exams and accountability mechanisms (for example, Ofsted inspections) should be reinstated. As it stands, the government has made no announcements about exams for the academic year that has just started (2020/21), but has confirmed that Ofsted will now resume visiting schools (ibid). There has also been a discussion about the recovery of 'lost learning' among students. This has resulted in the government announcing a £1 billion 'catch-up fund' to help provide additional tuition to those students at risk of falling behind (DfE 2020b).

But less has been said about the pandemic as an opportunity for us to reimagine our education system going forward. England's education system undoubtedly has strengths that we must seek to retain and build on in the future. But it also suffers from a number of longstanding weaknesses that pre-date the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic – and the disruption that it has led to – provides us with an opportunity to stand back and reflect on these weaknesses. How can we 'build back better'? What do we want the 'new normal' in schools to look like? And what do we need to do now to achieve that? As the writer Arundhati Roy has said, "pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (Roy 2020).

INFORMATION BOX: FIVE BIG PRE-PANDEMIC CHALLENGES

1. **Too many young people leave school without the skills they need.**
Almost one in five 18-year-olds – around 100,000 students – left
school in 2018 without the government's benchmark of five good
GCSEs. This rises to 37 per cent of children receiving free school
meals and a shocking 45 per cent of those with special educational
needs (Children's Commissioner 2019). Furthermore, even for those
who do achieve good qualifications, many employers feel that they
nevertheless lack some vital skills for the workplace (CBI 2019).

2. **Progress has started to stall – particularly in narrowing the attainment
gap.** Closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged students[1] and
their peers has been a core focus of education policy for successive
governments. Despite this, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) has
revealed that progress on narrowing the gap has ground to a halt since
2017/18, with emerging evidence that it is starting to widen once again
(Hutchinson et al 2020). In its 2019 annual report, the EPI forecast that
it would take 500 years to close the gap by the end of secondary school
based on existing trends. In its most recent report (for 2020), it made
an even more stark warning: based on the current trend it would not
close at all (ibid).

3. **We are outperformed by many of our international competitors.** The UK
consistently scores above average in the Programme for International
Student Assessment (PISA) tests – run by the Organisation for Economic
Co-operation and Development (OECD) – across reading, maths and
science. However, despite improved performance in 2018 compared
with the tests in 2015, our scores were exceeded in at least two subjects
by countries including Canada, Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong, Japan and
Singapore (PISA 2018a). Gaps across a broader set of skills could be
even wider, with the UK opting out of PISA's new creativity rankings
making comparison hard (ibid).

4. **Our children are among the least satisfied and healthy in the
developed world.** According to a PISA survey conducted by the OECD,
students in England are, on average, less satisfied with their lives than
those in other OECD countries (PISA 2018b). They are also more likely to
experience negative emotions, including "sometimes or always feeling
worried, miserable and sad" (ibid). Our children's physical health
is also poorer than those in other countries, with the Nuffield Trust
concluding that "young people aged between 10 and 24 in the UK now
experience worse health and wellbeing outcomes than those in many
other similar countries" (Shah et al 2019).

5. **We have a recruitment and retention crisis among teachers.** In recent
years, the overall number of teachers has not risen in line with increasing
student numbers. The government has missed its recruitment target for
trainee teachers every year since 2011 (Sibieta 2020). A staggering one in
five new teachers leave the profession in their first two years, and four
in 10 leave after five years (ibid). Recruitment challenges are worse in
more disadvantaged areas. Workload and a desire for a better work–life
balance are often cited as a reason for those leaving teaching (NAHT 2017).

Many of these trends are longstanding but have also been exacerbated by,
and have intersected with, recent cuts in education spending and a range
of policy reforms pursued over the past decade (Britton et al 2019).

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1 We define a student as 'disadvantaged' if they have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the
past six years.

This paper sets out to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic has already shifted, and could in the future shift, the debate about education in this country. For the purposes of the paper, our focus is schooling (ages 4–18) in England. As part of this project, we have conducted significant research over the past few months, including:

- more than 30 semi-structured interviews with leading stakeholders from across the education system
- a review of the many emerging sources of data (in particular polling) about the pandemic and how it has been experienced – this includes new polling from Teacher Tapp and Parentkind, the results of which are published in this paper
- a literature review of the main research that has been published on schooling during and after the pandemic.

This research has identified three areas where the pandemic has the potential to open up new conversations about – and bridge divides over – the future of schooling in England. These are set out in more detail in the chapters that follow, but can be summarised as:

- a conversation about how our education system can prepare children for life, not just exams
- a conversation about where and how learning takes place – as well as who is involved in it
- a conversation about the need to tackle inequalities outside, as well as inside, the classroom.

This is the start, rather than the conclusion, of the debate about the 'new normal' in schools. This paper sets out the opportunity we see across the above three areas of education policy. We also look, where possible, to draw some tentative policy conclusions to help shape the policy debate in the months and years to come. However, we do not claim that this research is the final say on these issues. As a nation, we are at the start of the process of understanding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our society. It will take time – and distance from the events of this year – for us to collectively understand what has happened and how to move forward.

To help take these conversations forward, Big Change and IPPR are working together to establish a new kind of Co-Mission on Education and Learning. This will put the users of education – particularly young people – at the heart of the change process. It will aim to bridge the divides within education policy, align stakeholders around an ambitious vision and pave the way for long-term system change. In the coming months we will be working with key groups from across the sector to take this forward in the hope that it will help to build a better future for young people in England.

CONVERSATION 1

PREPARING CHILDREN FOR LIFE, NOT JUST EXAMS

In recent years, the UK has embraced an increasingly narrow academic curriculum combined with high-stakes assessment and accountability. Since 2010 there has been a move towards a knowledge-rich curriculum across all subjects, with a particular focus on academic subjects such as maths, English and science. This has been combined with an increasing focus on high-stakes examinations – SATs, GCSEs and A-levels – as the dominant feature of robust accountability structures, with the aim of driving up standards. These structures include the publication of data from standardised national testing in the form of school league tables[2] and a programme of Ofsted inspections. Failure to meet the standards expected under this system can result in forced academisation (for maintained schools), while academies can be rebrokered.[3]

The pandemic has temporarily dismantled much of this system. As a result of school closures, external exams did not take place in the 2019/20 academic year. SATs for KS1 and KS2 were cancelled, while GCSEs and A-levels were ultimately replaced with the submission of centre-assessed grades based on school-moderated teacher assessment and an internal 'ranking' exercise (these grades were originally subjected to national statistical standardisation but this was ultimately scrapped) (DfE 2020c). Alongside this, Ofsted inspections and reports were suspended, with the exception of urgent inspections in response to specific safeguarding concerns, and league tables for the 2019/20 academic year will not be published. The government has made no announcements about exams for the current academic year (2020/21), but Ofsted is now resuming visiting schools, with routine inspections starting again in January 2021 (DfE 2020a).
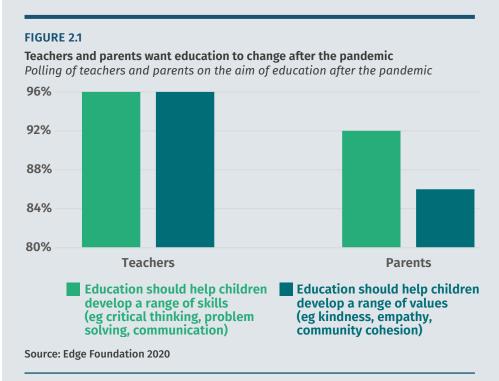
There is now an opportunity to evaluate whether we want to revert to the same systems of assessment and accountability after the Covid-19 pandemic. The has forced us to focus on the elements of our curriculum, assessment regime and accountability structures that really matter. We now have an opportunity to take a step back to reassess our existing system and determine which elements we want to put back in place after the pandemic and which elements we want to reimagine. This will involve confronting some challenging questions: What knowledge, skills, attitudes and values do young people need to have? How can schools help support young people to achieve this? And what is the role of assessment and accountability within this?

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2   For primary schools, data from KS2 SATs is published. This includes: the percentage of students meeting the 'expected standard'; progress scores (currently measured from the end of KS1, to be replaced by progress from reception baseline testing) and descriptions; the percentage of students achieving the 'higher standard'; and average scores in reading and maths. For secondary schools, data from GCSEs is published. This includes: a Progress 8 score, calculating the progress that students have made since the end of KS2 in up to eight subjects; an Attainment 8 score, measuring attainment across the same eight subjects; the percentage of students achieving grade 5 or above in English and maths; and data relating to the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) group of qualifications (English language and literature, maths, the sciences, geography or history and a language).

3   The process by which one academy trust is asked by the regional schools commissioner to transfer one, some or all of its academies to another academy trust.

INFORMATION BOX: TIME TO LOOK AT THE CURRICULUM AGAIN?

The pressures created by the Covid-19 pandemic and school closures risk a further narrowing of the curriculum. There is a danger that, in the wake of the pandemic, schools narrow the curriculum further in order to catch up on 'lost learning' (Turner 2020). However, there is a growing consensus, including in our interviews with stakeholders from across the sector, that this would be undesirable. This is backed up by polling conducted by YouGov, which found that teachers and parents want the pandemic to lead to a "much broader and more rounded education" (Edge Foundation 2020: 25) (see also figure 2.1). Given this, it is heartening to see the government advising schools to continue to offer a "broad and balanced" curriculum (DfE 2020d). However, our qualitative research highlighted an opportunity to reduce the amount of content students are currently required to learn within individual subjects. This would allow for more scope for deep learning as well as a greater breadth across the curriculum as a whole (Kingsnorth 2019).

FIGURE 2.1

Teachers and parents want education to change after the pandemic
Polling of teachers and parents on the aim of education after the pandemic

Source: Edge Foundation 2020

The pandemic could create space for a conversation about the skills young people need for the future of work. The UK is facing the worst jobs crisis in a generation, with young people likely to be particularly hard hit (Quilter-Pinner et al 2020). This crisis will reinforce pre-existing trends such as automation, environmental breakdown and globalisation that are reshaping the future jobs market. The evidence suggests that the following will be particularly crucial in preparing for this future: interpersonal skills, such as collaboration and coordination; higher-order cognitive skills, including fluency of ideas and originality; and systems skills, for example judgement and decision-making (Bakhshi et al 2017). As Andreas Schleicher, director for the Directorate of Education and Skills at the OECD, argues, this demands that the education system rethinks the curriculum because success is "no longer about reproducing content knowledge, but about extrapolating from what we know and applying that knowledge to novel situations" (Schleicher 2010).

There is a way forward that respects the evidence supporting current approaches and the value of academic subjects such as maths and English, while embracing the need for a broader curriculum. The two main camps on curriculum – 'traditionalists' who focus on academic rigour and knowledge, and 'progressives' who argue for a more rounded and skills-based approach – have historically been seen as mutually exclusive. This supposed dichotomy is unfortunately reinforced by a lot of current discourse. However, many educators agree that this binary is far too simplistic. Writing for Policy Exchange, Chris Husbands notes that "most serious thinkers about the curriculum have described the debate between knowledge- and skill-led approaches as being what Christine Counsell describes as a 'distracting dichotomy'" (Husbands 2016: 47). In truth, high levels of knowledge and high levels of skill are intertwined. Recognising this opens up the space for a more nuanced and productive conversation going forward.

Virtually all system stakeholders agree that there is a place both for testing and for an accountability framework. The debate about the role of assessment and accountability is polarised. But there are some areas of broad agreement. Most agree that teacher assessment and feedback are a vital part of high-quality teaching and learning. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) summarises purposeful teacher assessment as "not simply … about providing some assessment data for a termly 'data capture'; it has value as a learning tool, and the data generated helps diagnosis about learning and informs future lesson planning" (EEF 2020a). Likewise, most agree that there is a role for an accountability framework within the school system, to ensure quality and safety. For example, the NAHT recognises that Ofsted performs a critical function by identifying failure in the system (ibid).

However, there are significant downsides when standardised assessment and high-stakes accountability structures dominate the system. There is evidence that standardised assessment for the purpose of high-stakes accountability leads to 'teaching to the test' rather than a focus on learning in the round. For example, research conducted by University College London (UCL) found that 74 per cent of headteachers agreed with the statement: "The content of SATs means we have to teach to the test" (Bradbury 2019). Likewise, there is evidence that it can result in perverse incentives to game the system, including a narrowing of the curriculum and a focus on memorising material instead of critically engaging with it (Long and Danechi 2020). These challenges are particularly acute in schools with disadvantaged students where the pressure to 'narrow the gap' is greater (Koretz 2017). In the most extreme cases there is evidence that this can contribute to excluding and 'off-rolling' low-performing students as they approach GCSEs (Long and Danechi 2020). The risks of this system are particularly acute as children return to school after lockdown. Evidence from ImpactEd shows that 57 were concerned about 'having lots of pressure to catch up' (ImpactEd 2020a). There is also evidence that high-stakes accountability is contributing to the teacher recruitment and retention challenges experienced across the country (NFER 2016).

The evidence that this system results in better outcomes for students is limited. As the National Audit Office has highlighted, while Ofsted can demonstrate the extent to which it is inspecting schools during the statutory timeframe, the quality of its inspections and reports, and the views of headteachers about its work, it "does not know whether its school inspections are having the intended impact" (NAO 2018: 9). There is also growing evidence in the public service literature that while accountability regimes – such as Ofsted in education and the Care Quality Commission in the NHS – can raise the performance of substandard service providers, they cannot drive excellence (Ham 2014). This is because they rely on compliance rather than creating a commitment to innovation and excellence (and in

some cases they actively stifle these qualities by disempowering frontline staff and leaders). This observation was reinforced throughout our qualitative research for this paper, as was the barrier that our current regime constitutes to collaboration.

The UK is an outlier in this respect, with other countries taking a more balanced approach. Compared with other high-performing school systems such as those in Finland, the Netherlands and Singapore, the weight given to assessments (SATs and GCSEs) in judging school performance is distinctive. There is also some evidence which suggests that the UK's reliance on hard levers of accountability – instead of softer 'improvement' levers such as leadership, culture and training – is disproportionate compared with other countries. The OECD has noted that: "Jurisdictions such as Ontario in Canada, Finland, Japan and New Zealand that place greater emphasis on the more professional forms of work organisation tend to pursue more collegial forms of teacher and school-leader accountability" (Schleicher 2018b). These approaches may include:

- a greater focus on teacher qualifications and training
- a more supportive inspection regime
- a sampling approach to examinations
- greater use of coursework/projects
- quality-assured peer-assessment regimes.

This debate will undoubtedly remain polarised at the extremes but there is a growing appetite for a discussion in the middle. Assessment and accountability remains one of the most polarising elements of our education system. This was clearly demonstrated by our qualitative research, with some key stakeholders hoping that the Covid-19 hiatus creates an opportunity to scrap high-stakes assessment and accountability entirely, while others were clear that quickly re-establishing these elements of the system will be crucial for school standards going forward. However, within this range we believe there is a growing majority who favour a wider discussion of the role and potential reform of assessment and accountability in light of the pandemic (Müller and Goldenberg 2020). This builds on a pre-existing movement in this direction, which has even been signalled by Ofsted itself in its recent Education Inspection Framework (EIF) (Ofsted 2019) and is backed up by the views of parents, with the latest Parentkind survey finding that more than four-fifths of parents believe that "a good education for my child goes beyond exam results" (Parentkind, forthcoming).

WHERE NEXT?
Curriculum, accountability and assessment
We now have an opportunity for a period of reflection on school curriculum, accountability and assessment in England. This should be used to pursue a national conversation about the purpose of assessment and accountability within our education system. This conversation must put young people – as well as parents and teachers – at its heart. There must be a recognition of the need to balance high academic standards with wider skills that young people need to thrive in life.

As a first step, we argue that:
- The government should urgently review the publication of school performance tables, moving to a multi-year model and including contextual information as a minimum in order to avoid the high-stakes win/lose dynamic of the current system.
- The government should build on its announcement that KS1 SATs will be made non-compulsory from 2023 by reviewing the role of assessment and accountability mechanisms across our education system in light of the pandemic (in particular KS2 SATs and GCSEs) and investigate the use of other accountability mechanisms, including via the submission of school-assessed performance and a robust school-to-school peer-review model.

CONVERSATION 2

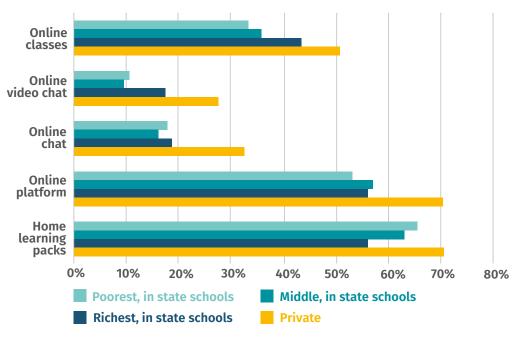## WHERE AND HOW LEARNING TAKES PLACE

The pandemic has completely changed where and how learning takes place. With schools having been closed to all but the children of key workers and those deemed vulnerable by schools, from March 2020 up until this September, over the past few months most children were studying remotely from home for the first time (Cullinane and Montacute 2020). While many were taking part in online lessons, the evidence suggests that most learning was independent (for example, through existing digital content or learning packs) (see figures 3.1 and 3.2). This is a complete shift in where and how learning occurs. Two themes are particularly interesting:

- the significant role that digital technology has played in the educational response to the Covid-19 pandemic
- the greater role parents played in their children's education during the lockdown.

Online classes made up only a small proportion of teaching and learning at primary level during lockdown
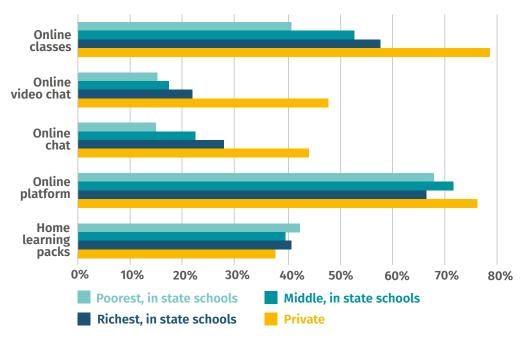*Children's daily learning time during lockdown (primary)*

Source: Andrew et al 2020

FIGURE 3.2

Online classes made up only a small proportion of teaching and learning at secondary level during lockdown
Children's daily learning time during lockdown (secondary)

Source: Andrew et al 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic has put digital technology at the heart of schooling for the first time. Technology has transformed the way virtually every part of our society works. From how we bank to how we shop, technology is now omnipresent in our day-to-day lives. By contrast, before the pandemic, education – and particularly schooling – largely remained the same. Technology had a presence in our schools but was still on the periphery of teaching and learning in the majority of schools. But Covid-19 has changed this as the lockdown enforced remote learning across all age groups. Around half of students say they benefitted from online teaching (although there were significant variations across groups) (NFER 2020). Technology has also been crucial for ongoing communication between schools and students throughout the pandemic. For the first time, digital technology is a crucial enabler for teaching and learning.

There could be a bigger role for technology in education – both inside and outside the classroom – after the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, many experts and teachers were sceptical of the potential for digital technology to support learning. However, our qualitative research suggests that the experience of the pandemic has catalysed a re-evaluation of the role that technology could play in teaching and learning. This is partly because of the need to plan for the possibility of future lockdowns, but it also because more schools have seen the potential for technology to enable better learning. There is also an appetite for investigating this question at a national level, building on the government's recent education technology (ed-tech) strategy (DfE 2019a) and its investment in Oak National Academy to provide comprehensive digital teaching content (DfE 2020e).

This renewed interest demands that policymakers confront a history of mixed results in ed-tech. Despite growing optimism about technology in education, the history of ed-tech demands a degree of caution in pursuing this agenda.

Most studies have found either no evidence of improved educational outcomes as a result of digital innovation, or a small positive impact (Higgins et al 2012). For example, the OECD found that there were "no appreciable improvements in student achievement in reading, mathematics or science in the countries that had invested heavily in ICT [information and communications technology] for education" (OECD 2015). However, the accumulation of evaluations of individual technology-enabled interventions suggests that, used selectively, digital innovation can help to drive improvement (EEF 2019a). The key takeaway from this literature is clear: we must approach technology as a means rather than an end. The question is not: Should we use digital technology? It is: When and how should we use digital technology to best effect?

INFORMATION BOX: WHY, WHEN AND HOW SHOULD WE USE TECHNOLOGY?

- **A greater focus on technology is a prerequisite for narrowing the digital divide in our economy.** While there is limited evidence that greater access to technology can improve academic outcomes, it can increase digital usage, confidence and literacy (Shank 2019). This is crucial because young people are growing up during an unprecedented digital revolution where digital literacy will be essential for future job prospects. However, while computer science and information technology (IT) have become mandatory, the available data suggests that almost half of children still only experience an hour a week of computer use in the curriculum (The Royal Society 2012). This must change.

- **Technology, when used properly, can free up teacher time and help us address our workforce crisis.** There is a staffing crisis in education, with schools struggling with recruitment and retention (Sibieta 2020). Surveys suggest that the most significant concern for teachers is workload and in particular the burden of administration (NASUWT, 2019). Greater use of technology has the potential to automate precisely such tasks, including data processing, assessment and marking (Baker et al 2013). For example, in China, up to one in four schools now use artificial intelligence to streamline the process of marking exams (ibid). However, to achieve this, it must be properly implemented, and teachers must be supported to use the technology.

- **Technology can enhance traditional ways of teaching.** A synthesis of 45 meta-analyses published since 1990 indicates that technology is best used as a supplement or enhancement to traditional teaching rather than as a replacement for it (Higgins et al 2012). The EEF has found that it can add significant value by: improving the quality of explanations and modelling; increasing and improving opportunities for students to practise through digital quizzes and games; and improving assessment and feedback (EEF 2019a).

- **Technology can help personalise teaching and help overcome the challenges of a one-size-fits-all system.** The practical constraints of our education system – in particular the number of students and teachers – have limited the ability of schools to offer support to students that is personalised to their needs. Technology – in particular rules-based computer programs and, increasingly, adaptive learning systems – can help overcome this by: curating and staggering learning materials based on a student's needs; diagnosing strengths, weaknesses or gaps in a student's knowledge; and providing automated but tailored feedback (Baker et al 2013).

- **Technology can expand the support children get outside of the classroom by providing higher-quality out-of-hours education.** The pandemic has shown that remote learning as a replacement for school is not desirable. But technology can help students to study more, and more effectively, outside of school hours, essentially creating a blended learning model (EEF 2019a). One such model is 'flipped learning', where students are introduced to learning material prior to lessons, which can then be used to target specific challenges or questions. The EEF has found significant improvement in results for maths using this approach (ibid).

WHERE NEXT?
Digital technology and blended learning

The pandemic has demonstrated that there is a case for a balanced but bolder embrace of technology in education in the years to come. But the evidence is clear that this agenda must be ruthlessly focussed on *when* and *how* digital technology can be used to improve outcomes for learners and teachers. We must not simply assume that going digital by default will transform outcomes alone.

As a first step, we argue that:

- The government's digital strategy in schools should be focussed on four key objectives: enhancing teaching in the classroom; improving learning outside the classroom; personalising education where possible; and reducing teacher workload.

- The government should create a national transformation fund and support unit to help schools push forward with this agenda, with a focus on basing changes on global best practice, supporting procurement and implementation, and training teachers to adapt to new ways of working.

- The government should use the pandemic as an opportunity to end the digital divide – with 1 million children still without access to the internet at home (Edge Foundation 2020) – by providing schools with the funding to ensure that all young people have the infrastructure required to benefit from technology-enabled schooling.

The pandemic has also fundamentally shifted who is involved in education, with parents taking a bigger role. Formal learning primarily involves students and teachers. Before the pandemic, parent involvement was largely confined to attending parents' evenings, engaging in end-of-term reports and providing support with learning at home throughout the year. The pandemic fundamentally changed this, with children at home during lockdown and parents, on the whole, taking a much greater role in shaping what, when and how their children learned. For example, polling of parents has found that nearly half of all parents were supervising their child's learning during lockdwon for more than 75 per cent of the day (Parentkind 2020). Overall, it found that more than half (53 per cent) felt more engaged in their child's learning compared with before lockdown, with only 10 per cent less engaged (ibid).
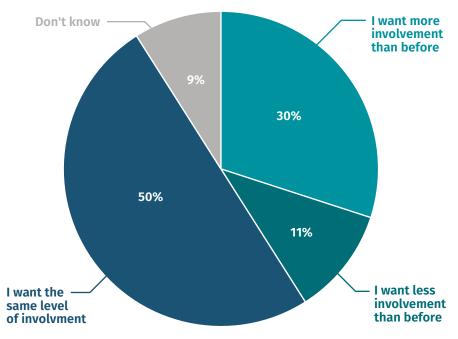
The evidence suggests that most parents want to continue to be more involved in education after the pandemic. Many parents will be relieved now that children returned to school this September, given the challenge of balancing work and home life. However, the available data suggests that many parents would like a more active role in their children's education after the pandemic. They do not want to revert to the status quo. For example, new polling from Parentkind found that a third of parents wanted more involvement in their child's education after lockdown, compared with around one in 10 who wanted less (see figure 3.3)

(Parentkind, forthcoming). Indeed, this is a somewhat consistent finding over time, with a majority of parents historically saying that they want more information from their child's school and want to take a bigger role in their child's education.

The vast majority of parents want to be as or more involved with their children's education after the pandemic

Parent responses to "When schools return to normal do you think your level of involvement will change compared to before?"

Source: Parentkind forthcoming

This should be embraced, as most studies conclude that increased parental engagement leads to better outcomes. Studies show that parental involvement in a young person's education can have a big impact on achievement even after all other factors shaping attainment have been controlled for (DfE 2010a). This result is found consistently across age groups, social classes and ethnic groups (ibid). Indeed, some research concludes that parental engagement is a more important factor in determining educational outcomes than other traditionally recognised factors such as school quality. The evidence particularly shows that parents with higher expectations, who set structures and encourage their children to do their homework, who develop and maintain conversations with schools and who learn with their children (particularly regarding reading) tend to support more and better learning (EEF 2019b).

However, genuinely embedding parental engagement in education will be challenging. This is partly because there are significant barriers to participation for many parents, notably the challenges associated with fitting engagement with schooling around work (EEF 2019b). Parents often also feel intimidated by schools, particularly if they themselves do not understand the content their children are learning, or if they feel that schools are judgemental about their parenting. These barriers are significantly greater for some 'hard to reach' groups and families with lower incomes (which can result in differences in participation across income groups). But the barriers to meaningful engagement are not just on the side of parents. Schools are often not very good at creating meaningful and consistent

ways for parents to engage productively in their child's education and taking parental needs into account. For example, polling by Parentkind has consistently found that parents do not feel like they are properly consulted or included in their child's education (Parentkind 2017).

INFORMATION BOX: PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT: WHAT WORKS?

The available evidence suggests that the most promising way of driving better outcomes through parental engagement is through supporting parents to engage with their child's education outside of school (in the home). Reforms should focus on: ensuring more regular and effective two-way communication; training for both teachers and parents, which can improve outcomes; and, in the case of difficult-to-reach communities, putting home visits in place (EEF 2019b).

The evidence suggests three big lessons:

- **Regular, personalised and two-way communication works.** Polling of parents suggests that they do not feel that communication with schools is good enough. As the EEF has argued, "school communications with parents are likely to be more effective if they are personalised, linked to learning, and framed positively" (EEF 2019b: 19). Particularly key is communicating crucial information on homework, completion, attendance and grades on a regular basis. Weekly text messages on progress to parents have shown significant promise in terms of engagement, as have more personalised letters on attendance to parents. Approaches that ask for opinions and feedback from parents are also preferable.

- **Training for teachers on parental engagement is required.** Most schools agree that parental engagement is the responsibility of all staff, particularly teachers on the front line. However, many teachers feel that they are ill-equipped to support parents to engage with their children's education, particularly when it comes to hard-to-reach communities (often a result of cultural background, parental health or working hours). Fewer than 10 per cent of teachers say that they have received training on parental engagement. Programmes that have offered teachers training on this show significant potential (DfE 2010a).

- **Support for parents on how to help their child can deliver results.** Parents too can often lack confidence in how to meaningfully engage with their children's education. However, a range of interventions have been shown to have a significant impact. Providing group-based workshops for parents or one-to-one support, potentially through a school-home support practitioner (ibid), can help to improve confidence, engagement and student outcomes. Likewise, interventions such as home visits for hard-to-reach communities can also be effective (EEF 2019b). Government could provide extra funding to scale up these interventions across the country.

WHERE NEXT?

Parental engagement

The pandemic has meant that parents have been forced to play a much larger role in delivering education for their children in partnership with schools. While many working parents will be relieved that schools have now opened up again, most also want a bigger role in their children's education in the future. The pandemic provides us with an opportunity to reset the relationship between schools, parents and their children in order to improve outcomes for young people. We must seize it now.

As a first step, we argue that:

- The government should work with schools and parents, drawing on Parentkind's 'Blueprint for Parent-Friendly Schools' (Parentkind 2017), to set out an ambitious new parental engagement strategy. This should establish what parents can expect from schools and what parents can do to improve outcomes for their children.

- The government should also commit to building on Ofsted's Parent View survey to create a regular published parent survey to embed parent voice and transparency into the system.

- The government should provide funding to ensure that all teachers have access to training on effective parental engagement and, separately (via the community schools agenda set out in the next chapter), ensure that all schools provide access to support and activities for parents to help them with their engagement in their children's education.
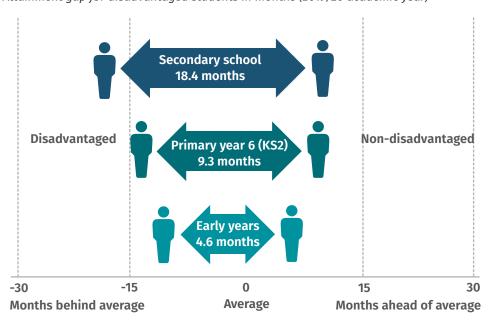
CONVERSATION 3

TACKLING INEQUALITIES BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

We went into the Covid-19 pandemic with yawning inequalities in educational outcomes. England – along with many other countries – experiences significant inequalities in the learning outcomes of children across a number of dimensions, including geography, gender and ethnicity. However, historically, the main focus has been on the attainment gap between children brought up in high-income households and those brought up in low-income households. This gap can already be seen at age 5 – with wealthier students 4.6 months ahead – but it worsens considerably throughout full-time education, so that by the time children reach secondary school it represents almost 19 months of education (see Figure 4.1) (Hutchinson et al 2020). Furthermore, despite most metrics showing a narrowing of the attainment gap during the first half of the 2010s, the latest data suggests that the gap is growing again (ibid).

FIGURE 4.1

There are large and pervasive attainment gaps in England, which widen as children get older
Attainment gap for disadvantaged students in months (2019/20 academic year)

Source: Hutchinson et al 2020

INFORMATION BOX: RACIAL DISPARITIES AND BLACK LIVES MATTER

The Covid-19 pandemic has been experienced at the same time as the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. Both have shone a light on the inequalities that sit at the heart of our society. These are as present in education as they are in the rest of society. Notably, while some ethnic groups (in particular, many students of Bangladeshi, Chinese, Indian and Pakistani background) perform better than the average, others (in particular, Black African and Black Caribbean students) lag behind (Clegg et al 2017). The research suggests that these disparities cannot be explained by income alone (Demie and McLean 2017). A number of additional factors have been identified to explain the disparities – including higher rates of school exclusion and lower teacher expectations – but there is growing evidence that racial bias is a significant part of the issue (ibid).

The pandemic is likely to have widened the 'attainment gap'. The evidence is clear that extended periods away from school can result in significant 'learning loss' (EEF 2020b). This is particularly the case for students from poor backgrounds. A recent rapid assessment of the available evidence suggests that the attainment gap between students could widen by 36 per cent as a result of the pandemic (ibid).[4] This conclusion is supported by what we know about the experience of children throughout the pandemic. For example, a survey of parents during the pandemic by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that, on average, children in the top fifth of the income distribution were doing five-and-a-half hours a week more studying than those in the bottom fifth at secondary level and seven-and-a-half hours more at primary level (Andrew et al 2020). Likewise, stark differences were found in digital access, time in online lessons and access to tutoring (ibid).

Recent government efforts largely focus on academic support to close the attainment gap. In recent years, governments have made improving academic support – in particular the quality of schools and teachers – the main focus of efforts to narrow the attainment gap, based on evidence of the importance of these factors in determining educational outcomes. The introduction of the pupil premium – a sum of money the government gives to schools each year for each student who is eligible for free school meals, in order to close the attainment gap – has broadened this support slightly, with some schools investing it in activities such as pre- and after-school support and parental engagement, but a major focus of this spending remains on smaller group tuition and learning materials (Ofsted 2013). A similar approach has been taken since the pandemic. The government's recent Covid-19 catch-up package, worth £1 billion for schools this year, will provide additional tuition for young people at risk from falling behind (DfE 2020b).

But the pandemic has demonstrated that the government needs to take inequalities beyond the classroom just as seriously. It has highlighted the significant inequalities children face in the home. These include huge disparities in terms of:

- the attitudes of, and support provided by, parents
- the degree to which the home environment is conducive to studying and learning
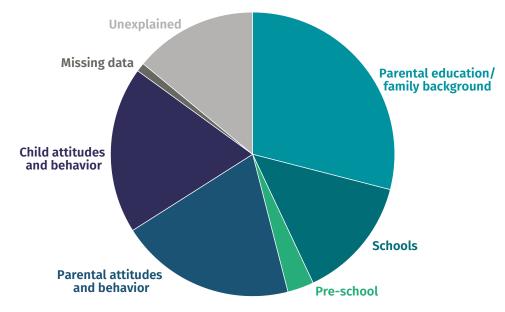- access to learning resources, particularly digital infrastructure and connectivity.

ImpactEd's polling of young people during the lockdown found that whilst the majority were in homes conducive to learning, around a fifth were not able to find an effective routine for home learning, felt they were not receiving support from

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4   Although it found that estimates varied from 11 per cent to 75 per cent.

parents when they got stuck and struggled to access a device to do their online work (ImpactEd 2020b). Another particularly concerning issue that the pandemic has exposed is the growing number of young people facing a range of vulnerabilities, including mental health problems (either their own or their families'), exposure to violence, neglect and abuse, bereavement and caring responsibilities. Academic evidence suggests that these factors, starting in the early years, are as important – if not more important – than the quality of schooling itself (see figure 4.2) (Goodman and Gregg 2010).

FIGURE 4.2

Educational inequalities are caused by more than just differences in teacher and school quality

Explaining the gap between the poorest and the richest: decomposition of direct effects at age 11 (before controlling for prior abilities)

Source: Goodman and Gregg 2010

The pandemic has also highlighted that these vulnerabilities are not just experienced by children from poorer households. The vulnerabilities and inequalities highlighted here are undoubtedly strongly correlated with parental income (implying that addressing poverty will have to be part of the solution to educational inequalities). But the pandemic has also reminded us that it is not just children in low-income families who face these challenges. For example, a recent government review of 'children in need' found that up to a third of young people facing these vulnerabilities to the extent that they require the support of a social worker are not in receipt of free school meals (a proxy for being from a low-income family) (DfE 2019b). This is likely to be particularly true since the pandemic. Emerging data suggests that domestic abuse (Ivandic and Kirchmaier 2020) and mental health problems (Banks and Xu 2020) have increased significantly – with the growing economic crisis likely to have an effect as well.
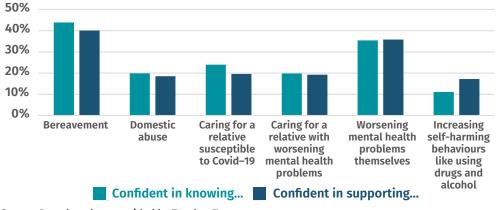
This demands that we take a broader vision of the purpose of schooling and the support schools provide to students. Schools cannot solve all of the social problems that create barriers to learning. But they can look to shape the lives of children beyond the classroom. Indeed, technically, schools have a statutory obligation to promote the wider emotional, physical and social wellbeing of their students (PHE 2014). But, while individual teachers and schools may prioritise these objectives,

this is usually done without significant resources and against the incentives of the system. For example, in its latest accountability framework, Ofsted made clear that wellbeing and related issues were not to be measured centrally (Gregson Family Foundation 2019). The only measure by which Ofsted continues to objectively assess the progress of schools and young people is through academic attainment. It is therefore unsurprising that the UK ranks in the bottom quarter of countries in the PISA life satisfaction rankings (ibid). This must now change.

Schools must take a 'whole-school' approach to wellbeing, with teachers supported to be at the heart of this agenda. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends that schools adopt a comprehensive 'whole-school' approach to promoting the physical, social and emotional wellbeing of students (NICE 2017). This means ensuring wellbeing objectives are embedded into the culture, curriculum, staff and systems of the school. However, inevitably it will be teachers who will have to spearhead this agenda. Yet, the pandemic has exposed the need for more support for teachers to help them perform this task. New polling of teachers conducted by Teacher Tapp for IPPR found that one in two teachers did not feel confident in knowing which children had experienced bereavement, abuse, poor mental health or new family caring responsibilities during the national Covid-19 lockdown. Furthermore, more than one in two did not feel confident in supporting children through these experiences (see figure 4.3).

Young people facing vulnerabilities are largely invisible in the classroom

Teacher responses to "Do you feel confident in knowing if any of the pupils you teach have experienced any of the following during lockdown?" and "Which of the following experiences are you confident you have the knowledge to effectively support a child you are teaching through?"
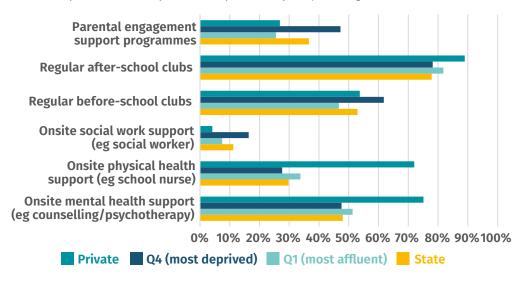

Source: Based on data provided by Teacher Tapp

But delivering on this cannot be the responsibility of schools alone. Schools and teachers can, and do already, undoubtedly take a role in supporting young people with the vulnerabilities they face outside of school. But teachers are not doctors, counsellors or social workers. There will always be a limit to what they can and should be expected to achieve on their own. This requires schools to work closely with a wider array of public services to provide the support young people need. But, all too often, the support young people require is not accessible, joined-up with their school or tailored to their needs. Polling conducted by Teacher Tapp for this paper has found that less than half of teachers in state-funded schools say their students have onsite mental health support (for example a counsellor) and less than a third say they have onsite physical health support (such as a nurse), with more deprived schools less likely to benefit from these resources. This compares to

75 and 72 per cent respectively of teachers in private schools (see figure 4.4). This is concerning because around three out of 10 teachers say they are unable to access external specialist support such as NHS child and adolescent mental health services when their students needed it (Weale 2019). Teachers believe that improving access to such professionals would help improve attainment (see figure 4.5) and it would also be popular with parents, as new polling from Parentkind shows (see figure 4.6).

FIGURE 4.4

Private schools and better-off state schools are significantly more likely to provide onsite physical and mental health support
Teacher responses to "Does your school provide any the following services?"

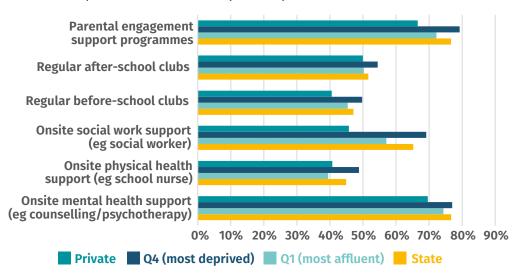Source: Based on data provided by Teacher Tapp

FIGURE 4.5

Teachers in all schools, but especially those in less well-off areas, think that more support for health and wellbeing would improve student attainment
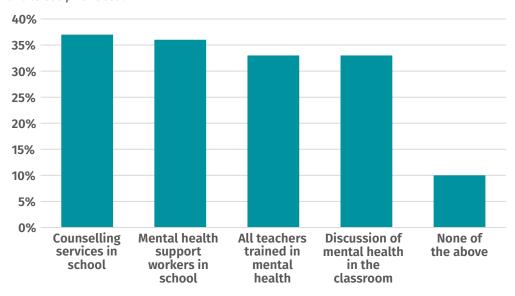*Teacher responses to "If government funding was no issue, which of the following do you think would improve student attainment if scaled up?"*

Source: Based on data provided by Teacher Tapp

FIGURE 4.6

Parents also want more support for child health and wellbeing
Parent responses to "Thinking about the support and knowledge which could be available to support children's mental health and wellbeing in school, which of the following would you like to see prioritised?"

Source: Parentkind, forthcoming

The government should revisit the vision of 'community schools' to promote wellbeing and close the inequalities gap in attainment. 'Community' or 'extended' schools partner with other public services and community groups in order to reach beyond the classroom and influence the wider determinants of educational outcomes. Community schools vary in their approach, but core components include: the integration of wider public services – including health, social and welfare services – within the school; active family and community engagement; and extended school hours and activities (Smith 2014). This approach has been systematically implemented in parts of the United States and the Nordic countries in Europe – but also, historically, in England, between 2002 and 2010 (ibid). The evidence of the benefits of this approach at the macro level and the individual components of community schooling is strong, including better attendance, attainment and wellbeing among students (ibid).

Community schools build on a number of existing initiatives in England but require a comprehensive and consistent approach. The government is conducting a number of pilots of embedded, or closer interagency working between, public services (for example, social services and healthcare) (DfE 2017; Westlake et al 2020). Meanwhile, some schools are also using pupil premium funding to put in place additional support for young people and their families (for example, breakfast clubs, after-school activities and parental support). But since 2010 these activities have not been a core delivery responsibility of schools in England. If the government is really committed to addressing inequalities in attainment, it should roll out a basic universal community schools offer across England by providing children and parents with an entitlement to the core components of the community school model and schools with the financial resources to deliver on this.

INFORMATION BOX: THE EXTENDED SCHOOLS PROGRAMME

Extended schools deliver a range of services beyond their core function of the classroom education of children. These services can include childcare outside basic school hours including school holidays, health services, adult learning and community activities. The vision for an extended schools programme in England was first articulated in a report published as part of the government's neighbourhood renewal strategy in 1999. In 2005, the then government in England committed all schools to providing a core of extended provision by 2010 (Woudhuysen 2016).

Significant funding – albeit probably not enough – was invested into achieving this objective. And, by 2011, an evaluation of the programme reported that "two-thirds of schools were offering all five elements of the full core offer (childcare from 8am to 6pm; a varied menu of activities; parenting support; community access to facilities; and swift and easy access to specialist support), and the remaining third were offering some elements" (DfE 2010b: 213). The same evaluation was clear that the extended schools programme led to improvements in outcomes, including student wellbeing, attendance and attainment (ibid).

Subsequent evaluations of the programme suggest that while this initiative did represent progress, it required additional investment and reform to become properly embedded (Woudhuysen 2016). Unfortunately, in 2011, the coalition government took the decision to end the ring-fenced funding for extended schools. This has not stopped some schools pursuing the vision behind the extended schools programme (indeed many incorporate elements of extended schools in their provision). But it has undone much of the progress.

While the polling of teachers conducted as part of this research (see figures 4.4 and 4.5) is not perfectly comparable to that of the Department for Education (DfE) reported in 2010 (DfE 2010b), comparisons suggest a decline in access to these services.[5] For example, DfE's polling suggests that in 2010, 91 per cent of schools were offering additional parental engagement services, compared with 37 per cent of teachers in our polling saying that their school does. Similar trends can be seen in onsite mental health support, with the DfE finding that 86 per cent of schools were able to offer swift access to specialist support onsite, including children and adolescent mental health specialists, compared with 48 per cent teachers in our polling saying the same.

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5   Phrasing in the DFE study and our Teacher Tapp polling was different. The data collection methodology was also different. DFE conducted phone-based interviews with the person responsible for Extended Schools to ascertain access to these services whilst we polled teachers across the country. Our polling may include multiple teachers in the same school.

INFORMATION BOX: EXTENDING THE SCHOOL DAY

The pandemic has precipitated a conversation about the school timetable.
There is significant concern in the UK, and abroad, that the pandemic will
have resulted in 'learning loss' among students, particularly those who were
already at risk of falling behind. Policymakers are looking at the possibility
of extending the school day or the academic year to help students catch
up. Summer schools have also been considered (and implemented in some
countries). This is unsurprising: these techniques have been used following
similar disruptions in learning, for example after Hurricane Katrina in the
US in 2008 (Patall et al 2010). However, in addition to the short-term crisis
response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the pandemic has also precipitated a
wider conversation about the case for reforming the school timetable.

**Extending the school day has historically been seen as a potential solution
to a range of issues.** Most proponents of a longer school day are for it
on the basis that it can help improve academic outcomes by expanding
learning time. This argument is often – but not always – focussed on
the core curriculum (for example, maths and English). Others argue that
extending the school day is a good way of broadening the curriculum – to
include a wider set of enrichment activities – without taking away from
academic study. However, in addition to the educational arguments for this
policy, most proponents also argue that it would drive greater workforce
participation (particularly among women) and ensure young children are
properly supervised and supported in the evenings by aligning the working
day and the school day.

**The evidence on the effectiveness of extending school time is mixed, but
generally results suggest a positive – albeit relatively small – impact.** Across
countries, no consistent relationship between academic outcomes and the
length of the school day has been found (Schleicher 2018a). But studies
looking across schools within countries generally have shown positive, albeit
relatively small, impacts on academic outcomes (EEF 2019c). For example, the
EEF found that, "on average, students make two additional months' progress
per year from extended school time and in particular through the targeted
use of before and after school programmes". Initiatives that include
pastoral or enrichment activities – including sports, arts and wellbeing
activities – also often lead to beneficial social, emotional and psychological
outcomes (as well as better academic outcomes) (ibid). However, it is worth
flagging that the quality of the provision is more important than the length
of provision (with additional hours only valuable if they are of high quality).

**Unless these programmes are carefully designed, they risk widening
the gap between low-income children and other children.** Some studies
have found that extending the school day, or providing after-school
activities, can exacerbate existing inequalities. This is usually the result
of differential participation rates among groups (EEF 2019c) and therefore
disproportionately benefitting better-off children. The risk of this occurring
is much higher if programmes are available to all students but are voluntary
or involve additional costs to parents. However, there is also evidence which
suggests that if these programmes are well designed – for example, are
subsidised for low-income families or targeted specifically at those most at
risk of falling behind – they can have the opposite impact, narrowing the gap
between groups of students (Kidron and Lindsay 2014). This is particularly
the case where after-school classes give students the opportunity to
receive more personalised or one-to-one support (EEF 2019c).

WHERE NEXT?

Narrowing inequalities

The pandemic has highlighted that while strategies to improve standards within schools are vital in closing the attainment gap, there is also a need to do more to narrow inequalities in the home. These include those relating to parental engagement, the home environment and exposure to a range of vulnerabilities such as mental health problems (either children's own or their families'), bereavement, violence, neglect and abuse. Without action on these barriers to learning, the attainment gap will continue to grow.

As a first step, we argue that:

- The government should endorse 'parity of esteem' between academic and wellbeing outcomes in schools. This should involve supporting schools to adopt a 'whole-school' approach to wellbeing and mandating an annual wellbeing assessment for every student and teacher across the country. This should form part of any accountability structures going forward.

- The government should revisit the vision behind community schools and set out a national entitlement, alongside additional funding for schools, to the core elements of this, including: an extended school day (pre- and post-school activity); a comprehensive programme of parent engagement and activities; and, crucially, embedded mental health and social work support.

CONCLUSION

Covid-19 has resulted in an unprecedented disruption to schools and learners in England. There is a risk that the legacy of the pandemic will be deeply regressive – with inequalities growing as a result of the lockdown. The government is right to pursue measures now to undo this damage. But it can and should go further: the pandemic can also be seen as an opportunity to 'build back better'. We can use this as a moment to 'reset' our system and address some of the longstanding weaknesses that pre-date the pandemic. Our research has highlighted that these opportunities span: the role of accountability and assessment in preparing children for life, not just for exams; where, when and how learning takes place; and also, our approach to narrowing inequalities not just within but also outside of school. In the coming months and years, IPPR will be working with Big Change to take this agenda forward in the form of a new Co-Mission on Education and Learning to help build a brighter future for young people and our society as a whole.

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