RETURN TO SCHOOL SURVEY

Summary report, May 2020

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RIGHTS RESPECTING SCHOOLS

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

1,553 individual school staff members took part over the course of one week.

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

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

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

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

WHAT ARE SCHOOLS' TOP PRIORITIES WHEN PUPILS RETURN?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Supporting children who may have suffered from trauma or abuse during school closure was a top priority in more than half the schools (53%), as was supporting children to return to school routines and expectations (54%).

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

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

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

Less than a third of schools placed catching up on lost learning for all pupils (32%) or narrowing the gap for pupils who had fallen behind (22%) as a top five priority. These were a little higher among secondary schools (43% and 33% respectively), but were still ranked below safety, pupil mental health, staff mental health and support for pupils who suffered from trauma or abuse.

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

In secondary schools only, supporting pupils with upcoming exams was a significant concern (55% placed this as a top five concern).

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

CAN SCHOOLS PROVIDE THE SUPPORT THAT PUPILS WILL NEED?

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

On the whole, respondents were confident that they could support children as they returned. However, over a quarter (27%) were not confident that they could help pupils to catch up on the learning missed during lockdown, and over a third were not confident that they could secure help from health or social services for children and families who need it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHAT SUPPORT DO SCHOOLS ALREADY HAVE TO HELP PUPILS?

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

- Only one in five respondents (20%) believed that they had adequate mental health counselling services to meet the expected needs of children returning. More than one in five respondents (21%) said they had no mental health counselling available through the school at all.
- Less than 30% of respondents felt they had adequate mental health and wellbeing support for staff available through the school.

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

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

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

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

> "For me going back to school is about rebuilding relationships with our children and looking after everyone's mental health and wellbeing. Learning will come later."
> **English secondary school**

> "Mental health counselling. We are lucky to have Counsellors at the school but they were struggling to cope with workload before this started"
> **Welsh secondary school**

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

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

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

Over half (54%) of respondents said that they did not have the financial resources available to provide the support pupils would need when they return. Sixty-nine per cent said they were not confident that they would receive the support they needed from either national or local government.