

# NFER report on COVID recovery

**T**he National Foundation for Educational Research, in conjunction with the Nuffield Foundation, has today published a new report on the on-going impact of COVID-19 on schools serving predominantly deprived populations. It shows how schools are adapting their curriculum to help pupils' learning recovery. It also finds that pupils moving between Early Years, Reception and Year 1 are less emotionally and academically ready to make the transition, compared to previous years, and that many pupils moving from primary to secondary school are emotionally underprepared.

The report provides further insights into schools' support for the recovery of learning and wellbeing once pupils returned to school full-time from March 2021. It also highlights their challenges and support needs. It is based on in-depth interviews with senior leaders in 50 mainstream primary and secondary schools across England, predominantly serving deprived populations. These schools and pupils have been most seriously affected by the pandemic.

Key findings from the report include:

- Most senior leaders said that their schools had modified the curriculum to help pupils recover and make progress with their learning. The research identified four models: narrow (prioritising literacy and numeracy over other subjects such as arts and languages); focused (prioritising core content within subjects); blended (supporting numeracy and literacy through other subjects); and continuous (covering planned content over a longer period of time). Schools adopting the narrow model had done so because of the perceived pressure of external accountability.
- There were particular worries about children moving into Nursery, Reception and Year 1 in 2021/22 because the pandemic has affected such a large proportion of their lives. Some school leaders were concerned about the emotional readiness of pupils moving from primary to secondary school, and the academic readiness of pupils in Years 11-13 to progress to the next stage.
- Most school leaders reported more pupil wellbeing and mental health problems than usual, especially increased anxiety, as a result of the pandemic. A substantial minority – mainly, but not exclusively, secondary leaders – noted an increase in severe mental health issues, including self-harm.
- Schools were finding it very difficult to secure specialist external support. School leaders responded by increasing their own pastoral support and wellbeing activities, including working with other organisations.

Caroline Sharp, Research Director at NFER, and co-author of the report said: "Our report shows the continuing impact of the pandemic on mainstream schools serving deprived communities, and its adverse effect on pupils' wellbeing, learning and transition across all age groups. Schools are doing all they can to support their pupils, whose education and welfare has been so severely disrupted by COVID-19. Most are modifying the curriculum to help pupils recover missed learning, and simultaneously make progress. More research is needed to understand the implications of the various curriculum modification models identified in this research."

Commenting on the report Geoff Barton, General Secretary of ASCL, said: "This report contains some very useful pointers to the Government on bolstering its education recovery plans in the spending review that is due to take place this autumn. The investment it has announced to date simply does not go far enough. Of particular concern is the finding that most school leaders reported more pupil wellbeing and mental health problems than usual and that a substantial minority noted an increase in severe mental health issues, including self-harm."

A fuller report on this research will appear in the research section of the next issue of *Education Journal*.

2 September, 2021

[WN 0002]