

The reported effects of the pandemic on pupils in special schools and colleges and what they need now

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ASK Research is an independent research organisation who specialise in high quality, informed research aiming to influence policy and advise service provision, especially around issues concerning groups who face social disadvantage. The authors of this report each have over 20 years' experience of research into special educational needs for government and other organisations.

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Executive Summary

Our first publication from this project¹, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, reported on the nature of the issues faced by special schools and colleges in England during the pandemic in terms of offering in-school places and remote support. Around half a million pupils have Education, Health and Care Plans² [EHCPs] to address their special educational needs and disabilities [SEND], with around half of them educated in special settings. All pupils in special schools and colleges have EHCPs.

This second publication sets out the effects of this period and what needs to happen next to support pupils at special schools and colleges, their families, and the staff who support them. It is based on a representative survey of 190 special education providers in England, depth interviews with senior leaders from 40 of those settings and depth interviews with the parents/carers of 40 pupils who attend them.

Our findings show that:

A Pupils in special settings experienced greater learning losses than pupils in mainstream settings due to the pandemic

Headteachers estimated that pupils in special schools and colleges were on average around 4 months behind where they would have been with their literacy and numeracy, had it not been for the disruption related to the pandemic. This level of academic loss is greater than has been reported for pupils in mainstream settings.

Around a third believed that their pupils were, on average, at least 6 months behind where they would expect them to be academically. Reported levels of academic loss were greater in settings with higher numbers of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM).

B Pupils with EHCPs have experienced further developmental losses

Headteachers estimated that pupils in special schools and colleges were, on average, around 4 months behind where they should have been with their social and communication skills; and their independence and life skills. They also reported pupils being around 4.5 months behind with their behaviour and self-regulation and 5 months in their emotional wellbeing and mental health.

Pupils with physical issues were considered to be around 6 months behind in their physical development.

Again these levels were all greater in settings with more disadvantaged pupils.

C Legally required Health and Care input has been severely disrupted

It is a legal requirement that pupils with EHCPs receive health, therapy, and care input, but their access to this has been severely reduced during the pandemic. In May 2021, Headteachers reported that around a third of pupils attending school were still not receiving their full health and therapeutic input (34%) or their social care support (37%). Of those not attending school, almost nine out of ten (87%) pupils were not receiving their full health or therapy support and eight out of ten (78%) were not receiving their full care package. The latest DfE data shows that in September 2021 around 18% of pupils were

¹ Special education during lockdown: providers' and parents' experiences <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/covid-19-mitigation-education-provision-and-special-schools>

² An EHCP is for children and young people aged up to 25 who need more support than is available through special educational needs support. EHCPs identify educational, health and social needs and set out the additional support to meet those needs.

not attending their State special school³.

Special settings had to restrict what they can offer pupils as they, as with wider society, were operating under safety restrictions. This has also meant pupils not accessing the full support or enrichment activities vital to their development, wellbeing and independence.

D The wellbeing of families and staff has been negatively impacted

Parents described disruption to services throughout the pandemic, including the loss of support and restrictions on family activities. In addition, there have been serious effects on the wellbeing of parents due to having their children at home for extended periods. As a result, parents felt in need of more support and Headteachers agreed - nine in ten Headteachers surveyed (89%) believed that parents' support needs had increased compared to before the pandemic. Parents also reported negative effects on their employment and income, the wellbeing of their other children, and the state of their relationship with partners.

The impacts are not constrained to families. Staff in special settings reported trying to support families more, given the multiple difficulties families were facing and lack of other services. These staff had also found this period a time of unprecedented challenge, during which they had faced increased pressure. Not only were they trying to get as many pupils as possible into school or college, but they were also simultaneously supporting families and providing remote support whilst plugging the gaps left by other service providers, dealing with increased behavioural issues, and experiencing anxieties over their own and pupils' safety. Staff often reported feeling unsupported by local and national government and 'forgotten', leading them to make uncomfortable decisions alone. Significant numbers of Headteachers reported that they and their staff were leaving the sector or seriously considering whether to continue in their jobs.

E Proposed recovery support does not meet the needs of pupils with SEND

Leaders of special schools and colleges thought recovery support was needed that addressed the wider losses pupils with SEND have suffered, especially the increasing mental health needs that were having a knock-on effect on pupils' behaviours, ability to engage in learning and enjoy a happy home life.

Existing support in the Educational Recovery Plan was not felt to be appropriate for the types of needs pupils in special settings have, the issues they need more help with, or the effects on their wider support networks. Fewer than 1 in 10 Heads (8%) had applied for or would consider applying for, funding from the National Tutoring Programme which was set up to address learning loss. Interviews revealed that this is because they believed their pupils will not benefit from academic input from a tutor not known to them and who is not experienced in supporting pupils at special schools and colleges.

Heads and parents both felt that recovery support needed to be extended to not only reinstate full health and care services but also to provide additional support to make up for the over 12 months' input many pupils have lost to prevent further damage being done.

In addition, funding was not equitably available, with eligibility dependent on setting type (independent providers, who make up around 40% of all special settings are very different from mainstream independent provision, and are ineligible to claim) and the age of pupils catered for and the measures of need were considered too narrow (i.e. FSM

³ Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus outbreak <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

eligibility). Headteachers would prefer funding be passed directly to them rather than made available through mechanisms that do not suit the needs of special settings such as the National Tutoring Programme.

Conclusions and recommendations

Even before the pandemic there was widespread agreement that funding in the SEND sector was inadequate and wide variability of provision existed in terms of both access and quality⁴. In addition, the Education Select Committee, in its 2019 review of SEND, reported that *"The distance between young people [with SEND]'s lived experience, their families' struggles and Ministers' desks is just too far."*⁵ Our report illustrates that the pandemic has more negatively impacted pupils with SEND, highlighting their needs, and this distance, even more acutely.

This paper sets out why pupils with SEND should now be a priority for the new team at DfE. As the Chancellor sets out his Spending Review, including the new Health and Care levy, the actions listed below will help pupils, their families and those who work with them to not only fully recover but thrive.

We recommend:

- 1 The Educational Recovery Fund should be made appropriate to support the needs of pupils with SEND.
- 2 There should be greater funding for the Health and Care needs of pupils with SEND.
- 3 Support should also be provided for their families, particularly in relation to their mental health, as well as for staff in special settings, if they are to be encouraged to remain in the sector.
- 4 The SEND review, announced in September 2019⁶, must be published.

These steps are all vital if the Government is truly committed to not only building back better but also levelling up and making a stronger, more cohesive society post-pandemic.

4 National Audit Office (2019) Department for Education Support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in England. <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Support-for-pupils-with-special-education-needs.pdf>

5 House of Commons Education Committee (2019) Special educational needs and disabilities: First report of session 2019. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cmselect/cmeduc/20/20.pdf>

6 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-review-into-support-for-children-with-special-educational-needs>

Introduction

The Nuffield Foundation funded ASK Research with NFER to carry out this study on the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on pupils' return to their special schools and colleges since Autumn 2020. The study was conducted in April-June 2021. It involved:

- A survey of a representative sample of 190 Headteachers from special schools and colleges in England⁷. The results were weighted to be representative of the sector.⁸
- Depth interviews with 40 specialist Headteachers
- Depth interviews with 40 families of children and young people who attend specialist settings.

There are just under half a million pupils in England with an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP)⁹. Around half of these (over 200,000) are educated in specialist settings¹⁰. These pupils have a diverse range of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), from Dyslexia or hearing impairment, through Autistic Spectrum Condition and moderate to profound and complex needs, which may mean the pupils are non-verbal and/or non-mobile, medically vulnerable, with challenging behaviours and, in some cases, life-limiting conditions.

We have previously reported how special schools and colleges managed during the first national lockdown, the issues they faced and families' experiences¹¹.

This paper focuses on the effects of the disruption throughout the pandemic (including a further restriction of education provision between January to February 2021) and identifies what the special education sector, pupils and families need to help them recover. It covers:

- effects on academic progress
- effects on wider developmental progress
- provision of health and care support
- emotional wellbeing
- ongoing support needs.

7 This represents an 11% response rate, from the sample of 1,773 specialist providers in England. To ensure conclusions can be drawn about the national population of 1,773 special schools based on the 190 survey responses, we must consider the sample representative of the population. The response data was weighted based on the over or under representation of school phase and FSM quartile compared to the population. The range of weightings was between 0.61 and 2.52.

8 In terms of FSM eligibility and type of provider.

9 Department for Education (2021) Education, health and care plans, 2021 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-health-and-care-plans>

10 Department for Education (2019) Special Educational Needs in England 2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/814244/SEN_2019_Text.docx.pdf

11 Skipp, Hopwood, Webster (2020) Special education in lockdown: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/FULL_Spec_Lockdown_Rpt_ASK-Research.pdf

Technical notes

Survey data has been examined for statistically significant differences between results for schools and colleges according to different levels of FSM eligibility (using quartiles), provider type (comparing independent schools, academy/free schools and local-authority-maintained schools) and the stage of provision offered (primary, secondary, all through or college). Only statistically significant results are reported.

This report contains illustrative case studies and quotes. The case studies represent composites developed from a range of real-life examples to protect anonymity. The quotes are taken directly from individual interviews.

To encourage provider participation, towards the end of the survey fieldwork period, the questionnaire was split into two sections, a core set of questions answered by all 190 respondents, and a second, optional, section, which was completed by a subset of providers. The report notes cases where the base size falls below the full 190.

Findings

School attendance and demand for places

We have previously detailed how, despite the Government stating that all pupils with an EHCP were allowed to attend their setting during lockdowns¹², it was not feasible for special settings to offer places to 100 per cent of their pupils (due to staffing issues, available space for social distancing and the needs and behaviours of pupils). In addition, not all families wanted their child to attend, or there were other barriers (such as lack of transport provision) that prevented this.

From our survey Headteachers reported that during the lockdown of Winter 2021 (Jan- Feb):

- 4% of their pupils were deemed Clinically Extremely Vulnerable¹³.
- An average of 64% of pupils got some time in their setting. By the end of the lockdown, 46% had been given a full-time place and 17%¹⁴ a part-time place¹⁵.
- 36% of pupils did not attend their setting at all.
- 28% of providers said demand for places was greater than they could provide¹⁶. Settings with the highest proportion of disadvantaged pupils had the lowest demand for places¹⁷.
- Headteachers reported that where places were available to pupils, but they did not attend, this was mainly due to households who were shielding or had concerns about medical vulnerability, about the safety of sending pupils into school or college or felt that other pupils needed the place more than them.
- The vast majority of settings were able to fully open and offer all of their places after this lockdown. However, settings with the highest disadvantage had significantly lower attendance at this point than mainstream settings.

12 Department for Education (2020). Supporting vulnerable children and young people during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak - actions for educational providers and other partners. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>

13 Prior to September 2021 pupils considered Clinically Extremely Vulnerable were advised to shield and not to attend their educational setting during national lockdowns. See <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk/who-is-at-high-risk-from-coronavirus/>

14 Percentages may not total to 100 due to rounding.

15 This result is based on 136 respondents.

16 This result is based on 132 respondents.

17 18% of providers in the quartile with the highest levels of FSM eligibility had experienced demand for places which was greater than they could offer, compared to 33% of other providers (based on 130 respondents).

Effects on learning¹⁸

In our survey at the end of the 20/21 academic year, Headteachers of special schools and colleges estimated that overall they thought pupils were around 4 months behind in their academic development¹⁹ than where they would have been had it not been for the disruption caused by the pandemic. This level of loss is greater than the overall levels of learning loss previously estimated for pupils in mainstream settings (ranging from 2.5 - 3 months although methods and timings of these studies vary²⁰).

Additionally, Headteachers reported pupils were on average 4 months behind where they would have been with their behaviours for learning (e.g. the emotional, social, and cognitive skills required to engage in learning).

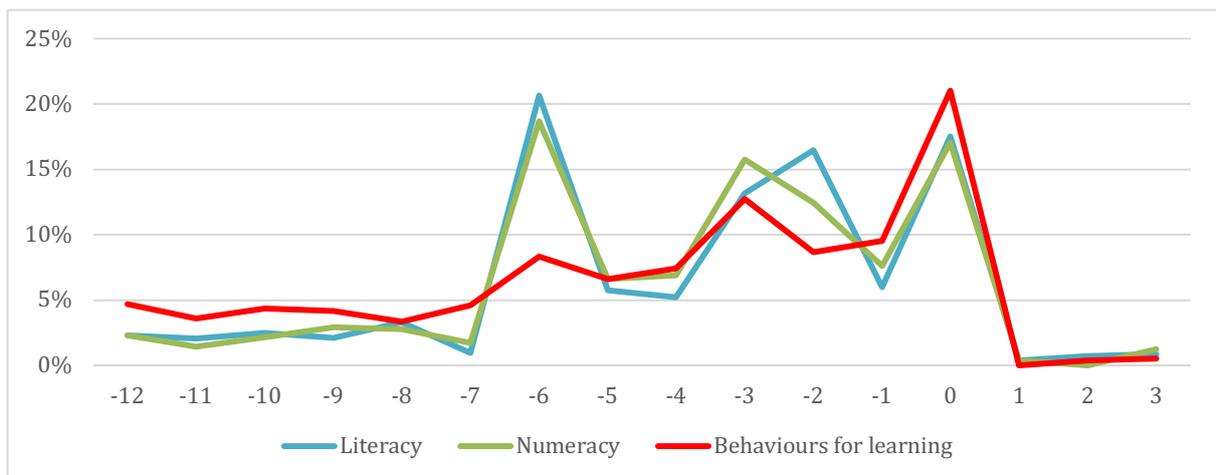
However, averages do not give the whole picture (Figure 1). School survey responses show that around one in five Headteachers (between 19% and 22% depending on the area of loss) said that their pupils were on track with their academic progress. Around a third of schools (between 32% and 34% depending on the area affected) estimated that the average level of academic loss across their pupils was more than six months and a small, but important minority (between two and five per cent depending on the area of loss) estimated that their pupils were 12 months or more behind where they should have been academically.

¹⁸ We acknowledge that 'months progress lost' is not an ideal development measure, particularly for pupils with SEND. However as no other research had looked at the effects in specialist provision and this is how effects have been calculated for pupils in mainstream settings we replicated it in order to contribute to the discussions around impacts on an equal basis.

¹⁹ 3.8 and 3.7 months behind respectively for literacy and numeracy compared to where they would have been had it not been for the pandemic.

²⁰ See studies reporting extent of academic losses for pupils in mainstream schools. E.g.: Blainey, K. and Hannay, T. (2021) The impact of school closures on spring 2021 attainment. Hodder Education. Available at: https://www.risingstars-uk.com/rs-assessment/whitepapers?utm_source=organic&utm_medium=sharing&utm_campaign=whitepaper_; Sharp, C., Nelson, J., Lucas, M., Julius, J., McCrone, T. and Sims, D. 'The challenges facing schools and pupils in September 2020'. NFER. Available at https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4119/schools_responses_to_covid_19_the_challenges_facing_schools_and_pupils_in_september_2020.pdf; Renaissance Learning/Education Policy Institute 'Understanding progress in the 2020/21 Academic Year'. DfE. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupils-progress-in-the-2020-to-2021-academic-year-interim-report>

Figure 1: Distribution of academic losses (in months)



Source: ASK/NFER survey of special school Headteachers, 190 respondents

Headteachers from special schools and colleges with the highest proportions of pupils facing disadvantage (as measured by Free School Meal eligibility) reported greater academic losses for their pupils²¹ (Figure 2). On average these pupils were thought to be around 5 months behind where they should have been in their literacy and numeracy skills and 6 months behind in their behaviours for learning. This would make them between 1 and 2.5 months further behind than pupils in schools with fewer disadvantaged pupils.

²¹ Comparisons were conducted using one-way ANOVAs. All results were significant at either the one or five per cent level.

Figure 2: Mean reported learning loss for pupils in special schools and colleges (in months²²) by FSM eligibility level



Source: ASK/NFER survey of special school Headteachers, 189 respondents (56 respondents were in the top quartile for FSM eligibility)

Effects on wider development

Academic progress was only one aspect of the developmental issues experienced by pupils with EHCPs throughout the pandemic. Headteachers reported pupils at special schools and colleges as being, on average:

- 4 months behind where they would otherwise have been in their social and communication skills; independence, self-care and life skills; and their health and physical development.
- 4.5 months behind with their behaviour and self-regulation.
- 5 months behind with their emotional wellbeing and mental health.

Special schools and colleges often cater for pupils with particular types of needs. Settings registered as having pupils with physical needs attending, reported that their pupils were 6 months behind in their physical development.²³

²² The data labels in the figures are rounded to the nearest half month.

²³ Settings attended by pupils with emotional and mental health issues or speech and communication issues did not show the same increase in losses in those areas. This may be because so many settings cater for these pupils, or because these issues are common across so many types of needs (e.g. pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, which 40% of our settings include).

Amira is 7 and has profound and multiple learning disabilities. She is non-verbal and has mobility issues. Amira loves going in the swimming pool but has not been able to do that since March 2020. Her mum has tried to do the stretching exercises staff would normally do with her in school, but she's worried she's not doing it right. Amira would normally spend time in a standing frame when she's at school. The school offered to bring the frame home but the family live in a flat with other young children and they couldn't fit such a large piece of equipment in anywhere. It also needs two adults to support Amira in the frame so this would be difficult at home because dad is out at work every day. Amira had been able to walk from the living room to her bedroom before the pandemic. Now she cannot manage to stand.

We heard many examples of what these types of effects meant for pupils and settings.

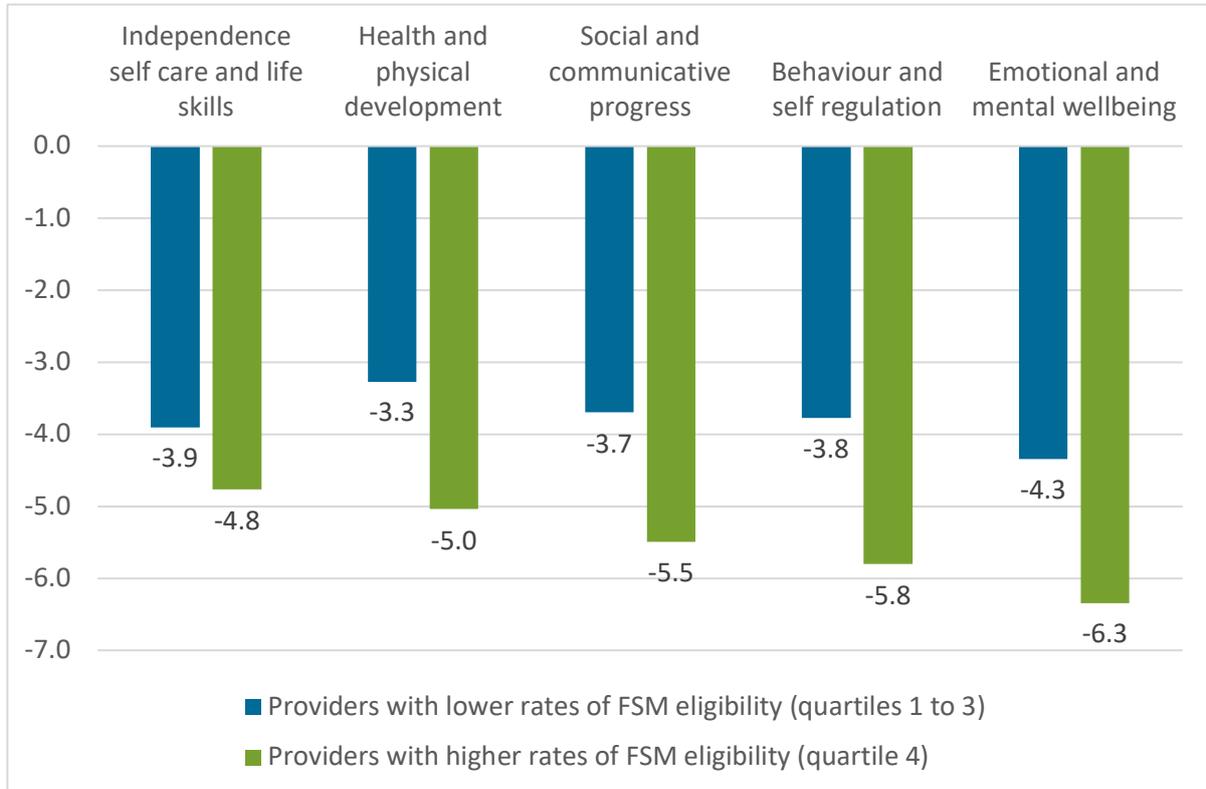
Tommy is 15 and attends a school that specialises in supporting pupils with Emotional and Mental Health issues. When a teaching assistant went to visit him at home during the lockdown she found him on the roof of his house. He said he was up there so that he could *"shoot the baddies (meaning the virus), so they couldn't kill his family."*

Danielle is 12 and has autism. She struggles with being in school normally and mixing with her classmates. During the second lockdown, she spent most of her time locked in the bathroom doing the work she had been set. She stopped talking to her family much and started to pick at her skin until it bled.

Mrs Hughes is Headteacher of a special school that caters for pupils aged 9 to 18. She described how during lockdown they had a small group of pupils who were in full-time. They had plenty of space and adult input and the school was very quiet. Since March when all of the pupils returned there have been more cases of pupils being distraught, angry and unable to cope. *"We had very few incidents of challenging behaviour before. Staff certainly did very little intervening with pupils. But in the last few months, we have had multiple issues with children slapping, kicking, biting, hiding, refusing to engage and lashing out at others. They thrive on routine and structure and this chaos and constant changing over the last year has really affected them. We're having to strip down the curriculum to the real basics, and allowing so much more time for sensory support. We've had to set aside a classroom just for pupils to have a quiet space and to calm down so that they don't damage themselves, their friends or the staff."*

As with their academic progress, pupils in settings with the highest levels of disadvantage were reported to be an additional 1 to 2 months behind their peers in each of these areas (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Mean reported developmental losses (in months) for pupils in special schools and colleges by FSM eligibility level

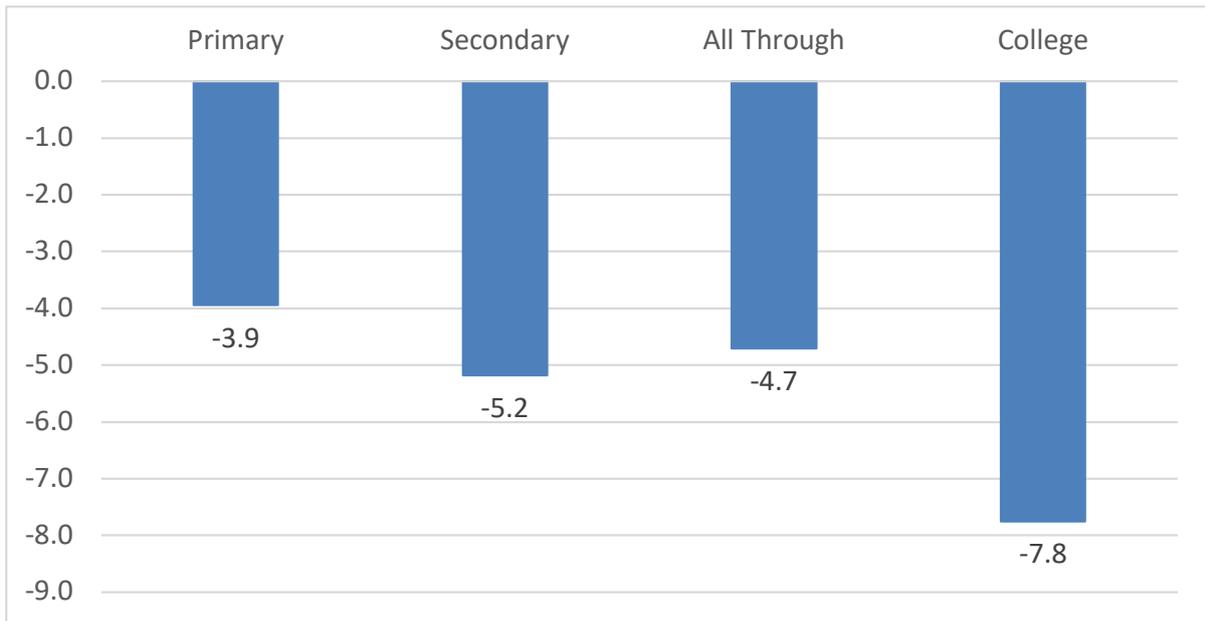


Source: ASK/NFER survey of special school Headteachers, 190 respondents (56 respondents in the top quartile for FSM eligibility)

There was a statistically significant difference²⁴ between the losses in emotional well-being experienced by pupils at different stages of their education. The degree of loss reported by leaders increased with the age of the students in their setting with students at colleges reportedly having experienced significantly greater emotional and well-being losses than students in other settings (Figure 4).

²⁴ Comparisons were conducted using one-way ANOVAs. All results were significant at either the one or five per cent level.

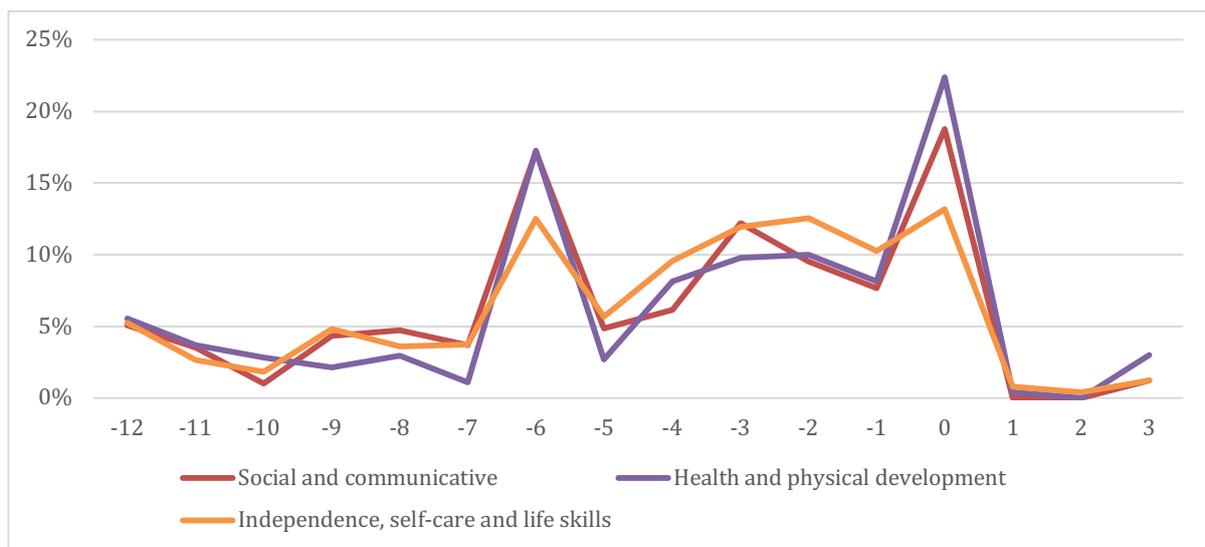
Figure 4: Mean reported emotional and well-being losses (in months) for pupils in special schools and colleges by stage of education



Source: ASK/NFER survey of special school Headteachers, 190 respondents (23 primary schools, 47 secondary schools, 107 all through providers and 14 colleges)

As with academic progress, further breakdown of responses shows that between 13% and 22% of schools thought that overall their pupils were on track with their social and communication skills; independence self-care and life skills; and health and physical development. However over a third of schools (between 34% and 39%) estimated that across all pupils the average level of losses in these domains was at least 6 months and 5% - 6% felt that the majority of their pupils were 12 months or more behind where they would have expected them to be (Figure 5).

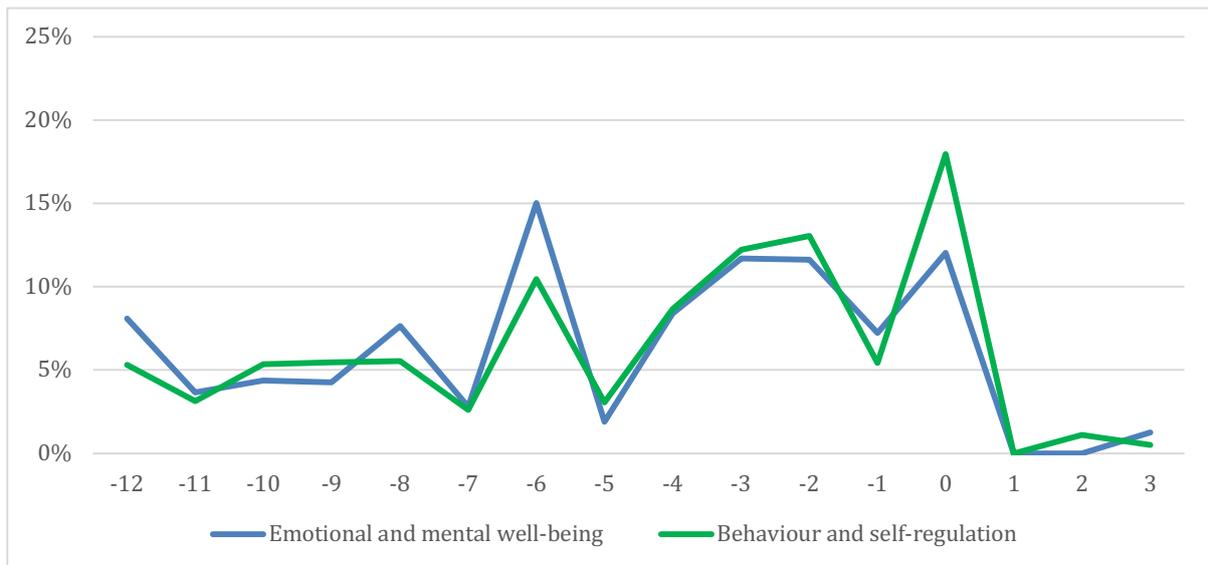
Figure 5: Distribution of developmental losses (in months)



Source: ASK/NFER survey of special school Headteachers, 190 respondents

The effects are even more marked in relation to student emotional wellbeing and behaviour. Just 13% of schools felt that pupils were on track or ahead with their emotional and mental well-being, whilst 46% of schools felt that pupils were at least 6 months behind, and 8% saw them as at least 12 months behind. Similarly, only 20% of schools saw pupils as ahead or on track in terms of their behaviour and self-regulation, whilst a sizeable minority viewed progress as at least 6 months (38%) behind where they would have expected it to be. A worrying 5% of schools felt behavioural losses were at least 12 months (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Distribution of emotional/behavioural losses (in months)



Source: ASK/NFER survey of special school Headteachers, 190 respondents

Headteachers and parents were concerned about how they were going to address these losses as well as the overall effects on pupils both in the short and longer-term.

“We have a couple of lads here who were really on course to move to the local college at the end of this year. But now, they’ve missed so much and they’re just nowhere near able or confident enough to mix with large groups of mainstream peers, they’d never cope. So we’re having to talk to parents instead about them going to a specialist college, which they really didn’t want.” Headteacher

“Our pupils already faced significant challenges in life. But now they’ll be even less well-prepared, and, I fear, there may be fewer jobs available and they may be even more ostracised from society.” Headteacher

Health and care input

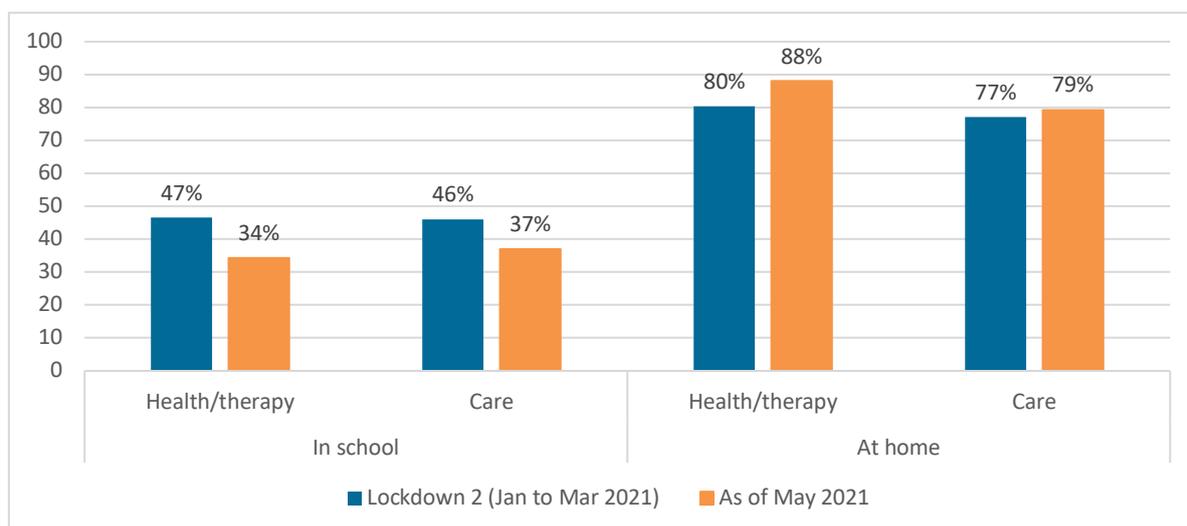
It is a legal requirement that pupils with EHCPs (which all pupils in special settings have) receive health, therapy, and care input as set out in their plan. This duty was suspended between March-September 2020. Yet health and care input has continued to be severely disrupted beyond this period.

In our survey, of the 64% of pupils attending school during the winter lockdown, Headteachers reported that almost half (47%) of their pupils were not receiving their full health and therapeutic support or their full social and care support (46%). The situation was worse for the 36% of pupils not in school during the lockdown. Around four out of five pupils at home (80%) did not receive their full health and therapeutic support, or their full social and care support (77%) (Figure 7). Settings with higher proportions of FSM eligibility were more able to continue to deliver full support during this period ²⁵.

These issues persisted after the winter lockdown. In May 2021, Headteachers reported that around a third of pupils attending school were still not receiving their full health and therapeutic input (34%) or their social care support (37%). Interviews with Headteachers and parents suggested that these pupils had not received their legally required input for over 12 months.

Again delivery was even more restricted for pupils who had not returned to their settings, although these made up a small proportion of pupils overall (2%). Almost nine out of ten (88%) of pupils still at home were not receiving their full health or therapeutic input and eight out of ten (79%) were not receiving their full care support.

Figure 7: Percentage of students estimated, on average, to have not received their full EHCP health and care inputs (by different periods of the pandemic)



Source: ASK/NFER survey of special school Headteachers. Based on responses from 159 schools for May 2021 (100 of which (unweighted) had pupils at home) and 127 schools for the Winter 2021 lockdown (92 of which (unweighted) had pupils at home)

²⁵ Comparisons were conducted using one-way ANOVAs. All results were significant at either the one or five per cent level. Full delivery of Health EHCPs took place in 45% of schools in the quartile with the highest levels of FSM eligibility compared to 28% of other providers. Full delivery of Social and Care EHCPs took place in 54% of schools with the highest level of FSM eligibility, compared to 29% of other schools.

The lack of input was seen as not only contributing to a regression in pupils' skills but also families being unsupported while their children's needs increased, leading to more families in crisis.

"His behaviour took a real nose-dive without our usual support package. He attacked my husband, beat him black and blue, we had to call an ambulance. I rang social services and said we really need some respite, just a break for us all but there was nothing they could do. I rang again after he'd attacked my other son. This time I was told if I really needed to I could apply for a Section 17 (Child in Need) assessment, it could be 6 weeks before it could be arranged. They knew what was going on in this house. They knew we couldn't cope. They did nothing." Owen's mum

"I calculated that over this period we are supposed to have received 65 hours of input from SaLT [speech and language therapy]. In all that time they have only managed to make a phone call to five families." Headteacher

"If we suspect a safeguarding issue our local protocol says we need two different agencies to agree. But we've been the only agency working, we can't get through to other providers, so we've not been able to refer any safeguarding concerns in all this time." Headteacher

"Our daughter normally goes to respite over the weekends, to help us all cope but they've had to limit how many places they can provide because of safety and staffing and more families are needing their help. So now rather than weekly support we get a place for one night a month. That has real repercussions on our other child, me and my husband and her if I'm honest. She's more aggressive than before and really withdrawn. I'm really worried for her as I think this is doing long-term damage." Katie's mum

In addition, due to Government guidance²⁶ determining how schools and colleges should operate, as well as the wider social restrictions in place, Headteachers detailed how they had been unable to provide their usual full package of support.

On-site activities, including therapies and social events, were either severely limited or stopped. Over half of Headteachers we surveyed (52%) reported that at the end of the last academic year they were having to limit their in-school activities.

Off-site activities (e.g. swimming, travel training, work experience) were also not able to take place in most settings. Seven out of ten Headteachers (70%) said they had restricted their usual out of school activities in the last academic year.

There was a statistically significant difference in the proportion of leaders from different types of settings reporting restrictions to their activities. Independent schools were less likely to report having restricted either on-site or out of school activities.²⁷

Headteachers and parents described how these activities are integral to pupils' lives, as well as a way to deliver some of the care and support pupils with EHCPs need. Not being able to deliver them was therefore seen as negatively impacting on pupils' development, wellbeing, and behaviour.

²⁶ See Schools coronavirus operational guidance. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/schools-coronavirus-covid-19-operational-guidance>

²⁷ $\chi^2(3, N=170) = 12.493, p=0.002$ - 53% of Independent schools versus 79% of Academies/free schools and 79% of LA maintained schools reported restricting out of school activities, and $\chi^2(3, N=170) = 28.341, p<0.001$, 23% of Independent schools versus 67% of Academies/free schools and 66% of LA maintained schools reported restricting in-school activities.

College A takes students to a local riding centre three times a week. They learn to care for the horses and take them out for a ride which improves pupils' core strength and mobility, as well as their mental wellbeing. The centre is staffed by volunteers who are all older and so have not been working throughout the pandemic, meaning visits to the riding centre have had to stop.

Staff at School B go to their local swimming pool with a group of eight pupils weekly. Since the pool has reopened, to adhere to safety guidelines, they have implemented lane swimming only. The pupils cannot adhere to this, so they have not been attending.

School C runs a breakfast club where pupils get ready for school, have a shower and get dressed. This was an ideal opportunity for them to develop their independence skills but has not been able to happen since March 2020.

School D takes pupils to the local supermarket every day to buy their lunch. The supermarket has insisted all customers wear face masks and adhere to social distancing, which these pupils cannot do, so they have been asked not to visit.

School E is keeping each bubble in the school separate. They cannot afford to clean their food preparation areas after each bubble goes in, so only one bubble a day can now do cookery. For the older students, this means they are not getting practice in preparing their own meals.

Wellbeing of families and staff

The negative effects of this period on wellbeing were not just limited to pupils. Families, staff, and school leaders were also reported to have been adversely affected.

Families

In the survey nine in ten Headteachers (89%) said they thought that parents' support needs had increased over the pandemic. There were no statistically significant differences in the responses of providers according to the type of setting, the age of pupils they cater for or level of FSM eligibility. Leaders, therefore, see higher levels of parental need as a universal trend, rather than limited to specific pockets of need or deprivation.

Parents and Headteachers reported how parental stress and anxiety had increased due to the removal of their support structure over this period, their need to manage work with additional caring, and the renewal of lockdown measures, various restrictions and frequent changes in messages.

Parents reported being exhausted and feeling like they could not cope anymore. They also detailed their heartbreak at the effect this period had had on their children and family, and angry and resentful about the loss of support and consideration for families like theirs. There were several reports of parents experiencing mental health breakdowns as well as physical conditions contributed to by stress, such as strokes and heart attacks

"I'm emotionally scarred, exhausted and cannot see how I'll ever recover. As parents, we just cannot go on. The strain has just been too great." Parent

Parents also reported negative effects on their other children (without SEND). Due to the issues of being at home with a sibling with SEND over this period, siblings were said to be suffering from increased anxiety and the effects of trauma as well as academic and social losses. Often parents detailed that these children were now needing additional support from their schools to help them cope and recover

"It's just been too much for his little brother. He's seen things he should never have seen. He's struggled with his home learning because we've not had time for him, we've been busy with [our son with SEND]. He's not had any fun, he's just been stuck here with us in chaos." Parent

The increased stresses of this period and the issues of supporting a child with SEND without the usual support (educational and wider) had reportedly led to strains on other family relationships. Many parents reported issues with their partners. A small number of parents had separated or said they were considering it because this period of intense pressure had strained their relationship. Informal support and links with wider family had been severely disrupted due to the pandemic – the lockdowns, restrictions on socialising and concerns about everyone's safety. This had not only made coping more difficult for families but had in some cases disturbed relationships between children and their grandparents and other family members.

Staff in special settings

Headteachers reported how, over this period, staff in special settings had:

- worked harder (including providing in-school places for as many pupils as possible and tailoring learning support for those at home),
- provided more support to families, including trying to plug the gaps left by other providers,
- dealt with greater pupil behaviour issues, often due to increased mental health problems
- managed their anxieties despite working with a high-risk cohort,
- and felt they were operating without clear guidance or support yet expected to make highly important decisions for which they would be held responsible.

This increase in pressure reportedly caused staff burn-out and led to poor mental and physical health. In interviews over half of the respondents reported that some staff and leaders had already decided to leave the profession or were said to be considering doing so, staff absence had increased and morale was at an all-time low. There were concerns about the workforce issues this was likely to lead to.

"I would say my staff are broken. Their mental health is dreadful. There has been a distinct lack of value for us over this time, with no textbook on how to manage what's been going on... So we have had a high number of leavers." Headteacher

"Who'd want to work in a special school now? We rely on TAs, yet they're being asked to perform tasks they've never been trained for, including standing in for specialists, they're supporting parents and pupils who are struggling, they're working with youngsters who can't social distance and all for the same wage they could get in a supermarket". Headteacher

The latest DfE workforce data (September 2021) appears to support these concerns with the highest proportions of teaching staff, leaders and Teaching Assistants absent from State special schools, compared to other school types, for both Covid and non-Covid-related reasons²⁸.

28 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2021-week-40>

Addressing losses – the Recovery Plan

The Government has set up an Educational Recovery Plan²⁹ to address the effects of the lockdown and associated disruptions. Funding was made available through:

- a one-off catch up premium for the 2021 academic year
- a one-off Recovery premium for the 2021/22 academic year for State-funded schools and linked to Pupil Premium levels
- the National Tutoring programme for 5-16-year-olds, also linked to Pupil Premium levels
- summer school funding for Secondary schools in 2021.

However, Headteachers of special schools and colleges felt that this package of support was unsuitable for the special sector because and did not provide what they and their pupils needed. Our survey demonstrated that:

- While 66% of Headteachers had accessed, or considered accessing, catch up funding, many felt they were ineligible or it was inadequate to cover the types and levels of additional costs they had incurred (such as specialist mental health support, pool cleaning, residential area sanitation).
- Only 8% of Heads had applied for or would consider applying for, National Tutoring Programme funding. Interviews revealed that this was because they believed their pupils would not benefit from academic input delivered by a tutor not known to them or inexperienced in supporting pupils at special schools and colleges. Leaders also felt they did not have sufficient capacity for their staff to provide additional learning input.

“The NTP? Ridiculous.... It smacks of a government who has no idea and no idea of the needs of our children and families.” Headteacher

- 31% of Headteachers said they would consider running summer schools. However, during interviews, they identified that these would be to provide opportunities for pupils to have fun and a break for families, rather than extra learning. Headteachers were concerned about how Summer schools could be staffed appropriately, given the need for specialist support coupled with the need for their staff to take a break before the start of the new academic year.
- 20% of Headteachers said they would consider extending the school day, an option that has been discussed by policymakers. However, the interviews showed that Heads would primarily use any such extra time to provide more opportunities for social interactions and engagement activities rather than additional teaching. There were questions raised as to whether pupils needed, or would be receptive to, more learning at this stage. In addition, there were concerns about transport, as many pupils at special settings rely on school transport, and Headteachers were unsure whether this could be flexed to accommodate a longer day. Headteachers also said that school staff should not be expected to work additional hours, making any extension to the regular school day difficult to manage operationally without additional funding to cover staff time.

There were significant differences in the proportion of providers accessing catch up funding according to their FSM rates, the stage of provision and type of provider.

²⁹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/993053/Education_recovery_support_June-2021.pdf

Those with the highest rates of FSM eligibility were less likely to have accessed catch up funding³⁰ as were independent schools³¹, whilst providers with younger children were more likely to have accessed catch up funding³².

There were also statistically significant differences regarding which providers had decided to extend their school day. Providers with the highest rates of FSM eligibility were more likely to have done so³³, as were independent schools³⁴. In addition, colleges were most likely to have extended their day, followed by secondary schools. Both these types of providers were significantly more likely to have made this change than primary schools, none of which had extended their day.³⁵

Headteachers and parents identified a range of measures they felt should form part of any plan to support pupils with EHCPs, their families and staff in specialist settings to help them recover. They recommended that an effective recovery plan should:

- Focus on more than educational attainment
- Increase health and care input for pupils with EHCPs
- Specifically address emotional wellbeing and mental health – of pupils and staff
- Extend support to families – ensuring they also recover from the effects of pandemic disruption and are able to support their children
- Be informed by experts – trusting Headteachers to decide what their setting needs and how best to allocate funding
- Allow sufficient time for meaningful recovery – not being a ‘one off’ or short-term solution
- Address pre-existing funding shortfalls in SEND³⁶, and lack of specialist professionals to support pupils with SEND and their families (including in health, care, respite and especially CAMHS services) which have been exacerbated by the changes brought about by the pandemic.

“Special schools do more than just educate. The recovery period should address wellbeing and social progress as well as academic. Access to therapeutic, SaLT [Speech and language therapy] and OT [Occupational therapy] service should be more readily available.” Headteacher

“She’s missed 12 months of education. It’s not learning she’s lost out on – it’s her understanding of the world, experiences, seeing new people and seeing faces and different views. She’s lost relationships, which are hard for her to establish in the first place. She’s gone without the structure and supportive environment she needs to thrive. Basically, she’s lost a year of what she needs.” Parent

30 χ^2 (1, N=188) = 4.955, $p=0.030$ - 54% of schools with the highest rates of FSM, compared to 71% of other schools had accessed catch up funding.

31 χ^2 (3, N=189) = 45.533, $p<0.001$ - 32% of Independent schools versus 83% of Academies/free schools and 81% of LA maintained schools had accessed catch up funding.

32 χ^2 (3, N=189) = 12.971, $p=0.005$ – 95% of primary schools, 66% of all through providers, 59% of secondary schools and 43% of colleges had accessed catch up funding.

33 χ^2 (1, N=188) = 5.089, $p=0.030$ - 30% of providers with the highest levels of FSM eligibility compared to 16% of other providers.

34 χ^2 (3, N=190) = 24.897, $p<0.001$ - 41% of Independent schools versus 9% of Academies/free schools and 11% of LA maintained schools reported extending their school day.

35 χ^2 (3, N=189) = 12.320, $p=0.006$ - 43% of colleges had extended the school day, compared to 28% of secondary schools, 18% of all through providers and 0% of primary schools.

36 House of Commons Education Committee (2019) Special educational needs and disabilities: First report of session 2019. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cmselect/cmeduc/20/20.pdf>

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The Government must be open and transparent about the current levels of need amongst families, service providers, SEND organisations and children and young people and the issues they are facing. Only by doing so can we commit to finding solutions together which address the significant needs of those in the sector and help it to 'level up'.

Our research has shown:

- Pupils in special settings have had their development more severely affected than their peers.
- Health and care input that pupils with EHCPs are legally entitled to receive has been severely disrupted, affecting pupils progress, family wellbeing and the burden on staff in special settings.
- Recovery support currently available does not meet the needs of this sector.

Ministers need to effectively engage with all those involved in the sector who have the expertise required to meaningfully inform future support provision.

At a time when public finances are under strain, the temptation may be to look for short-term, lower-cost fixes. We would remind Ministers and the Chancellor about the known fiscal benefits of early intervention³⁷.

Recommendations

Whilst this has been a difficult time for all schools and families, this research shows that for pupils attending special settings, their families and those working to support them, the impact of the pandemic has been even greater. A response must therefore be formulated and implemented at a pace and scale that reflects the urgent and substantial needs of the sector.

Our research on the impact of the pandemic on special settings, the staff who work in them and the pupils who attend, suggest there are 4 key recommendations for the new team in DfE and the Chancellor to consider at this critical stage of the national recovery effort.

1 The Educational Recovery Fund needs to be made suitable for pupils with SEND.

Pupils with SEND need to be fully included in The Educational Recovery Fund. This means the fund needs to be available for all special settings - not just State providers or pupils of a certain age - and should not only be allowed to be spent in certain ways.

The Recovery Fund needs to address the needs of schools with the highest FSM eligibility which have seen the worst effects and potentially face the greatest challenges moving forwards. However, the fund must also acknowledge that FSM eligibility alone is not a sufficiently sensitive indicator to identify all needs.

³⁷ Early intervention: smart investment, massive savings (HM Government, 2011) (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61012/earlyintervention-smartinvestment.pdf)

The Recovery Fund should be paid directly to schools and colleges as they have an in-depth understanding of their pupils' needs and what is required for their communities to recover.

2 There needs to be greater Health and Care resource.

Funding is needed not only to address the EHCP inputs lost over this period but also the backlog of need that has accrued and the increased demand for support and assistance which has developed as a result. Needs have increased across society, but specific funding should be available to provide the legally required support for pupils with EHCPs and to do so at a consistently high quality.

We suggest that a proportion of the newly introduced Health and Care levy should be committed to the SEND sector.

3. Capacity to address mental health needs must be increased.

Emotional wellbeing has taken a severe hit over this period, not only in pupils but their families and those who work to support them. To prevent increased need and issues in the future (including greater demand for under-pressure services and workforce and recruitment issues) there is a need to address this now to avoid it impacting staff retention. Suggestions include mental health first aid training for staff, input from external specialists, evidence on effective interventions for use with pupils with a range of SEND, better support and counselling services for staff and education leaders, and more respite and social support for families. Issues within the SEND system and lack of understanding of the needs of children and young people with SEND amongst non educational service providers have contributed to the negative effects on emotional wellbeing over this time. There is a need to address this across government departments and wider society.

4 The SEND review must be published as a matter of urgency.

This review was first announced in 2019 but has been severely delayed, and has missed three planned publication deadlines³⁸. It is now more crucial than ever that it is published. This publication will begin a thorough enquiry into the state of the sector and what this means for the life chance of children and young people already facing the greatest barriers in life. Systemic and practical problems within the sector had been well evidenced before the pandemic and this period has caused these to be accelerated and exacerbated, leading to greater issues.

The review must take account of the issues raised by the response to the pandemic, and identify the key lessons learnt and the continuing challenges being faced. The reality of the multiple issues facing the sector needs to be clearly set out and the commitment and drive for success shown by many over this time acknowledged.

Hopefully, with Nadhim Zahawi who previously held the DfE SEND brief, leading the way at DfE and the Chancellor's new commitment to health and social care funding, we will see a clearer acknowledgement of the current and longstanding issues special schools face, sufficient funding made available to properly address them, and a genuine commitment to providing the best possible lives for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

³⁸ <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/sector-in-limbo-as-third-send-review-deadline-passes/>



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