

Context

In April 2021, there were 1,228 primary schools in Wales. This is six fewer than in January 2020, when there were 1,234. The number of primary schools working as federations increased again, with 101 schools now working within 47 federations. The number of primary school pupils has increased from 272,000 in January 2020 to 273,000 in April 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021o).

As part of our engagement and pastoral work, we had spoken with all schools in the sector by the end of the academic year. Discussions with headteachers and senior leaders focused on the implications of the pandemic for the wellbeing of pupils and staff, how schools supported teaching and learning, leadership throughout the pandemic, and preparations for the Curriculum for Wales, where appropriate. We also made pastoral visits to schools in a statutory category.

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Wellbeing

For all schools, supporting pupils' wellbeing was the priority as they returned in September 2020. Most pupils were happy to return to school and showed a desire for learning and an eagerness for a taste of 'normal' school life. This was also the case when schools re-opened in the spring term after the second national lockdown, although the physical and emotional effects of lockdown and a lack of engagement with friends had made this time more challenging for pupils than the initial lockdown period. Most schools built on their existing procedures to identify and support pupils' wellbeing needs.

When pupils returned to school, teachers often focused on providing pupils with opportunities to talk, to rebuild relationships, and to engage in physical activities, creative tasks and outdoor learning. As time went on, teachers became more innovative in adapting and refining ways to support pupils' wellbeing. In a UK-wide study, the Child Poverty Action Group (2021, p.13), found that: *'young people talked enthusiastically about how their teachers had found creative ways to help them stay in touch with their friends and classmates... allocated time for online socialising separate from their learning, such as online quizzes or games, or messaging functions to speak regularly with their friends and classmates'*.



Supporting pupil wellbeing on their return to school

Ysgol Llangwryfon, Ceredigion, added a number of daily wellbeing activities to the curriculum, including frequent exercise periods outside, additional circle times and opportunities for pupils to create class murals that reflected their impressions and feelings during this period. All pupils in Years 5 and 6 received a book to use as a feelings' diary. Each page had been cut into four parts – things that concerned the pupils the previous evening, things that were a concern for the pupils that morning, things that made pupils happy today and things that the pupils are excited about. There was an opportunity for the pupils to complete the diary first thing each morning and one member of the staff in the class monitored the contents of the diaries before playtime. In the event of a concern, staff intervened purposefully as necessary.

Following lockdowns, many schools noted a deterioration in pupils' social skills, such as in their ability to listen to others or to take turns. Nearly all schools found that the lockdowns had affected the wellbeing of pupils adversely to some extent. Pupils found it difficult to focus, to pay attention for extended periods and to persevere with tasks. A few pupils were more anxious than usual, for example around incidents that had happened at home or regarding schoolwork or renewing friendships. This reflects the findings of Loades *et al.* (2021, p.1218) that *'children and adolescents are probably more likely to experience high rates of depression and most likely anxiety during and after enforced isolation ends'*.

Informal wellbeing sessions held remotely

At Ysgol Llanfairpwll, Anglesey, in addition to the academic provision, the school offered virtual 'cuppa and a biscuit' sessions to Year 5 and Year 6 pupils during the spring lockdown period. In these sessions, pupils were divided into small groups and given the opportunity to chat with their friends under the guidance of a teacher to support their emotional wellbeing. Each session included an opportunity to have fun in the form of a quiz or a game, and to discuss feelings and any concerns. Each session had a different focus, such as relaxing the mind, or motivating pupils to engage and complete tasks.

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There was a reduction in the physical fitness of a minority of pupils, mainly due to inactivity during periods of remote learning. In response, staff introduced activities to improve pupils' physical fitness and general wellbeing. Teachers made greater use of outdoor areas for all pupils to participate in physical activities to encourage them to lead a healthier lifestyle.

Many leaders identified a deterioration in a minority of pupils' behaviour after a short period back in school. In these schools, staff continued to place a strong emphasis on strategies such as circle time to find ways of resolving disagreements.

From September 2020 onwards, schools continued to identify pupils who were vulnerable, for example due to concerns about their welfare. They also identified pupils whose learning had been disproportionately affected during the pandemic. During the second national lockdown, schools increasingly offered on-site support in their hub provision for wider groups of pupils whom they considered to be vulnerable.

Safeguarding referrals often increased during lockdown. In general, meetings to support pupils who had been identified as needing support from specialist services continued remotely. Schools were increasingly supporting families' wider needs, such as distributing food parcels, assisting parents with applications for financial support and providing 'a listening ear' to those who were anxious.

Staff in many schools provided vulnerable families with considerable additional support to encourage them to ensure that their children attended school. This included doorstep visits by staff or education welfare officers to engage with families and to explain the importance of attending school. When schools reopened to pupils after the second national lockdown, many leaders identified that attendance levels were beginning to approach pre-pandemic levels. Pupil attendance was consistently between 90% and 95% for most weeks of the summer term. Average attendance during the last full year of schooling, in 2018-2019, was just below 95% (Welsh Government, 2019a).

In the autumn term, nearly all schools provided additional intervention programmes for those pupils in need of extra literacy, numeracy, and social and emotional support. In general, pupils responded positively to the support provided and made beneficial progress during the term.

During the second lockdown, staff continued to work with pupils who required additional support, either via remote learning or in the hub provision, although teachers often found it more challenging to meet pupils' individual needs remotely. In a minority of schools, pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) continued to find it difficult to engage with remote learning activities. In response, schools often provided small group sessions to meet pupils' specific needs remotely and following their return to face-to-face learning.

Where schools had a significant number of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL), staff often found that supporting the wellbeing of these pupils presented them with specific challenges when their families had limited understanding of English or Welsh. In instances where families felt particularly isolated due to their limited understanding of English, schools offered them continual support.

Adapting to meet the needs of the school community

Mount Street Infant and Nursery School, Powys, had to deal with unusual circumstances during the pandemic – including many pupils with EAL and a school population that changes often due to the proximity to the Infantry Battle School Brecon where many Gurkha soldiers serve. During the pandemic, new pupils continued to arrive, often with little or no English. Families often felt isolated during the pandemic. As a result, staff identified the need to take extra measures to support them. The school used a grant from the Ministry of Defence Education Support Fund to employ a Nepalese teaching assistant who was able to help with communication. For example, she created videos for pupils and parents about how to access remote learning, supported pupils at school and in the hub provision, and conducted regular check-in phone calls with families.

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For example, they provided pupils with classes to improve their English or Welsh language, working closely with the local authority's EAL support service. Often, staff made use of translation services to support pupil engagement.

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

In nearly all schools, leaders and teachers noted concerns over pupils' progress due to the impact of the pandemic. Disruption to learning through periods of lockdown and self-isolation led to poorer progress in the literacy and numeracy skills of many pupils. For example, although schools provided pupils with reading activities online and suggestions for practising their reading at home, pupils' engagement in these opportunities varied considerably. Those who did not read regularly during lockdown made little progress. This meant that, when they returned to school, older pupils sometimes found it difficult to read beyond the literal meaning of a text, and younger pupils often struggled to decode unfamiliar words and make sense of what they were reading. The Education Policy Institute (2021b) estimated that, on average, pupils in primary schools experienced a learning loss of over three months in mathematics. These concerns were repeated, but to a lesser extent, following the second national lockdown. Teachers noted a deterioration in pupils' listening, speaking and social skills, particularly for vulnerable pupils and those in the foundation phase. In the foundation phase, the greatest concern was about pupils missing key child developmental milestones that may affect their emotional wellbeing, communication and learning development.

Most schools that teach through the medium of Welsh identified regression in the confidence of many pupils from non-Welsh speaking homes to speak in Welsh. This was often more evident in younger pupils. In all schools, where pupils attended hub provision or where they had engaged well with distance learning the impact on their progress overall was reduced. During the second half of the autumn term, most pupils' skills recovered steadily following their return to school. This trend was repeated following the second national lockdown.

On returning to school after lockdown, teachers adapted their teaching strategies to reflect the limitations imposed by COVID-19 restrictions and to attempt to lessen the effects of periods of remote learning and time away from peers and staff. Most teachers provided pupils with more opportunities for physical exercise and learning in the outdoor environment, aligning well with Welsh Government (2021h, p.36) guidance that *'recognises the unique value of outdoor learning and the many benefits it brings for learners, including supporting the development of healthy and active lifestyles, developing problem-solving skills, and developing understanding and respect for nature and the environment in which they live'*.

In many schools, teachers devised activities that encouraged pupils to strengthen or regain skills in collaborative and in independent working. For example, one school provided pupils with 'big' open questions based on recent news stories. Teachers encouraged pupils to form their own opinions about current affairs and to present their views in a variety of ways. In many cases, they prioritised activities that allowed opportunities for pupils to play and socialise as part of their learning.

Using digital tools and online learning to progress pupils' skills in listening and speaking

On return to school in September, staff at Stacey Primary School, Cardiff, identified that pupils required support to improve their oracy skills, particularly those pupils with EAL who had only heard their home language during this time. During the second national lockdown, teachers integrated regular opportunities for pupils to use and develop their listening and speaking skills through their distance learning model. Teachers threaded whole-school approaches to developing spoken language through learning activities, and they encouraged pupils to provide verbal responses, such as posting audios and videos of their talk. For instance, Year 2 pupils studied 'The Owl and the Pussycat', and made puppets to help them retell the poem, sharing their performances with their teachers and peers. Approaches such as this helped pupils to use the language of narrative and description while learning at home.

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During the pandemic, many schools continued to adapt their curriculum to incorporate the areas of learning and experience (AoLE) outlined in the Curriculum for Wales. In particular, they placed an emphasis on including elements of the health and wellbeing AoLE to support pupils' physical and mental health. Many schools continued to consider ways to embed the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales into their provision, often focusing on how these can help pupils to develop their resilience through challenging times. In a few cases, teachers designed tasks that specifically developed pupils' skills as learners, for example considering how tasks could be adapted to include opportunities to develop pupils' resilience. Nevertheless, schools often apply the four purposes at too superficial a level. For example, teachers ask pupils to consider at the end of a lesson which of the four purposes may be relevant to tasks they have completed.

On the return to school in September, most schools identified a need to assess the progress pupils had made during the previous, disrupted year. Nearly all approached assessment arrangements with sensitivity. They used a variety of different methods, including informal teacher observations, standardised tests and the Welsh Government's personalised assessments. Often, schools placed a greater reliance on teachers using their professional judgement to ascertain pupils' learning needs, rather than tests that often assess a narrow range of skills. In a few cases, schools moved away from the use of formal tracking systems as they felt that these relied on a limited set of measures and did not help them identify well enough the breadth of the impact of the pandemic on pupils' learning and wellbeing. In many schools, teachers understood the importance of maintaining a dialogue with pupils about their learning during periods of remote learning and during in-school teaching. By the second national lockdown in spring 2021, most schools had developed systems that enabled teachers to provide pupils with helpful feedback on the tasks they completed at home.

From September 2020, schools continued to develop and refine their approaches to remote learning. Due to improved skills and confidence among staff, pupils and parents in the use of remote learning technologies and techniques, the second national lockdown had less of a detrimental impact on pupils' learning than the initial one. The improved quality of schools' remote learning offer resulted in increased engagement levels for most pupils. Frequent check-in sessions to answer pupils' questions and address misconceptions in their learning, as well as the selective use of live sessions, were valuable in engaging pupils. Many schools recognised that this approach was best balanced with other means of delivering learning, although 'Getting online: barriers and successes for the provision of online learning during the January 2021 Tier 4 lockdown' (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2021b, p.12) found that many schools felt pressure to provide 'live' online lessons when '*...this may not be the right method for engaging learners, unless part of a mixed approach*'.

Adapting approaches to remote learning

The headteacher at Ysgol Dolafon, Powys, worked with staff to devise effective ways to improve pupil engagement. During the first national lockdown, only a very few pupils regularly engaged with the tasks set for them. The headteacher understood that several factors contributed to this, including the school's rural location with many pupils living and helping out on their family farm or having parents who were busy with their own work.

During the autumn term, the school had to close for a short period due to an outbreak of COVID-19. During this time, the headteacher introduced regular, live wellbeing sessions that gave the staff confidence in the use of remote learning technology. As a result, staff were ready to include live sessions in the provision offered to all pupils during the second national lockdown period in spring 2021. The headteacher devised a weekly tracking form for each class where staff recorded pupil engagement and intervened as necessary. This allowed teachers and the headteacher to identify which pupils needed further encouragement and support. The headteacher introduced a staff evaluation form where staff recorded weekly what went well and what could have gone better. These notes were then used during a discussion between the staff to identify solutions and support. These changes helped improve pupil engagement from 10% during the first lockdown to 90% during the second lockdown.

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Frequently, staff dedicated considerable time in developing online resources to support parents to help their children with learning at home. For example, staff created short videos that demonstrated specific approaches to mathematics. In Welsh-medium schools, live sessions enabled pupils who do not speak Welsh at home opportunities to practise the language regularly.

Through the periods of lockdown, many schools attempted to provide foundation phase pupils with a range of activities that they could complete at home that reflected an experiential learning approach. Most teachers found it challenging to deliver learning experiences remotely that align well with effective foundation phase practice. In these cases, the success of pupils' learning often relied heavily on the skills of parents, and their availability, to support their children. While engagement levels for remote learning improved during the second national lockdown, younger pupils were still less likely to engage consistently in remote learning than those in key stage 2.

On return to in-school learning, measures associated with controlling the spread of COVID-19 limited foundation phase practices. For example, opportunities for staff and pupils to work collaboratively were limited because of the need to ensure social distancing. As time progressed, and particularly after the second national lockdown, foundation phase practitioners became more adept at thinking creatively to minimise limitations to pupils' learning. For example, staff increased the proportion of outdoor learning and used 'bubbles' more effectively to allow pupils and staff to work together more closely.

Leadership

Leaders found it challenging to simultaneously develop their schools, support staff and ensure that pupils received effective education during the pandemic. Focusing on operational matters and supporting the wellbeing of staff and pupils have been priorities throughout the year. Often, staff worked diligently to implement new safety practices while supporting the needs of pupils, either remotely or face-to-face. There was an unprecedented degree of pressure on the wellbeing of staff as they managed rapidly changing situations within school and made themselves increasingly accessible to pupils and their families over time. Many leaders reported raised levels of anxiety in staff as they did this. Nearly all leaders prioritised the wellbeing of their staff and pupils over their own. They recognised that the wellbeing of staff has had a direct impact on that of pupils. This was highlighted in the *Framework on embedding a whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing*, Welsh Government (2021h).

Managing staff wellbeing via web-free sessions

At Archbishop Rowan Williams School, in Monmouthshire, leaders took account of staff feedback that constantly being on-call online was having an adverse effect on their own wellbeing. In addition, there were concerns from parents about the amount of time their children were spending on screen. Leaders decided to use Wednesdays for staff planning, preparation and assessment time. While tasks were still set, there were no live-streamed lessons or ICT dependent learning on that day and teachers did not monitor messages. There was always a dedicated member of staff 'on duty' for each class to pick up wellbeing or safeguarding issues that occurred on a Wednesday. This provided staff with protected time to consider their pupils' learning for the following week and to analyse patterns of engagement during the previous week. There was immediate positive feedback from pupils and families, and staff wellbeing improved greatly.

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The wellbeing of headteachers was a cause for concern throughout the year. Most felt an unrelenting weight of responsibility for the wellbeing of their learners and staff. They felt worn-out as they had not had a substantial break since before the initial national lockdown. They pointed to 'increasing levels of stress and anxiety' and 'negatively affecting personal relationships and daily life' as the two principal ways that they were affected. Many raised concerns that receiving updates from the Welsh Government on changes to practice at the same time as the public was difficult to manage and made them anxious. Support from local authorities for the wellbeing of leaders strengthened as the year went on. Nonetheless, many felt that it was not clear who was responsible for providing emotional support for them.

As the year went on, leaders consulted regularly with families and gathered their views on the school's provision, particularly during periods of remote learning. In almost all primary schools, leaders reflected constantly on their approaches to remote and face-to-face learning and reviewed, refined, and adapted them where necessary.

Nearly all leaders recognised the importance of keeping families updated about their plans and processes in a clear and timely manner. This communication helped them to understand what support families needed and enabled them and their staff to provide it. This often included providing families with support in dealing with the behaviour of their children, providing them with technical support or delivering work packs or food parcels to them.

Schools received several grants and additional funding throughout the year. Leaders welcomed these, particularly the Welsh Government's (2020e) funding for the 'Recruit, recover, raise standards' [accelerating learning programme](#). Most schools used this additional funding to employ extra members of staff or increase the hours of existing staff. Many deployed them to improve pupils' literacy and numeracy skills or to increase emotional support for them. A few schools prioritised the development of independent learning skills for vulnerable pupils. As pupils experienced many months of remote learning, it was difficult for leaders to evaluate the impact of grants on pupils' progress within a short period. Many leaders received other funding late in the financial year and they found it challenging to spend this meaningfully and in time.

Leaders continued to focus on providing staff with a range of professional learning opportunities throughout the year. Developing the digital skills of staff further and deepening their understanding of different teaching and learning approaches were integral to their professional learning offer.

Evaluating remote learning

At Ysgol Eifion Wyn, Gwynedd, leaders and staff evaluated their delivery of remote learning regularly, but informally. They discussed their methods and identified approaches that were most effective. Leaders liaised with parents to seek their views of their children's learning experiences and considered their responses. As a result, staff used live learning sessions that were short and stimulating to keep pupils interested and encourage them to engage consistently with their learning. The school contacted the families of those pupils who needed additional guidance to complete tasks and offered them advice and assistance.

Starting conversations about professional learning

A middle leader at Llandrillo yn Rhos Primary School, Conwy, established a professional learning chat group so that colleagues could keep in touch when the school was closed. In the group messages, staff shared aspects of professional learning and resources that interested them, such as professional journals, podcasts, or video clips of experts delivering lectures. They reviewed these materials and discussed implications for their practice, signposting colleagues to relevant resources. This approach gave staff ownership of their own professional learning and enabled them to focus on things that mattered to them and interested them.

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As the year went on, leaders encouraged staff to engage in webinars to enhance their understanding of developments in education, such as the Curriculum for Wales and ALN reform.

By the spring term, a majority of leaders considered that they were on-track to implement the Curriculum for Wales in 2022 and that retaining the planned timeline was important to maintaining momentum. At this time, a minority of leaders articulated a clear understanding of the process of curriculum design or were able to place their school in the context of the Welsh Government (2021d) guidance document '[Curriculum for Wales: The journey to 2022](#)' to facilitate such conversations. In these cases, the school's vision was clear and included plans for evolving teaching in line with the 12 pedagogical principles set out in [Successful Futures](#). By the summer term, more leaders had refocused their attention on developing their plans to incorporate the principles of the Curriculum for Wales. As a result of the additional pressures brought by the pandemic, many leaders felt that their school would benefit from a prolonged, uninterrupted period to work further on developing their curricular approaches.

A further area of professional learning that nearly all schools focused on as the year progressed was the implementation of ALN reform. Leaders often sourced opportunities for staff to develop their skills and knowledge in areas such as safeguarding, attachment disorder, autism spectrum disorder, dealing with trauma in children and communicating through sign language. A minority of leaders were concerned about their school's readiness to implement ALN changes on time, and the workload pressures on staff who lead on this aspect of the school's work. A few headteachers re-structured staff responsibilities to support this reform. In most schools, staff received professional learning opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of the impending changes, with a few working in partnership with their clusters to achieve this.

