

Context

In April 2021, there were 182 secondary schools in Wales. This is one fewer than in January 2020, when there were 183. In April 2021 there were over 174,100 learners in secondary schools in Wales, around 3,000 more than in January 2020 (Welsh Government, 2021 o).

As part of our engagement work with the sector, we conducted 172 engagement meetings held remotely and visited 29 schools this 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

When schools opened in September 2020, most pupils were happy to be back in school and behaviour was generally good, although a few pupils found it difficult to readjust to the routines of school life. Following the return of all pupils after Easter 2021, behaviour was still mainly positive, although there was a deterioration in the behaviour of a few. The attendance of many pupils was good overall. Nevertheless, pupil attendance remained consistently below 90% for the summer term, compared with average attendance of just below 94% for the last full year of education in 2018-2019 (Welsh Government, 2019b). The attendance of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds was notably below that of other pupils. Headteachers reported a rise in persistent absence amongst specific groups of pupils, such as those eligible for free school meals. In a few cases, Year 11 pupils did not return to school after the second national lockdown, which left them at risk of leaving school without any qualifications.

Schools were especially concerned about the impact of the pandemic on wellbeing and anxiety among pupils. This was highlighted in 'Coronavirus and Me' (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020, p.20), which found that only 11% of 12 to 18-year-olds did not feel worried about their education. Many schools reported an increase in child protection referrals and demand for counselling services, particularly following the second lockdown.



Botwm Becso (Concern Button)

Ysgol Gyfun Y Strade added a 'Botwm Becso' (Concern Button) to its website. Pupils can use this button at any time of day or night to report any concerns or worries they may have. The information is confidential and goes straight to the assistant headteacher responsible for wellbeing, who then contacts the pupil and decides how best to support them.

Although pupil engagement with online learning was better during the second national lockdown, the impact on their mental health and wellbeing was more acute. This time, pupils generally spent more time learning online, and poor weather and dark evenings had a negative impact on their wellbeing. Increasingly, schools introduced 'no screen time' days or periods to support pupils' wellbeing.

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The impact of the pandemic on specific groups of learners has been considerable. Those with additional learning needs (ALN) tended to engage less than other pupils with online learning, although schools offered them support. For example, they involved teaching assistants in online classes and invited pupils into school so that staff could help them to complete their work and support them with any other issues. Overall, more able pupils engaged well with learning from home. Pupils with English as an additional language found online learning particularly challenging, especially if their parents did not speak English. Pupils who usually had alternative curriculum provision, such as work experience or outdoor learning courses, could not access their usual learning experiences, and this had a negative impact on their motivation and engagement. There were specific concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of pupils in examination year groups, who were at risk of significant stress when taking many assessments over a short period of time.

The divide between pupils from disadvantaged and more privileged backgrounds became more pronounced over the course of the pandemic. The former group were less likely to have access to Wi-Fi, digital devices and support with their schoolwork at home. Their families were more likely to be impacted financially by the pandemic and larger families needed to self-isolate more frequently. These findings are also reflected in the Child Poverty Action Group's (2021) report 'The Cost of Learning in Lockdown', published in March 2021.

Partnership to support vulnerable families

Coedcae Comprehensive School established a successful partnership with the local authority to support vulnerable families. The school identified vulnerable families, who were not on the free school meals register but were facing increasing financial pressures due to job losses or because of the furlough scheme. With a weekly grant of £250, the school delivered hygiene packs to those families to relieve them of financial pressures where money had to be spent mostly on essentials like food rather than hygiene products. As a result, the school built solid relationships with pupils and their families and helped with the issues and struggles of their school community.

Providing mini learning zones to support pupils to access support

In September, Bassaleg School restructured its Progress Centre provision to provide mini learning zones for each year group. This enabled pupils with ALN to access specialist support safely, gain respite and, if necessary, facilitate a gradual transition to school whilst remaining in their bubble. Support staff were deployed to provide consistent support to pupils and were provided with specific guidance on how they could support pupils in a COVID-19 safe way.

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Throughout the pandemic, schools invested substantial resources and time into monitoring and supporting pupils' wellbeing, particularly the most vulnerable. During periods of lockdown, most schools contacted pupils regularly to check on their wellbeing. Leaders used additional funding to provide pastoral support and intervention programmes. Many schools focused strongly on wellbeing in their general provision and offered childcare and hub provision for specific pupils.

Schools continued to work closely with outside agencies, such as social services and the educational psychology service. A few of the changes brought about by the pandemic, such as remote meetings, benefited this work. However, restrictions on visitors to schools posed challenges, for example, when educational psychologists needed to carry out assessments of pupils.

This year, schools continued to lend digital equipment to pupils who did not have it at home or to pupils who had to share with other family members. However, schools sometimes struggled to buy equipment because of increased demand. As equipment was returned to school, leaders considered how they could improve their provision of equipment to tackle the digital divide that was highlighted during the pandemic, such as those described in 'Getting Online, a briefing by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2021b).

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

Across Wales, there was considerable variation in the amount of school time secondary school pupils lost due to having to self-isolate. In some schools, whole year groups missed up to 12 weeks of face-to-face provision in the autumn term.

During the first national lockdown, there was considerable variation in the online provision offered by schools. In particular, the number of live lessons that schools provided varied greatly. From January 2021, the proportion of online lessons that were delivered live increased notably in most schools. As staff and pupils were more confident in working online by January, schools were able to focus more strongly on the quality of teaching and learning. Most schools plan to retain some aspects of their distance and blended learning provision in the future. For example, they plan to use pre-recorded lessons for revision purposes and when teachers are absent.

Supporting pupils' mental health

Since the return of pupils to school, leaders in Ysgol Syr Hugh Owen identified increased anxiety, self-injury and low mood through their internal systems to monitor pupil wellbeing and welfare. The school created an online classroom for mental health so that pupils could access information and activities to support them. In addition, the school adapted PSE lessons to respond to pupils' needs, such as lessons on building mental resilience, improving personal hygiene and promoting the NHS 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' model.

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Making distance learning engaging and manageable

Leaders and teachers at Cardiff High School worked together to make distance learning engaging and manageable for pupils and staff. Staff were often over-planning online sessions, so they encouraged teachers to strip back the content of the lessons to ensure that effective learning was taking place. They were concerned that too many learning activities were digital, so leaders encouraged teachers to set non-digital tasks like writing in a physical journal or reading a 'real' book. Teachers had regular conversations about pedagogy and took a 'less is more' approach: 'chunking' work, consolidating learning, and ensuring that content was not covered at too fast a pace.

Through meetings and professional learning activities, staff identified that teachers' communication skills were of vital importance, particularly their proficiency in initiating and developing discussion. Teachers also discovered that pupils needed to be guided more systematically through their learning than they would in the classroom where a teacher could easily support individuals or pupils may have picked up cues from their peers. Teachers made expectations clearer and signposted pupils throughout the learning.

Pupils worked to a fixed timetable that mirrored the normal timetable. This included a mixture of live lessons, webinars (where teachers introduced a session, and pupils spent most of the time working individually, coming back at the end of the session to discuss their work) and self-study periods. The strict timetable enabled families to plan their time and access to devices. The school insisted that teachers followed the timetable for this reason. The self-study periods allowed time for staff to plan.

When schools closed in December, those that had experienced a high number of cases in the autumn term were well placed to deliver online learning as they had been able to practise and experiment. Pupil engagement with online learning varied widely, although it generally improved with the increase in live lessons from January 2021. In nearly all schools, a proportion of pupils failed to engage at all with learning from home, and this was a particular issue for schools serving more disadvantaged communities. Schools used a variety of methods to try to engage these pupils. They made regular phone calls to them and their families, made socially distanced home visits, arranged support such as counselling or mentoring and invited them to come into school to complete their work with the support of staff. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) identified that senior leaders believe that up to a third of pupils did not engage with set work (Lucas *et al.*, 2020). Staff were especially concerned about the low engagement of pupils with ALN and those eligible for free school meals. Despite improved systems to monitor pupil engagement, precise evaluation of their engagement remained a challenge, with definitions of what constituted engagement varying between schools.

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When all pupils returned to schools after Easter, restrictions continued to affect face-to-face teaching. For example, teachers were unable to move freely around classrooms and interaction with and between pupils was difficult as they had to wear masks. Extra-curricular activities and wider learning opportunities were very limited throughout the academic year, resulting in a less varied range of provision than usual. Despite the limitations, most pupils said that face-to-face teaching is more effective for them and they prefer learning in school.

When pupils returned in September, schools worked to establish the current level of their knowledge, skills and understanding without overwhelming them with tests. Frequent disruptions to schooling because of cases of the virus made this difficult. As the year progressed, staff became more skilled at assessing pupils' work online using a variety of methods, including recordings of spoken feedback and live written feedback. Overall, assessing pupils' progress and providing meaningful feedback from a distance continued to be a challenge.

Most schools had concerns about pupils' progress in basic literacy and numeracy skills, particularly their reading, extended writing and oracy skills, although they noted improvements in their digital skills. Overall, general gaps in pupils' learning correlated with gaps in provision. For instance, the lack of opportunities for group and paired work and pupils' reluctance to engage in verbal discussions online led to a deterioration in their oracy skills. Despite some common issues, 'gaps' in pupils' learning varied widely within and between schools. Pupils who did not engage well with online learning made less progress than those who did. These pupils were more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds and therefore schools are particularly concerned about the growth in the divide between these pupils and those from more privileged backgrounds. The Education Policy Institute's 'Analysis paper: preliminary research findings on education recovery' published in April 2021 notes uncertainty around the exact nature of 'learning loss' for older pupils but 'found that schools with high levels of disadvantage experienced higher levels of learning loss than other schools, particularly in secondary' (Education Policy Institute, 2021b, p.3). In response to the 'gaps' they identified, many schools focused on specific skills, for example through whole-school reading approaches or numeracy intervention programmes for individual pupils. Some schools adopted an 'interested adult' approach, which involved a member of staff acting as a mentor to pupils who were experiencing difficulties.

Key stage 3 pupils were particularly affected by the pandemic. When pupils returned following the second lockdown, schools prioritised examination year groups, meaning that younger pupils often missed more schooling than older year groups. Year 8 pupils were particularly affected as they only experienced a few months in Year 7 before the pandemic. In most cases, when planning curricular provision under COVID-19 regulations, schools worked hard to ensure that key stage 4 and sixth form pupils had access to their usual range of subjects, including those requiring specialist facilities. As a result, younger pupils often experienced a far narrower curriculum and a more limited diet of stimulating tasks. They were often taught in one classroom and could not access specialist rooms or equipment. Practical subjects tended to focus on theory, so pupils missed out the usual range of activities such as cooking, singing, playing instruments or sports.

Approaches to online formative assessment

In Ysgol y Creuddyn, the mathematics department experimented with approaches to online formative assessment. During live teaching sessions, they used various pieces of software, such as virtual mini whiteboards, to test pupils' understanding of concepts and inform the next steps in teaching. They also used multiple choice diagnostic questioning to gauge pupils' understanding and identify misconceptions early on in teaching so that the misconceptions did not become embedded.

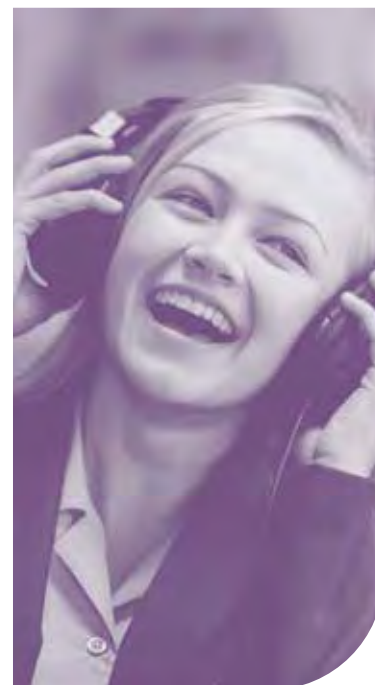
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To create small 'bubbles', in many schools, younger pupils were taught in the same mixed ability class for all subjects and not in their usual sets or bands. Where teachers did not plan effectively enough to meet the needs of all pupils, work was sometimes too difficult for some and too easy for others. Under the arrangements for Centre Determined Grades, a majority of schools used supply teachers or cover supervisors for key stage 3 classes to release time for teachers to mark and administer assessments. This meant that these pupils continued to miss their usual lessons even when back in school. Schools report concerns about the concentration skills and readiness to learn of younger pupils.

In general, schools increased their intervention provision for pupils in need of additional support in September. They tried to maintain this provision when pupils were learning from home, but this proved challenging. During the second lockdown, schools increasingly invited pupils with ALN or who struggled to engage with schoolwork to attend school so that they could be supported by staff. When all pupils returned to school after Easter, teachers wanted to avoid going over work that some pupils had completed, but also recognised the need to support those pupils who did not engage well with learning from home. The Education Policy Institute's (2021c) report, 'Education Reopening and Catch-up Support Across the UK', provides information about the range of government programmes designed to help schools support these pupils, including those in Wales.

Progress with planning for the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales varies widely across the sector. Many schools paused their plans, others continued to develop their plans and those who already had well-developed plans continued to refine their provision. Many schools identified advantages brought about by the pandemic that could support the development of the Curriculum for Wales. Most leaders cited the improvement in staff and pupils' digital skills as a major benefit that could support the roll out of the new curriculum. They also welcomed the renewed focus on supporting pupils' mental health and wellbeing. Many secondary schools have arranged INSET days about Curriculum for Wales. The focus of these has varied considerably from school to school.

Overall, schools have continued to prepare for ALN reform. In many cases, schools have worked with their partner primary schools to plan for the implementation and to provide professional learning, with some clusters of schools sharing an additional needs co-ordinator. Schools welcomed the phased introduction, although are concerned about having to run two systems simultaneously.



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Welsh-medium schools faced particular challenges during the academic year. Nearly all Welsh-medium schools reported a decline in pupils' range of Welsh vocabulary and their use of spoken Welsh as they had limited opportunities to hear and practise the language. This was especially the case for pupils who do not speak Welsh at home. Many pupils lost confidence in their ability to speak Welsh and were therefore reluctant to speak Welsh when they returned to school. In response, many of these schools focused heavily on oracy skills when pupils returned. For example, one school held a speaking and listening week, another appointed a full-time language support teacher and another reintroduced drama lessons. Welsh-medium schools also experienced significant challenges when trying to recruit new staff.

In 2021, the number of entries for examinations for Year 10 pupils increased by 70% in comparison with 2020 (Qualifications Wales, 2021b). Year 10 entries for mathematics-numeracy more than doubled and entries for English literature increased substantially by 60%, despite the disruption to schooling over the course of the year. One of the reasons for this was that the assessment arrangements for English literature changed and many schools felt that pupils were able to sit the qualification in Year 10.

Leadership

Throughout the academic year, leaders in secondary schools demonstrated significant flexibility and agility in their response to the pandemic and the increased demands on their time and skills. In addition to their usual duties, from September 2020, senior leaders had to manage COVID-19 safe operational arrangements, the logistical planning of bubbles and outbreaks of the virus, plan for a variety of learning models and implement Test, Trace, Protect procedures. Pressure increased with the introduction of lateral flow testing and the requirements for Centre Determined Grades and associated appeals.

Staff showed high levels of commitment to their roles during the crisis. Despite this, they faced many challenges and headteachers were concerned about staff wellbeing. Nearly all schools offered wellbeing support to staff and were aware of the pressures on them, particularly in relation to Centre Determined Grades. Headteachers often prioritised pupil and staff wellbeing at the expense of their own, with many having minimal respite or holiday. In a survey for the National Academy of Educational Leadership (2021), three quarters of leaders who responded identified 'workload' as having the biggest impact on their wellbeing.

Successful communication has been a key aspect of managing the COVID-19 crisis. Leaders found that regular, clear communication with pupils, parents and staff was vital and most used a range of communication strategies, including increased use of social media. Many schools report improved relationships with parents, staff, and the local community. However, headteachers expressed frustration at the fact that they were given little or no warning of announcements about education and that guidance changed frequently, which posed communication challenges.

Online parental involvement group

Ysgol Dyffryn Aman had an online parental involvement programme. The programme focused on working with parents to identify strengths and gaps in provision and to plan improvement priorities to support parents. For example, workshops were held on topics such as the use of Hwb and online classrooms, pastoral support and wellbeing, support for pupils with ALN and attitudes to learning.

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A notable feature of the approach to leadership in light of the pandemic was an increased focus on reflection and re-evaluation of practices. The pandemic prompted leaders to think differently, question long-established ways of working and act swiftly to make changes. Despite the significant challenges of the pandemic, many leaders displayed a positive attitude to moving forward and saw the benefits of some of the changes forced upon them. For example, many plan to retain some changes such as online parents' evenings, staggered lunchtimes, use of digital platforms and one-way systems. They also found many benefits to holding virtual meetings, particularly where those meetings involved external partners. For example, it was easier to collaborate and learn from colleagues and other schools as they were able to meet virtually to share ideas. Digital platforms enabled schools to engage beyond regional and geographical boundaries and meet more frequently.

Governors continued with their work over the course of the year, although much of it had to be conducted virtually. In general, attendance at governing body meetings improved when schools held meetings online.

Leaders continued to use a range of processes to evaluate the work of the school but found it difficult to use some strategies under pandemic restrictions, for example lesson observations. During the year, most schools increased opportunities for pupils, staff and parents to share their views through surveys, polls and focus groups. Initially, these focused mainly on wellbeing, but their scope expanded to cover the quality of online provision. Schools' monitoring of pupil engagement and wellbeing improved over time, becoming more sophisticated and giving schools a more precise picture. However, accurate monitoring of engagement and wellbeing remained problematic while pupils were not in school.

As the autumn term progressed, a majority of schools returned tentatively to some forms of evaluation and monitoring of teaching and learning. This became more challenging when schools closed in December, but they adapted their methods to the online environment. For example, middle leaders joined online classes and observed live lessons. When pupils returned after Easter, a few schools carried out socially distanced class observations, but most focused their time on preparing for Centre Determined Grades. The nature, frequency and rigour of monitoring activities varied widely and, in some cases, systems were ad hoc. Overall, schools found it challenging to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning fully.

Monitoring the quality of provision

Cathays High School involved all teachers in the monitoring of provision. Within subject area teams, teachers looked at the books and online learning of sample group of pupils in different year groups. This enabled them to compare the quality of provision. Their findings were moderated by the senior leadership team.

Leaders also introduced one-to-one reviews of online learning. These involved looking at recorded lessons in subject teams. Leaders did not give judgements, but focused on having coaching conversations.

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In the autumn term, professional learning programmes in secondary schools focused on improving staff's digital skills and preparing them to deliver distance or blended learning. As a result, there was a rapid improvement in these skills. During the late spring and summer terms, the focus moved to supporting staff with the Centre Determined Grades process. To varying degrees, schools also offered professional learning on ALN reform and the Curriculum for Wales.

Due to the move to digital platforms, all staff had access to a wide range of free professional learning opportunities at a time that suited them and without having to travel or be released from their usual duties. While this brought many benefits, it also resulted in a significant increase in the volume of activities. In general, schools had not fully evaluated the impact of all the professional learning taking place and in some cases the programme lacked strategic direction.

Most school leaders identified that their schools had moved forward in some ways and backwards in others. For example, there has been significant progress in pupils' and staff's digital skills and their schools' digital infrastructure. On the other hand, established, effective ways of working, such as whole-school approaches to literacy and numeracy, had been diluted during the pandemic and may take a long time to re-establish.

Leaders appreciated the grant funding that schools received. Recruit, recover, raise standards: the accelerated learning programme (RRRS) funding was generally spent on additional provision for examination year groups, particularly in the core subjects, and support for literacy and numeracy skills. They used other grants to pay for additional teaching and support staff and to offset the cost of necessary adaptations, such as increased cleaning. How the RRRS grant and other catch-up grants were used by schools and colleges to support post-16 learners is explored in our [thematic report](#) (Estyn, 2021n). Much of the funding given to schools was time-limited so it proved difficult for leaders to make any sustainable changes or staff appointments. In addition, all grants had different conditions and different expectations. Grant funding often arrived late in the financial year, which made it challenging to spend the money before the next financial year began. It also proved difficult to recruit additional staff at short notice, particularly in certain subject areas and in Welsh-medium schools.

