



June 2021

Engagement work

Primary sector update

Summer term 2021



Introduction

This report summarises the findings from engagement phone calls or visits made to 410 primary schools between 22 February and 14 May 2021. The report is based on the information discussed during meetings with school leaders, teachers and pupils held either remotely or in person. The main focus for each discussion was wellbeing, teaching and learning, and leadership. Proportions relate to the sample of schools that we contacted during this reporting period.

This report is also available in Welsh.

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Main findings

Wellbeing

- 1 Nearly all leaders noted that the spring term lockdown in 2021 had been a more challenging time for learners than the initial lockdown period in 2020. Leaders reported that the most recent period of distance learning had a more detrimental effect on many pupils' wellbeing.
- 2 Nearly all schools continued to provide opportunities for groups, classes, and the whole school to meet using online platforms to support pupils' wellbeing and maintain the feeling of a school community.
- 3 As in the autumn term, nearly all leaders reported that after lockdown ended, most pupils were happy to be back in school. Leaders stated that a few pupils were more anxious than usual.
- 4 Many leaders described a deterioration in a minority of pupils' behaviour after a short period back in school.
- 5 A few leaders noticed a reduction in the physical fitness of a minority of pupils.

Teaching and learning

- 6 Many leaders stated that their staff placed an increased emphasis on live teaching sessions and opportunities for pupils to discuss their learning with teachers online.
- 7 Leaders found that responding flexibly to the needs of families and including more regular online face to face contact significantly improved the levels of pupil engagement in their learning.
- 8 When schools reopened, staff often adapted activities to include shorter and more focused tasks to help pupils with their learning.
- 9 After an initial settling in period, most headteachers told us that staff evaluated pupils' learning using a range of approaches.
- 10 On pupils' return to school, most staff strived to adhere to foundation phase principles within the constraints associated with controlling the spread of COVID-19.
- 11 Leaders state that they have continued to invest time and resources in developing activities in outdoor learning areas.

Leadership

- 12 Nearly all leaders report that supporting the wellbeing of all staff remains a high priority for them.
- 13 The pandemic continues to affect the wellbeing of headteachers and this remains a cause for concern.

- 14 Leaders praise the continued resilience of staff and state that they have coped well with the constant operational changes demanded of them, including when schools reopened in the spring.
- 15 Nearly all leaders report that regular, clear communication between the school and parents has been essential throughout the pandemic.
- 16 A majority of leaders feel that their school would benefit from a prolonged, uninterrupted period to work further on developing their curricular approaches.
- 17 A minority of leaders expressed concerns about the school's readiness to implement the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act (ALNET).

Pupil wellbeing, support for vulnerable learners and pupils with additional learning needs

Nearly all leaders noted that the spring term lockdown in 2021 had been a more challenging time for learners than the initial lockdown period in 2020. Leaders reported that the most recent period of distance learning had more of a detrimental effect on many pupils' wellbeing. Many felt that generally, the shorter daylight hours, inclement weather and the stresses felt by adults within the household added to the challenges facing pupils.

Nearly all leaders reported that they were better prepared for supporting pupils' wellbeing remotely during the latest lockdown. Many had anticipated another period of school closure and had put appropriate strategies and resources in place to support pupils' wellbeing.



Schools continued to provide pupils and parents with access to staff to discuss any issues or concerns. Nearly all schools also provided pupils with more discreet methods to contact staff to share their worries and fears privately. A few schools used questionnaires to find out how pupils were feeling and adapted their provision and support accordingly. For example, one school provided specific training for a teaching assistant to support pupils' emotional wellbeing after analysing pupil feedback.

Nearly all schools continued to provide opportunities for groups, classes, and the whole school to meet using online platforms to support pupils' wellbeing and maintain the feeling of a school community.

Cameo – informal wellbeing sessions held remotely

At Ysgol Llanfairpwll, Isle of 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 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.

Cameo – introducing a wellbeing week

At Ysgol Pencarnisiog, Isle of Anglesey, the headteacher stated that the support provided for pupils' and staff wellbeing had been a strength during the pandemic.

One element that the headteacher said was beneficial to pupils' wellbeing was calling 'time out' to focus on a week of wellbeing activities. Pupils and their parents were encouraged to engage in informal family activities such as exercise sessions, artwork, music, or going for a countryside walk. This approach coincided with times when the local authority's COVID-19 cases were high.

As was the case in the initial lockdown, schools ran hub provision for the children of key workers and vulnerable pupils. Teachers increasingly identified additional pupils as being vulnerable or in need of additional support due to challenging family circumstances as the lockdown period progressed. Many schools invited these pupils to attend the hub provision.

Throughout the most recent lockdown, staff continued to support pupils identified as having additional learning needs (ALN), either at home through online learning, or face to face in the hub provision. In a minority of schools, leaders report that many pupils with ALN continued to face challenges engaging with remote learning activities. In response, schools often provided small group focus sessions led by teachers or teaching assistant to meet their needs.

When pupils returned to schools following the most recent lockdown, nearly all staff continued to place a high priority on supporting pupils' wellbeing. As in the autumn

term, nearly all leaders reported that after lockdown ended, most pupils were happy to be back in school. Leaders stated that a few pupils were more anxious than usual. For example, they reported that these pupils often displayed anxieties around incidents and circumstances at home, while others had concerns regarding schoolwork or renewing friendships. Schools continued to provide various opportunities for pupils to share and discuss their worries with staff or worked with outside agencies to support these pupils.

Cameo – working with external agencies to support pupil wellbeing

Denbighshire local authority worked closely with the health board's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) to plan for pupils returning to school and shared guidance with school staff. This was based on a 'traffic light' matrix system, with the 'red' concerns referred urgently to the mental health team. The health board allocated a member of the CAMHS team to each school cluster. This meant that schools' Additional Learning Needs Coordinators were provided with the information they needed to support pupils, such as those who felt anxious about returning to school.

Many leaders described a deterioration in a minority of pupils' behaviour after a short period back in school. Teachers state that pupils' concentration spans were shorter, some were not as respectful and tolerant of one another, while others were quicker to bicker during breaktimes. A few leaders also feel that instances of pupils having disagreements with each other online are increasing. Many schools have continued to place a strong emphasis on strategies such as circle time to discuss ways of resolving disagreements.

Most headteachers report that many Year 6 pupils have felt particularly affected by the periods of lockdown. They have missed out on the usual, well-established end of primary school routines, such as transition events and residential courses despite the best efforts of staff to recreate experiences remotely. Leaders are concerned about the closure of many outdoor education centres as a result of COVID-19.

Cameo – recreating the residential experience at home

Year 5 and 6 pupils at Craigfelen Primary School, Swansea, were disappointed to be missing out on their usual residential week at an outdoor education centre. In response, during the recent lockdown, staff organised a virtual residential week and set daily challenges for pupils to take part in at home. For example, with suitable supervision pupils engaged in den building and toasting marshmallows.

An instructor from the education centre demonstrated practical ideas via video link to encourage participation by pupils and their families. Pupils and teachers met online daily for breakfast and dinner to capture some of the important social activities of a residential week.

In addition to pupils' mental and emotional wellbeing, a few leaders noticed a reduction in the physical fitness of a minority of pupils because of being inactive for long periods during the winter months. In response, these schools introduced

activities to improve pupils' physical fitness and general wellbeing. Teachers have made greater use of outdoor areas for pupils of all ages to participate in physical activities to encourage them to lead a healthier lifestyle.

Around a half of leaders stated that there was an increase in the number of pupils who needed additional support on their return to school. This included support in nurture provision on school sites, and support from specialist services such as educational psychologists and speech and language therapists. Support was provided either remotely or by visiting schools, depending on risk assessments. A minority of leaders said that there had been an increase in safeguarding referrals, especially regarding pupils' wellbeing and mental health. Leaders said that agencies that safeguard pupils' wellbeing continued to provide valuable support. For example, social workers held meetings remotely, and visited schools where appropriate.

Teaching and learning

During the most recent period of lockdown in the spring term, leaders continued to refine their school's approaches to remote learning. Many stated that their staff placed an increased emphasis on live teaching sessions and opportunities for pupils to discuss their learning with teachers online.

For example, teachers held daily check in sessions with pupils to reflect on their prior learning and to address misconceptions. Where families found it difficult to engage in these live sessions, schools continued to provide a range of learning resources that parents could use when appropriate to their personal circumstances. Leaders found that responding flexibly to the needs of families and including more regular online face to face contact improved significantly the levels of pupil engagement in their learning.



The majority of leaders reported greater collaboration between staff in schools and across clusters to share, evaluate and refine approaches to online learning. For example, many local authorities and regional consortia developed online platforms to engage staff in sharing their practice.

Many leaders identified that a few parents benefited from additional guidance about how to support their children's learning. For example, staff created tutorial videos on the teaching of phonics and in a few instances set up online surgeries with individual parents to discuss their approaches at home.

Cameo – sending letters by post to engage pupils

At Clyro Church in Wales Primary School, Powys, staff were keen to inspire pupils to work in a variety of ways as well as digitally. Pupils are familiar with Maisie, the headteacher's dog. Maisie 'posted' a personal letter to each pupil telling them about her adventures during lockdown. The letter was part of a religious education theme encouraging pupils to think about the wonders of creation. Pupils were inspired to respond in a variety of ways including by letter, writing nature diaries, or by sending pressed flowers and photos.

When schools reopened, staff often adapted activities to include shorter and more focused tasks to help pupils with their learning. This helped to support pupils to concentrate, listen to others and work collaboratively. Most schools incorporated additional learning opportunities in the outdoors, for example through exploration and interaction with their local natural environments.

After an initial settling in period, most headteachers told us that staff evaluated pupils' learning using a range of approaches. A few leaders stated that they placed less emphasis on previously well-established assessment and tracking systems in favour of teachers' professional judgement to identify the next steps in pupils' learning.

Leaders informed us that pupils who had engaged effectively with remote learning or attended hub provision often made the best progress. However, almost all schools identified groups of pupils whose reading, writing, or numeracy skills had regressed. Many headteachers noted that the pandemic had a negative impact on pupils' listening and speaking skills, especially in the foundation phase.

Cameo – supporting reading at home

During the most recent lockdown, teachers at Ysgol Y Parc Infant school, Denbighshire, recorded daily story time videos and a Friday bedtime story. This helped improve family engagement with reading at home. As a result, teachers decided to continue to record bedtime stories and include a narrative for parents to help them to develop their children's listening and speaking skills. For example, parents are prompted to talk about characters and why they acted in a particular way.

In Welsh-medium schools, many leaders stated that pupils' Welsh language skills regressed significantly over the periods of lockdown, particularly for those who do not regularly experience the language at home. As a result, teachers delivered additional activities that immersed pupils in the language and provided valuable opportunities for them to improve their oracy skills. For example, in one school foundation phase teachers planned rich language and literacy activities based on a virtual museum workshop to support pupils' use of Welsh vocabulary and sentence patterns.

Cameo – enhancing Welsh language provision in partnership with parents

During periods of lockdown, parents at Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg Hamadryad, Cardiff, have been instrumental in supporting staff to develop pupils' reading skills. They have helped to ensure that pupils continue to hear and speak Welsh in their multi-cultural and multi-language learning community. Parents voluntarily arrange sessions to chat with pupils who speak little or no Welsh at home and to read with them using remote platforms. Since returning to school, parents have continued to support each other to provide pupils with opportunities to use and reinforce the Welsh language in a more informal environment.

A few leaders, whose schools have significant numbers of pupils with English as an additional language, offered additional support to these pupils and their families. For example, they encouraged rapid language acquisition through online immersion classes in their new language.

Most leaders feel that pupils' digital skills have continued to improve in a few areas, such as communication and presentation. A very few leaders stated that they took the opportunity to develop a more diverse range of information, communication and technology (ICT) skills. For example, in one school pupils used software to design a virtual mosque as part of their celebration of Ramadan and Eid.

Nearly all leaders told us that staff competence in delivering remote learning continued to improve significantly throughout the most recent lockdown. Many leaders said that they had adapted their curriculum to encourage pupils to remain engaged with learning. For example, they provided pupils with a range of practical activities, such as preparing recipes or developing a dance routine.

Schools often adapted provision to support specific groups of learners. For example, a few schools who work closely with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community adapted their remote learning provision to take account of their culture. Leaders often worked with local authority liaison officers to provide bespoke work packs for pupils.

As pupils returned to school, nearly all leaders and staff continued to adapt their approaches to incorporate the areas of learning and experience (AOLE) of the Curriculum for Wales. Many leaders described how they placed an emphasis on the health and wellbeing AOLE to support pupils' mental and physical health. For example, they provided pupils with problem solving activities in the outdoors and ensured they had frequent opportunities for exercise. Many leaders state that

teachers place an increasing emphasis on pupils' views and interests when planning and delivering activities.

Early in the spring term, foundation phase teachers and support staff continued to provide remote learning activities that were predominantly focused on developing pupils' skills through practical and creative activities. In the main, leaders stated that foundation phase practice was more challenging to deliver remotely as some activities were too reliant on support from parents.

On pupils' return to school, most staff strived to adhere to foundation phase principles within the constraints associated with controlling the spread of COVID-19. Staff continued to follow risk assessments to keep themselves and pupils safe, for example by ensuring additional cleaning and safety measures. Challenges included reduced teaching time and limited opportunities for collaboration between pupils and staff. Leaders report that staff supported pupils through additional play-based opportunities to encourage them to become more confident in their learning. Many teachers felt that pupils had made limited progress in developing their gross and fine motor skills and placed more emphasis on activities to develop these skills, such as providing access to climbing equipment and mark-making resources.

As mentioned in our 'Engagement work: Primary sector update' in [Autumn 2020](#) and [Spring 2021](#), leaders said that they have continued to invest time and resources in developing activities in outdoor learning areas for all pupils. For example, in one school, teachers established an outdoor 'learning village' and in another they held a mini-Olympics event.

Leadership

Nearly all leaders report that supporting the wellbeing of all staff remains a high priority for them. They say that although many members of their staff are exhausted physically and mentally, morale has improved since pupils have returned to school.

They praise the continued resilience of staff and state that most have coped well with the constant operational changes demanded of them, including when schools reopened in the spring. Most leaders indicate that there has been greater teamwork among staff at a time when many have felt more isolated. For example, in one federated school, the headteacher reported that staff on all sites united quickly and worked together remotely to plan, share ideas, and produce common learning experiences for pupils.



The pandemic continues to affect the wellbeing of headteachers and this remains a cause for concern. They explain that keeping staff and pupils safe has been the greatest challenge for them. Many feel responsible for looking after the wellbeing of the whole school community, particularly in areas of high deprivation. For example, leaders and staff provide social and emotional support to vulnerable families, such as offering guidance on access to specialist services and operating food banks. Most leaders continued to find the support of colleagues through their local clusters highly beneficial and appreciate the support received from their governing bodies, local authority officers and regional consortium improvement partners.

Nearly all leaders report that regular, clear communication between the school and parents has been essential throughout the pandemic. The need to keep parents updated with a wide variety of important information on a regular basis has been a major aspect of their work. Most leaders state that new ways of communicating with parents have improved working relationships between school and home. This has assisted staff to identify issues and concerns quickly and offer timely support.

Over the course of the pandemic, parents have been more inclined to communicate with staff to share concerns and challenges. However, although many leaders report that this has benefits, it has also created a heightened expectation by parents of staff availability. As a result, a few leaders have established protocols, such as providing parents with 'contact hours' when they may reasonably expect a response from school staff.

Many leaders are continuing their preparation for implementing the Curriculum for Wales from September 2022. They face challenges in evaluating new approaches and driving forward curricular reform. For example, leaders say that it can be more difficult to inspire change when addressing staff via remote meetings. In addition, when teachers experiment with different approaches it is challenging to gauge the impact on learning due to operational restrictions. As a result of the additional pressures brought by the pandemic, a majority of leaders feel that their school would benefit from a prolonged, uninterrupted period to work further on developing their curricular approaches.

Many leaders said that they need to renew professional discussions about Curriculum for Wales. A few have used the Welsh Government guidance document ['Curriculum for Wales: The journey to 2022'](#) to facilitate such conversations.

A few leaders articulated a clear vision for their school's curriculum. For example, one described a curriculum based around the local community that connects the generations to drive aspiration. Another leader described a curriculum with the key question 'what does it mean to live in Pembrokeshire?' at its core. Some important elements that are relevant to the Curriculum for Wales have evolved to become natural priorities during the year. For example, many schools focused on creating authentic contexts for learning or developed new formative assessment techniques. However, many leaders would welcome further guidance on specific aspects such as interpreting the progressions steps and expectations around summative assessment. Leaders seek reassurance that schools will not be expected to have their curriculum completed by September 2022 and that curriculum reform is an evolving process that will continue to be refined over time.

Many leaders told us that staff engagement in professional learning opportunities has been beneficial in strengthening their knowledge and understanding of different teaching and learning approaches. A few leaders explained that they have introduced reading or research tasks for staff to encourage them to adapt practices to their own classroom context. Since pupils returned in the summer term, staff in many schools have introduced and evaluated new professional learning into their activities with a greater focus on curriculum reform.

Many leaders explained that they have tailored the summer term's professional learning to suit the current circumstances. For example, leaders have arranged training sessions on outdoor learning and play to engage pupils and target their wellbeing on returning to school.

Cameo – professional learning

At Pentrechwyth Primary School, Swansea, the headteacher has created an electronic staff learning library to collate notes from staff training events. Staff have been set very clear training expectations linked to health and safety, the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act (ALNET), and the Curriculum for Wales. They were also encouraged to undertake professional learning opportunities specific to their own professional needs and personal interests.

Leaders ask staff to record the key messages and learning points from the training on a one-page profile to ensure that all staff benefit from the training experiences of others. This is then placed into the electronic staff learning library. There is a contents page that ensures staff know what training has taken place and what they can benefit from in relation to their own professional learning. This approach supports the development of the school as a learning organisation

Cameo – 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 giving talks. They reviewed these sources 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 aspects that mattered to them and interested them.

A minority of leaders expressed concerns about the school's readiness to implement the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act (ALNET). For example, they worry about the workload pressures on staff who lead on this aspect, and the financial implications of releasing ALNCOs from teaching commitments to fulfil their roles. Many say that their ALNCOs have received valuable training, and a majority described work being undertaken by staff during the summer term to prepare for the Act. For example, teachers are preparing Individual Development Plans as required.

A few have benefitted from working closely with other schools in their cluster to ensure a consistent approach.

Leaders continue to utilise additional funding such as that provided by the Welsh Government's ['recruit, recover, raise standards' accelerating learning programme](#). Most leaders continue to use the additional finance to increase staffing levels and their capacity to support pupils. This includes providing intervention sessions for pupils that target literacy and numeracy skills or having more staff on hand to support pupils with their daily tasks. Many leaders are using additional funding to support the wellbeing needs of vulnerable pupils. For example, a few schools have created pastoral roles such as family liaison workers or established nurture groups to support pupils' social and emotional needs. Many leaders also report that they purchased extra outdoor resources with this funding to encourage and promote more outdoor learning.

Cameo – introducing the role of 'family liaison officer'

The headteacher at Waunceirch Primary School, Neath Port Talbot, used the 'recruit, recover and raise standards' funding to employ a family liaison officer. The officer supports vulnerable pupils and their families through telephone calls, online platforms or by collecting pupils from their homes to attend school. The officer has fostered strong relationships with pupils and their parents and also supports and guides them in academic and day to day issues. They ensure that all families can take part fully in all aspects of school life and access support available from outside agencies.

Annex

Consortium	Local authority	Schools
CSC	Bridgend	14
	The Vale of Glamorgan	17
	Rhondda Cynon Taf	25
	Merthyr Tydfil	7
	Cardiff	39
	Total CSC	102
EAS	Caerphilly	30
	Blaenau Gwent	9
	Torfaen	7
	Monmouthshire	12
	Newport	16
	Total EAS	74
ERW	Powys	30
	Ceredigion	15
	Pembrokeshire	11
	Carmarthenshire	29
	Swansea	29
	Total ERW	114
GwE	Isle of Anglesey	10
	Gwynedd	22
	Conwy	12
	Denbighshire	14
	Flintshire	22
	Wrexham	19
Total GwE	99	
	Neath Port Talbot	21
	Total Neath Port Talbot	21
All primary providers		410
FSM benchmark (3YA FSM 2018-2020)		
Up to and including 8%		87
Over 8% and up to and including 16%		104
Over 16% and up to and including 24%		79
Over 24% and up to and including 32%		64
Over 32%		71
Information Unavailable		5
Total		410