

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SCHOOLS

April 2022

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Challenges Faced by Schools Before Covid-19	4
2.1 Teacher Shortages.....	5
2.2 Government Funding.....	6
3. The Impacts of Covid-19	7
3.1 Remote Learning	8
3.2 Student Wellbeing	9
3.3 Covid-19 Testing.....	9
3.4 Teacher Recruitment and Staff Absences	9
3.5 Staff Absences	10
3.6 Examinations and Assessments.....	10
3.7 Funding Issues	11
4. Case Studies	13
4.1 St Bede's CofE Primary Academy	14
4.2 The Royal Liberty School	16
5. Conclusions	18

1. Introduction



The Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the education sector in the UK. With lockdown restrictions, schools have struggled to keep up attainment, many falling short of the national average in examinations. These are not the only pressures schools have faced, funding issues and staff shortages prior to Covid-19, meant the sector was already under enormous strain.

By 2023, many schools in England will have faced 13 years of budget cuts, impacting the quality of teaching staff are able to provide. Not only that, but the sector is facing a recruitment crisis, with declining numbers of people joining post-graduate teaching programmes. Coupled with growing class sizes, many teachers were struggling before the pandemic.

The impact of Covid-19 was felt throughout the sector, with both primary and secondary education having to move to remote teaching.

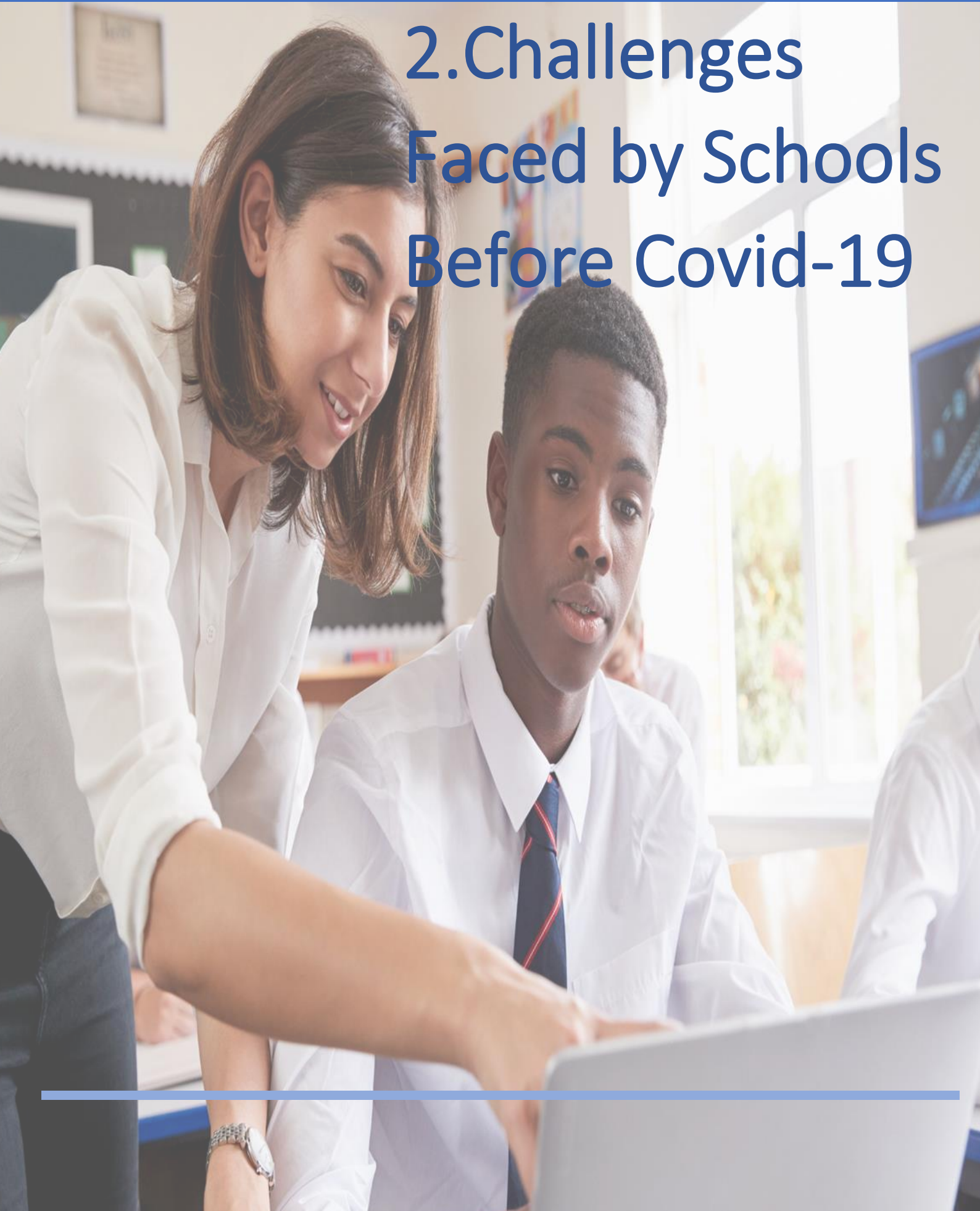
Issues facing the sector include:

- Increased teacher workload
- Delivering remote and hybrid learning
- Increase in the attainment gap between pupils
- Issues with staff shortages
- The need for regular Covid-19 testing in schools

This report will discuss how schools have adapted teaching models to first navigate lockdown, and then manage a safe return to the classroom.

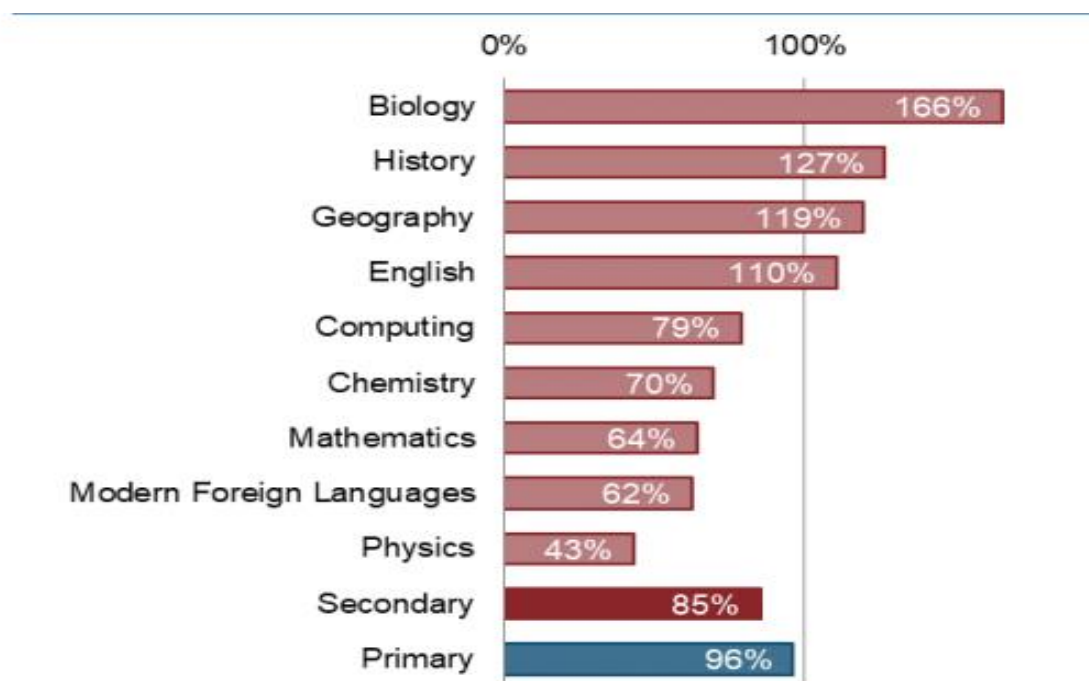
Case studies will discuss how schools have supported students through blended learning and economic relief. They will focus on how schools have adapted to blended learning, and how they are tackling the attainment gap.

2.Challenges Faced by Schools Before Covid-19



2.1 Teacher Shortages

The Department for Education shared figures in 2019 indicating that while there was an increase in the overall number of people applying for teacher training, the numbers fell short of the total required by the government's teacher supply target.



Source: Initial Teacher Training Census 2019/20: DfE, 2019

The figures highlight the particular failure to meet targets in specialist subjects. Some of the lowest figures recorded were for Modern Foreign Languages, Maths and Physics. Numbers recorded for Physics were even lower than the previous year, illustrating an overall failure to recruit secondary school teachers.

Primary Education performed slightly better, meeting 96% of the recruitment target. Recruitment fell in primary education by 6% between the 2018/19 and 2019/20.

Comparing the 2019/20 year to 2018/19, there were 365 more post-graduate trainees on Initial Teacher Training courses.[2] These figures indicate a 1% increase in applicants, however, the government target increased by 864 in the same period.

A solution to this issue has been to source talent from overseas in an attempt to fill these shortages. Teachers who qualified in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, the USA and any country in the European Economic Area only need to apply for a QTS

instead of retraining completely to be a teacher in England. The impact of Brexit on recruitment from EEA countries has yet to be measured, but predictions have suggested it will have a negative impact on recruitment, especially for MFL.

2.2 Government Funding

After a surge in funding in the early 2000s, since 2015 state schools in England have faced a consistent decline in their budgets. By 2023, schools across England will have endured 13 years of budget cuts, that have resulted in larger class sizes and a lack of resources.[3]

Figures from the IFS show that secondary school funding per pupil fell by 9% between 2009/10 and 2019/20. This represents the largest cut in education sector funding in over 40 years.

Funding per pupil in primary schools has actually grown by 4% in the same period.

The funding system in England provides greater funding provisions to schools deprived areas, to help narrow the attainment. However, it is these schools who have been hit hardest by the cuts, areas with 20% of the lowest incomes had their funding cut by nearly £1000 per pupil. The government has committed itself to 'levelling up' these regions and increasing funding.

3.The Impacts of Covid-19



3.1 Remote Learning

Teachers had to adapt lessons during the pandemic in an effort to try and deliver the curriculum remotely as teaching in person was limited to select groups of students.

Teachers were unable to cover the entire curriculum and relied on parents to help students with content and to boost engagement. Research conducted by the Nuffield foundation, indicated that despite these efforts, by September 2020 pupils were 3 months behind on learning[4]. In July of the same year, teachers estimated students had only completed 2/3 of the curriculum for the year, placing them behind for the next academic quarter.

Looking closely at the impact of prolonged periods of remote learning helps to understand how it contributed to the attainment gap. Highlighting how the digital divide has adversely affected disadvantaged students during the pandemic by preventing them from accessing learning resources

Teachers were also unable to monitor student progress beyond assessing the work they sent in. The work completed remotely was often simply a reflection of the engagement the student and their parent had with the work set.

As good as the remote learning delivered was, the teachers were unable to replicate and maintain all aspects of school life for the students. Good practice guides were shared by the DfE to provide support for teachers, but these could not imitate the learning environment of the classroom for students.

Student engagement waned towards July 2020 with less than 40% of students submitting their final pieces of work for online assessments. Additionally, there were indications of a lack of parental engagement in their children's remote learning. Such disengagement from parents is worrying when maintaining the learning of primary school children as it was the parents who had to try and encourage children to stay on task.

Teachers in the most deprived schools in England were over three times more likely to report that their pupils were four months or more behind in their learning. This is a continuation of the issues schools were facing before the pandemic. However, based on teacher estimates, the learning gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers increased by 46% during the pandemic.

3.2 Student Wellbeing

Remote learning didn't just have an impact on student attainment and the attainment gap, it had an impact more generally on their wellbeing. DfE published guidance for supporting students with mental wellbeing when learning remotely. The guidance included case studies from other schools and emphasised the importance of staff mental health as this is central to providing the best support for students.[5]

Mental wellbeing was not the only concern in lockdown, physical wellbeing of students was a concern too as PE lessons were not taking place. Many schools tried to integrate PE into the curriculum where possible and national initiatives in lockdown were promoted too to encourage student fitness. The remote learning platform Oak National Academy had a selection of remote PE classes too which encouraged physical wellbeing and fitness in primary education.

3.3 Covid-19 Testing

Schools needed to prepare to re-open and adapt to living with Covid-19, ensuring it was safe for students to attend school. As part of this, mandatory lateral flow tests were introduced.

Due to the contagious nature of the Omicron variant, all secondary schools returning from the break in January 2022 had to provide on-site testing for students to prevent the spread of Covid-19 [6]. Teachers had to have lateral flow tests at least twice a week and students in secondary schools were encouraged to get vaccinated. Not only that but secondary schools were provided with a limited number of PCR testing kits for students and teachers who were symptomatic and perhaps could not access kits elsewhere.

With the required twice-weekly testing, more asymptomatic cases were reported, leading to a steep increase in staff and student absences. This placed increased strain on teaching staff, with many having to teach subjects and classes for their absent colleagues.

3.4 Teacher Recruitment and Staff Absences

Staffing shortages were an issue across the sector prior to the pandemic, with recruitment for many subjects included in the International Baccalaureate falling below national targets. Shortages and teacher retention were a two-fold issue during the pandemic, both in terms of filling teaching positions at schools and the physical impact of positive Covid-19 tests causing staff absences.

The recession caused by Covid-19 had a positive impact on recruitment in the sector, uncertainties in the labour market led to a surge of interest in teacher

However, the increase in applications presented other issues for the sector. Many schools withdrew or limited their placement capacity because of the pandemic and the need to focus on curriculum catch up. Teacher placement capacity in primary schools was down by 20% at the start of the 2020 academic year. Secondary school placements were down by 7%, limiting the training of many offer holders.

3.5 Staff Absences

At the end of the 2021/22 Christmas half term, many schools faced closures due to teacher absences because of the omicron variant [6]. A survey conducted by the National Association of Headteachers reported that almost 1 in 10 headteachers had more than 20% of their staff off on the first day of term because of Covid related reasons. Shortages caused disruptions in teaching, and advice from the DfE encouraged teachers to merge classes into bigger bubbles as an effort to keep schools open. This faced criticism due to the contagious nature of the Omicron variant.

During the week before Christmas, Ofsted received 3,697 notifications of coronavirus in nursery, pre-school and childminding settings [8]. The absences in these early-years settings had a knock-on impact on the rest of the sector, with many schools reporting higher absence rates among staff because parents had no alternative cover for childcare.

Even now when the national restrictions and most requirements for testing have ended, schools are still asking for teachers to test regularly. Schools are experiencing a peak in teacher absences due to Covid-19 related illnesses, resulting in shortages nationwide.

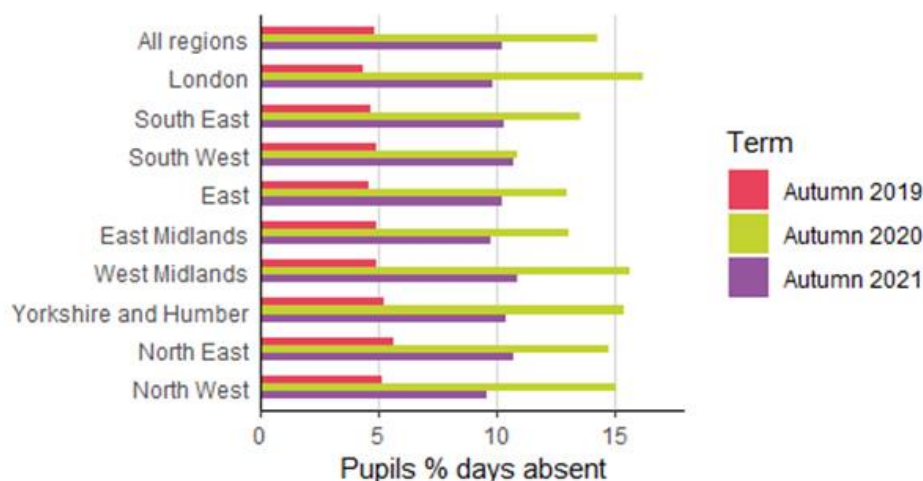
3.6 Examinations and Assessments

Both student and teacher absences have raised questions for the fairness of GCSE exams this summer [9].

When the absences are considered in combination with the disruption students have had to their learning over the last two years, it raises questions about how prepared they can be for summer examinations.

Throughout the pandemic, schools have developed contingency plans to prevent closures, this has not always been possible, resulting in disruption to learning. Remote learning has better-equipped schools to continue learning at home, though this does not ensure students have all the support needed for exams. Even with these contingency plans in place, they can do little to help with the amount of catch-up some students need to pass these exams. Currently, it is still likely that Ofqual will go ahead with GCSE exams this summer.

To make up for the disruption to learning, Ofqual has released guidance ahead of



Source: Percentage of days year 11 students absent, NFER, (2022)

the summer exams to provide students with some of the support they need [10]. The package of support has been put in place for students taking GCSE, AS and A level qualifications this summer. It is intended to make sure the exams are as fair as possible for students given the disruption they have experienced so far, and continue to face, due to coronavirus. The package includes:

- Changes to coursework - non-exam assessments and fieldwork requirements have been adjusted.
- Optional content - there will be less content or fewer topics for students to learn in some GCSE subjects
- Generous grading - exams will be graded more generously this year to give students more of a safety net
- Support materials - students will get formulae and equation sheets in some exams to reduce the amount they need to memorise
- Advance information - exam boards will give information on the focus of exams for most subjects to help students focus their revision

3.7 Funding Issues

The government announced in 2020 a one-off universal catch-up premium that aimed to catch-up on some of the learning that was lost due to the pandemic [8]. All Local Authority maintained schools, academies and free schools were eligible to apply for the grant. This was all part of the government's £1 billion catch-up package.

The schools were able to spend the funding received in ways they identified to be most effective for their own students. Funding was allocated to the schools on a per-pupil basis, and there were no specific requirements for how the funding should be spent beyond catch-up or to who the funding was allocated. Recommendations were set out by the DfE on activities schools could provide with the funding, 1-to-1 or small group tutoring sessions are advised, in addition to summer programmes which made up for teaching time lost.[10]

This funding gave schools a chance to cover the costs required to make up for the lost teaching time. However, the catch-up funding was criticised for being too little. The Education Policy Institute found that spending on education recovery needed to be at £13.5 billion over the next three years to help with the longer-term impacts of the pandemic [11]. Indeed, the Government's own catch-up Tsar resigned over the funding settlement. The spending allocated to recovery equated to £490 per student which was criticised as being nowhere near enough to cover the learning resources needed.

Additional recovery funding was allocated in the 2021 academic year for students covered by the pupil premium, it is aimed at supporting the delivery of evidence-based learning for disadvantaged pupils. As the funding targeted pupil premium students, schools in more disadvantaged areas benefited slightly more than others.

4. Case Studies



4.1 St Bede's CofE Primary Academy

Situated in Bolton, St Bede's Primary Academy is in an area that suffered very high rates of Covid-19. High case rates meant high absence figures from teachers and students alike during the pandemic, further exacerbating their already wide attainment gap.



The school recognised they needed to tackle the attainment gap and developed an evidence-based approach to identify the best steps towards achieving this. Through applying the evidence, the school created bespoke learning packages for individual pupils, so they had the best possible chance to catch up with their peers.

Using the toolkits and resources already available from the Education Endowment Foundation, the school worked to develop their own highly effective, cost-efficient toolkit. The toolkit works as a framework to create pupil packages comprising of:

- CPD
- Teaching & Learning
- Resources Available
- The team around the child

Resources

The biggest investment the school made was in their staffing. Each class has a teacher and two teaching assistants. Teachers are also offered constant training opportunities as part of the school toolkit, to improve skills and develop high-quality teaching methods.

Those in senior leadership positions mentor teachers and meet with them on a monthly basis to understand what tools and training could help improve their teaching.

Other resources the school invested in were more online teaching resources. These resources were both suited to learning in school and remotely so parents could access learning tools at home and provide learning support for their child. White Rose Maths was recognised as one of the most useful tools to come from this investment in online resources.

Bespoke Packages for Students

These investments and changes to teaching and training at the school have helped St Bede's develop tailored learning packages for students. These packages work to target disadvantaged students and limit the long-term impact of the pandemic on their learning. The interventions help tackle the attainment gap as identifying learning issues earlier gives students the support network they need to catch up.

The bespoke packages create a team around the child to identify what sort of support they need in their learning. Not only that, but they work to directly involve the parents in the plan so the school can better understand the child's needs. Engaging the parents is key for creating a learning package that can continue to develop with the child's progress, it gives both parents and teachers an understanding of what is needed both at home and in school.

4.2 The Royal Liberty School

The Royal Liberty School in Romford provides a further example of how schools caught up with the curriculum and learning. The Royal Liberty is an all-boys secondary school, catering from years 7 to 11. A quarter of the students at the school are on pupil premium and 10.3% are SEND.

With the help of £52,000 awarded to the school as part of the DfE Covid-19 Catch up Premium Fund, the school deployed a series of school-wide strategies to help decrease the divide between students. Some of the changes implemented to support the more disadvantaged students were measures introduced during or before lockdown, other changes have been introduced since.

Timetable Changes

During the first lockdown, the school altered their timetable, adapting the curriculum to the limitations of remote learning. The school was aware student welfare was just as important as grades, and reduced lesson time to 40 minutes a session to reduce student screentime. This was just one of the changes implemented across the school during the pandemic, as this time allowed the school to assess the learning strategies they had in place across the school.

A sixth period was introduced to the timetable for years 10 and 11 to increase the time students spent in core subjects. This was a rebranding for year 11, who previously had after school interventions. A result of the interventions and extra time spent on the subjects is the increase in standard GCSE passing grades. Between 2016 and 2021, the number of students achieving these pass rates increased by over 40%. The interventions were also well received by students and parents.

Normally the school day at Royal Liberty begins with form time to update students on school news and get them started for the day, this was temporarily changed for year 10 and 11 students. Form time for these years was used as a quick targeted intervention session so students could review exam questions and get support in specific areas. These targeted sessions boosted confidence and helped students improve skills they could then develop further in lesson time.

Redeploying Resources

Instead of bringing in entirely new strategies and resources, the school re-assessed their own learning and catch-up resources. Using cover supervisors already employed at the school, they were able to conduct online numeracy sessions for year 7 and year 8 pupils. By leading these online sessions, teachers were then able

to conduct targeted sessions with all students in the year groups. This helped students to catch up and ensured even those who were achieving above their predicted grades were getting the support they needed.

Tutoring

During lockdown the use of the National Tutoring Programme was encouraged. Royal Liberty already used the programme and promoted tutoring in-person, however lockdown emphasised the need to support students with subjects like MFL.

The school made sure to employ high-quality tutors, finding people who were suited to the child they were supporting. The school even identified students who needed extra support in English and employed a tutor to work with small groups for an entire day. Including tutoring in the intervention strategy helped give students the support they needed in core subjects. Both students and teachers commented on the massive impact it had on improving core skills in English.



5. Conclusions



5. Conclusions

Many schools across the UK are still struggling to catch-up on the learning lost during the pandemic. Student and teacher absences due to Covid-19 related illnesses remain high and learning is still being disrupted by Covid-19.

Overall schools have adjusted and provided continuity in the face of closures and lockdowns. Learning has adapted to meet the demands of the pandemic, both in and outside of the classroom. Teachers worked to ensure all students were supported with remote learning, and increased support when schools re-opened to decrease the attainment gap.

Schools have had to accommodate for changes to the curriculum and timetable to ensure students get the support they need. Royal Liberty High School and St Bede's Primary Academy have used the additional funding from DfE to implement schoolwide strategies to provide this support. They used the time during the pandemic to evaluate intervention practices already in place to create schoolwide strategies to support student learning.

Schools have adapted and continue to adapt to meet demands because of Covid-19, altering timetables and cover to ensure students are not missing out on learning. The pandemic is still ongoing though and we have yet to see the long-term impact of Covid-19 on our education system.

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