



News

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Lead Story: Schools tackle new hurdles to cope during Covid

Catch-up concerns, remote learning threat, workload issues, safety matters – curriculum leaders continue to juggle many tasks during the pandemic. See page 2

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Schools tackle new hurdles to cope during Covid



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Issues around catch-up provision, providing for the disadvantaged, and managing to keep schools working well without a proper test-and-trace system continued to occupy the minds of curriculum leaders this month.

'Prioritise disadvantaged'

Catch-up provision should be for the disadvantaged, the [Children's Commissioner Anne Longfield](#) told MPs this month.

Her comments came as controversy brewed over the allocation of laptops to help ensure all pupils could access remote learning.

An additional 100,000 would be made available, the [DfE announced](#) at the

start of the month. On the eve of the half-term break, schools were then told that their access to laptops for disadvantaged pupils could be cut by around 80%. They could now only apply for these if more than 15 students were self-isolating and having to be taught from home.

In the previous lockdown, less than one-third of those eligible for a digital device to learn actually received this, said NEU Joint General Secretary Dr Mary Bousted.

It is about more than just laptops, said Ms Longfield. 'Some children just will not have the home environment they need, no matter how many laptops we give out to enable them to do so.'

It was imperative for in-school education to continue for the most vulnerable in the event of future school closures, she added.

Many school leaders are struggling to find the head space to focus on classroom issues given all the time taken up by implementing Covid safety measures

Remote learning threat

Another measure to spark outrage was the government's threat of legal action against schools who did not provide adequate access to remote learning.

The so-called [Temporary Continuity Direction](#) set out exactly what schools should provide under the Coronavirus Act 2020. This included those elements set out in the box below.

The order was an insult to teachers, with government once again trying to pass the blame, said NAHT General Secretary Paul Whiteman. 'These are nothing more than tissue thin, meaningless powers, with politicians talking tough in the face of their own failure.'

He used his union's annual conference to praise schools for all they have done to keep going during the pandemic – picking up the baton that 'the government fumbled and dropped'.

Shadow Schools Minister Wes Streeting was also not impressed: 'Only this incompetent government could introduce a legal duty on schools to provide online learning for pupils isolating at home and then cut their allocation of laptops the very next day.'

Catch-up access

Back on the subject of the catch-up programme, an [investigation](#) revealed that only 150 of 1,000 mentors promised by the initiative would be in place before 2021. More than one-third of the funding has not yet been allocated. 'Again, [the government has] overpromised but underdelivered,' said NEU Joint General Secretary Dr Mary Bousted.

Only a few 100 of the nation's 22,000 state schools were believed to have expressed an interest in

[signing up to the programme](#), which begins next month. Many schools would prefer to have been given the cash directly to fund their own catch-up schemes as appropriate for their pupils' needs.

That way schools could target the extra support where it is needed 'based on their plans to re-engage students, rather than see it allocated for unqualified tutors', said NEU Joint General Secretary Kevin Courtney. The Government's plans for the National Tutoring Programme could see students having less time with qualified teachers, at a time when they need it most.

'Boris Johnson has been keen to present himself as a hero for disadvantaged young people but has so far not come up with the goods,' said Mr Courtney.

Lack of time and money

Many school leaders are struggling to find the head space to focus on classroom issues given all the time taken up by implementing Covid safety measures. Dealing with Covid-19 is a job in itself, they said.

Schools also do not have enough money to meet the extra costs of teaching during the pandemic. A [survey by the NAHT](#) found that in just the first few weeks of schools reopening, they had spent on average £8k to implement government safety measures. They have also lost on average nearly £10k in income due to a drop in demand for hiring school facilities.

'Schools need the government to make good these unanticipated but necessary costs in order to protect school budgets so that pupils' education is not adversely affected,' said General Secretary Paul Whiteman. 'It is frankly baffling that despite this, the government is refusing to provide schools with any financial support when it comes to Covid costs this term.'

DfE requirements for remote learning

- Integrate remote learning into curriculum planning
- Sequence learning within the curriculum to allow access to high quality online and offline resources and teaching videos
- Select online tools that will be consistently used across your school to allow interaction, assessment and feedback
- Provide printed T&L resources for pupils with no online access
- Set assignments so that pupils have 'ambitious' work every day in various subjects
- Provide contact that would be equivalent in length to the core teaching that would go in in school if pupils were able to attend as normal
- Train staff to use all the remote-learning tools
- Work with families to provide the best remote learning experience for their child

Schools tackle new hurdles to cope during Covid contd

Testing issues

As the month went on, [DfE data](#) revealed a steady increase in school closures and a fall in pupil attendance as Covid-19 cases rose.

Problems caused by the lack of an effective test-and-trace system continued. Seven out of 10 schools reported staff shortages due to testing issues, according to a [poll by the NEU](#). For 11% of these schools, the staff shortage was 'significant'.

This lack of testing was 'undermining' schools' ability to provide onsite learning for all who need it, said Joint General Secretary Kevin Courtney. 'The results [of our poll] also show an imminent danger that this problem will become very widespread indeed.'

A staggering 91% of schools did not trust government to keep schools safe.

The top choice for action from

government to keep schools open was to prioritise pupils and staff for Covid-19 testing, cited by three-quarters of all respondents.

Just one in four secondary schools said that more than three-quarters of pupils were ready for remote learning if it was needed again in future.

'Stop the spread'

The NEU called on government to move schools to a rota system to curb the surge in the spread of the virus. 'A rota system will ensure smaller class sizes making social distancing achievable,' said Joint General Secretary Dr Mary Bousted. It will also reduce social mixing after school.

By the end of the month, the announcement came of another national lockdown, but with schools remaining open. The NAHT called for clear guidance from government on how to ensure all in schools were kept safe.

The NEU was also concerned that many classrooms have poor ventilation leading to airborne

transmissions. School transport meant pupils mixing with other bubbles. 'Taking action now can avoid more disruption later,' said Joint General Secretary Kevin Courtney. Government should be working with schools now on plans for blended learning, rather than turning a blind eye, he added.

'Build back better'

At the end of the month, a report from thinktank the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) called on government to learn from the pandemic to build a better education system for the future.

[The New Normal: The Future of Education After Covid-19](#) said there were three key areas where lessons could be learned:

- how our education system can prepare children for life, not just for exams
- where and how learning takes place – as well as who is involved in delivering it
- how to better tackle inequalities outside, as well as inside, the classroom. ●

these pupils were also less likely to have received regular support from schools during lockdown than other students.

Lack of onsite support

A report from the IPPR revealed that only half of schools were able to offer pupils onsite counselling. The thinktank called on government to make this a national entitlement after the pandemic.

[The New Normal: The Future of Education After Covid-19](#) found pupils in private schools and better-off areas were more likely to have access to these support services.

'Without urgent government action to ensure every school can provide vital services such as counselling and after-school clubs there is a profound risk that the legacy of the pandemic will be even bigger educational and health inequalities,' said author Harry Quilter Pinner, Associate Director at the IPPR.

Inability to cope

Recent [research for the Prince's Trust](#) found that more than one-quarter of students felt unable to cope during the pandemic. More than one-third said they struggled to think clearly – an issue that curriculum leaders need to take account of with relation to how they deliver their remote learning programme.

On average one to two students in every class are

likely to be suffering from depression, according to new [research from King's College London](#). Students with a diagnosis of depression need extra support to help prevent them from dropping grades in their exams. Only 45% of Year 11 students with depression achieved five A* to C grades, which is lower than the average of 53%.

Taking action

'This study has two important policy implications: it demonstrates just how powerful depression can be in reducing young people's chances at fulfilling their potential, and provides a strong justification for how mental health and educational services need to work to detect and support young people prior to critical academic milestones,' said one of the researchers, Dr Johnny Downs.

He suggested a range of action curriculum leaders could take to help support students with depression.

These include:

- being aware of students with a past history of depression, given exams could trigger a relapse
- collaborating with the student's therapist to plan a suitable work schedule for preparing for the exams
- finding out about the exam board's exceptional circumstances policy so students can apply to that if appropriate
- running universal exam prep workshops and anxiety management programmes.

The NEU called for more funding for onsite mental health support, including counsellors based in schools. ●

Pupil wellbeing at crisis point

Pupils' mental health has deteriorated during the pandemic, with depression having a big impact on their schoolwork, while schools struggle with insufficient resources to support students with this. These were the grim findings of a raft of reports out this month on pupil wellbeing.

State of health

As well as a deterioration of mental health, Covid-19 has also caused greater levels of psychological distress for older students, found the [State of the Nation](#) report. But overall, students have shown 'huge resilience in the face of change' wrought by the pandemic, it said.

Its findings should help schools to 'better support the longer-term outcomes' for pupils, said the report. No mention was made of specific help and resources that the DfE would provide so schools

could provide the necessary support to students.

Increase in disorders

A survey by NHS Digital revealed that the number of pupils with mental-health disorders has increased by almost 50% – from one in nine pupils in 2017 to one in six in 2020.

[The Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2020](#) report also revealed the impact of domestic disturbance on pupils' mental health, which has worrying implications as we head into another lockdown. Nearly two-thirds of girls with a mental health issue had seen or heard an argument between adults in their household. Pupils of both genders with a mental health disorder were twice as likely to live in a disadvantaged household.

Deeply concerning for schools was the finding that

Exam plans 'untenable'

Next year's exams are to go ahead – but with a three-week delay to give schools more time to help students catch up with lost content.

The [announcement](#) this month from government sparked unrest across the education sector. Small changes were made to the [syllabus content](#), with the curriculum now 'settled', said Ofqual.

The government's potential [Plan B](#) was met with derision. This involved schools setting 'rigorous' mock

exams this winter so these grades could be used in the event of exams having to be cancelled.

Discord

'The government also needs to ensure that its Plan A – to hold a full set of exams next summer – is fit for purpose,' said ASCL General Secretary Geoff Barton. 'These exams have to take into account the fact that students will have suffered varying degrees of disruption because of the Covid pandemic, or

otherwise those who have suffered more disruption will be significantly disadvantaged.' He also called for exam papers to include more choice of questions to account for varying levels of lost learning.

At the start of the month, the unions had put forward [alternative proposals](#) for dealing with the exam issue. The NAHT was concerned that the compression of exams to achieve the three-week delay would have a bad impact on pupil wellbeing and their exam performance.

Exam plans untenable contd

Parents were concerned too, revealed a [survey by ParentKind](#). More than one-fifth of parents wanted teacher assessment to be the way of awarding grades next year. More than 90% were concerned about their child's loss of education during the pandemic and the adverse affect this would have on their exams.

The NASUWT was troubled by the lack of proper back-up plans.

'It is imperative that a range of robust and transparent contingency measures are developed, in consultation with the teaching

profession, to address the wide range of possible scenarios schools and pupils may find themselves in over the coming year which could impact on exams and the fair assessment of pupils' abilities,' said General Secretary Dr Patrick Roach.

The NEU said that going ahead with next year's exams was a 'dereliction of duty' by the government.

Joint General Secretary Dr Mary Boustead said: 'It is completely unrealistic, and unfair, to expect these pupils to take exams which make no compensation for disruption to school teaching time.' The 'slight' delay to exams and 'slight' alteration of content was an 'untenable response', she said.

'Sort it out'

Schools wanted a clear and straightforward answer. 'The Government is sending mixed messages – sometimes recognising this isn't a normal year, but then also pressing ahead with exams and standard tests as if normal teaching time did occur last year,' said Joint General Secretary Kevin Courtney.

Meanwhile, a [reform pressure group](#) of Tory MPs called for the abolishment of GCSEs altogether. They should be replaced by a baccalaureate covering several years of study, and allowing students to explore career options in a more structured way, said the One Nation group. ●

crucial that the government diversify the curriculum.

'This is not about political point scoring; it is about listening to what the public say their needs are ... loads of research has poured out, with teachers asking for the curriculum to be diversified,' she said.

The [NEU issued a statement](#) on the new clauses on this within the revised RSHE curriculum: 'This DfE advice should not be a way of smuggling in regressive ideas about what education can explore; or to penalise efforts by teachers to broaden, enrich and diversify the curriculum.'

It went on to say: "'Promoting divisive or victim narratives" is an intentionally unhelpful way for the DfE to characterise campaigns that advance participation and human rights, that highlight existing discrimination; or that encourage young people to discuss the barriers they face in their daily lives.'

Campaigners planned legal action against the government unless it withdrew its [RSHE guidance to schools](#) telling them not to use any 'anti-capitalist' materials in teaching and learning.

This was limiting freedom of speech, said the Coalition of Anti-Racist Educators (Care) and Black Educators Alliance (BEA) in their [pre-action letter to the DfE](#). They have started a [crowd-fundraising campaign](#) in the event of having to go ahead with the legal challenge.

'White social resentment'

The issue had also come up at a [meeting of the Education Select Committee](#) the previous week.

Post-16 provision put under spotlight

Post-16 provision hit the headlines this month, with T-levels receiving poor take-up, amid calls for investment in other vocational qualifications.

Only one in eight sixth-forms plan on offering at least one T-level route, according to a new [survey](#).

The report [Post-16 Institutions Omnibus Wave 7 Findings](#) found that more than half of those offering the qualification felt their staff would

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Professor Of Politics And International Relations Matthew Goodwin told MPs that use of terms such as 'white privilege' made white working-class communities feel like they were the problem.

Disadvantaged white families were left feeling they were not being given the same respect as those from other ethnic backgrounds.

'If we are now going to start teaching them in school that not only do they have to overcome

the various economic and social barriers within their communities, but they also need to start apologising for belonging to a wider group which also strips away their individual agency, then I think we are going to compound many of these problems,' he said.

Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Cambridge Prof Diane Reay agreed. There is a 'growing level of social resentment' among white working classes, who feel they are 'being left behind', she said.

Boosting diversity

This month saw Penguin books team up with the race equality thinktank the Runnymede Trust to boost diversity in school reading lists. Currently, just one English literature exam specification features a novel or play by a black author. Their campaign [Lit in Colour](#) aims to increase students' access to authors from minority-ethnic backgrounds.

'Our young people are still studying a mostly white, mostly male English literature curriculum: one which neither reflects contemporary society nor inspires a generation to read outside of their classes,' said Penguin CEO Tom Weldon. ●

Racism 'crippling life chances'

New research revealed worrying findings about the treatment of black students – while conflicting debates continued about the inclusion of racial issues within the curriculum.

Teachers' perceptions 'damaging'

Half of black students said teachers' perceptions of them was their biggest barrier to success in school. Nearly half said racism was a huge obstacle to their achieving in school. A staggering 95% witnessed racist language at school. The findings of a [YMCA poll](#) made for troubling reading.

Participants also reported being labelled by their school as 'unintelligent' and 'aggressive', putting them under a higher threat of exclusion. [Exclusion rates](#) show that three times as many Black Caribbean pupils are excluded than white British students.

Act now

Schools should review all of their policies 'through the lens of race and ethnicity' to ensure they are inclusive, said the report [Young and Black: The Young Black Experience of Institutional Racism in the UK](#). Anti-racist education should be embedded across the curriculum, and not just tagged on as standalone lessons or assemblies. Curriculum leaders should also ensure all their staff have

unconscious bias training so that their perceptions do not cause them to discriminate against black pupils. 'What struck us most was the sheer level of acceptance but also exhaustion in the black community, for people so young to be so tainted by this,' said YMCA Chief Executive Denise Hatton. Change was urgently needed right now to give them 'a better present and a brighter future'.

Curriculum controversy

At the start of the month, founder of the Black Curriculum Lavinya Stennett said it was taking 'way too long' to get black British history embedded in the curriculum. 'Our curriculum should not be reinforcing the message that a sizeable part of the British population are not valued,' she said.

Later on in the month, Equalities Minister Kemi Badenoch said that schools that 'promote partisan political views', including teaching pupils that white privilege is an uncontested fact, are breaking the law. Black lives matter, she said, but

the Black Lives Matter movement is political. White students should not be taught about 'their inherited racial guilt', she told MPs during a [House of Commons debate](#). 'Black history is not the history of institutional racism', she continued.

Opposition MP Abena Opong-Asare said it was

'What struck us most was the sheer level of acceptance but also exhaustion in the black community, for people so young to be so tainted by this'

Post-16 provision put under spotlight contd

held the Quality in Careers Standard kitemark.

On the issue of recruitment, 42% said that the quality of applicants had not improved over the last three years. Maths teachers were the most difficult to recruit.

Providers had made improvements in their ability to support pupils with mental health issues. Nine out of 10 of staff said they could spot the signs.

Culling qualifications

Government is to [press ahead with plans](#) to cut all funding to post-16 qualifications that overlap with the

new T-levels and A-levels.

The purpose is to simplify the choices available, and ensure only 'qualifications that meet a high-quality bar' are allowed to continue, said the DfE. The new measures are out for [consultation](#) – you have until 15 January 2021 to have your say.

'Invest in vocational courses'

In other news, a [survey by World Skills UK](#) revealed that three-quarters of the public want the government to invest in high-quality skills, apprenticeships and vocational qualifications to help young people survive in an economy post Covid and Brexit.

'As we build a skills-led economic recovery from Covid, we must focus

'As we build a skills-led economic recovery from Covid, we must focus on excellence, not just competence, and ensure that we develop a first-class skills system'

on excellence, not just competence, and ensure that we develop a first-class skills system for young people and their employers,' said CEO Dr Neil Bentley-Gockmann.

A [report from the Sutton Trust](#) out this month showed that students from disadvantaged backgrounds would see their future earnings fall even further as a result of lost learning due to Covid – by three times more than for those from better-off homes. ●

Fake news makes job harder for schools, says Ofsted

Fake news is making it more difficult for schools to cope during the pandemic. The spread of misinformation is fuelling parental anxiety, causing more pupils to be kept at home for schooling.

This was a key finding of the first tranche of its [autumn inspection visits](#) to schools to see how they are coping during the pandemic. More than one-third of schools said parents were keeping their child home because of fears of them catching Covid-19.

School leaders were also struggling to keep up with all the guidance from government. This needs to be simplified, said Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman.

Top challenges

The top challenges of providing remote learning was access to online resources. Inspectors also found that the remote learning

programme was not 'aligned' to the school's regular curriculum.

'They must not lose the progression that a strong, well-sequenced curriculum brings,' said Ms Spielman. 'Without that structure, remote education becomes more about filling time than about effective learning.'

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Back in school, some pupils were finding it more difficult to concentrate than usual, and were giving up more quickly if the work seemed difficult. School leaders also reported that some pupils

were noticeably more subdued since returning to school.

'Stop inspections'

Meanwhile, the NAHT continued to call for Ofsted to remove the threat of inspections from schools while they were coping with the pandemic, and helping pupils catch up on missed learning.

'In the interim, let's use the time to rebuild what we want and need from our accountability systems so they are ready to go as soon as schools are able to get back to operating in something like normal circumstances,' said President Ruth Davies.

The NEU agreed, calling it 'farical' to think that a day's inspection would be 'in anyway helpful or supportive' for schools at this time. 'If Ofsted wants to be of any use at all it should send its qualified inspectors into schools to teach,' said Joint General Secretary Dr Mary Bousted. ●

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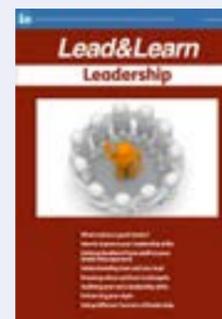
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