

Measuring the Impact of COVID-19: Decisive School Leadership

- Curriculum, attainment, admissions: what will be the longer-term implications particularly for the most vulnerable children?
- Leadership from within: How have School Leaders changed leadership styles to ensure that they can make the correct decisions at the correct time and to whom are leaders looking for best practice?
- What financial impact has the pandemic had SATs, MATs and LAMs across England?
- How has the relationship between schools and local authorities changed, what roles are schools now playing within their communities?

Schools have seen gaps not only in knowledge but also in learning behaviours. Sitting in classroom all day proved a challenge. ALL children are going to have gaps in learning, as not in classroom environment for 5 months. No matter how amazing the provision, can't convey the magic of the classroom through virtual learning platform. Impact will have long term effect.

Although SATs have taken lower profile than GCSEs and A-Levels, still very important. This year 6 cohort will struggle with SATs format.

The amount of work that has gone into summer term provision and opening in September was massive and feels underappreciated by those outside education.

Pressure and anxiety on young people. Even though C-19 has had greater fatality impact on old, more overall anxiety impact on young. C-19 has made evident the quality and strengthening of relationships between schools and their community and LAs, and in some cases, helped to rebuild. Pandemic has exaggerated inequalities across the board. Levels of parental support, access to laptops, own bedrooms, etc makes an incredible difference to how well children are able to continue their learning at home.

This stress test to the education system is the largest since WW2. It highlights the issues which have been around for quite a long time. We've all had to deal with differential learning challenges and unfairness in the system, but after C-19, do we go back to where we were or do we have a radical look at how we operate and really listen to the voices of our children, parents and school leaders?

So what do we do going forward and what do we change? Blended learning is probably here to stay, but access particularly for DA is a challenge.

Challenges which have arisen since September include:

- Laptops are a scarce resource and often restricted to one per family, so larger families cannot access.
- If they can't get access to laptops, even if they use books, paper and pencils, need to get them into the house somehow.
- As bubbles isolate, reform and change around, need to reallocate iPads etc – constant administration and some inevitable loss/damage of resources.

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What can councils do? Money is a key issue. Can help with distribution of resources, but if laptops etc don't materialise, can't do anything. Very frustrating. Very significant minority of families where this is not a satisfactory option. For example, not always technology, might be physical space e.g. shared bedrooms. Some groups of pupils such as SEN need peer and adult support, some have unsafe home lives. For some vulnerable pupils, being at home is not the right solution and councils need plans for that. LA ability to help is extremely limited, other than helping to identify who should be targeted.

Government claim 3-yr funding settlement announced last year is very generous and that schools should be able to fund extra costs such as cleaning, IT etc. We know this is not the reality on the ground, and that the purpose of funding should be to follow education, not the other way around. Schools have a massive variation in their financial capacity and we must not treat them as being on an equal playing field. Children are social animals – PSHE is key. Blended learning is an expensive approach. Not only the investment in technology, but in teacher training too. For some, school is an escape from their home environment. Funding is a major issue. Must be high degree of variation in schools funding to support future blended models.

Funding has not covered C-19 preventative measures such as cleaning. As bubbles close and teachers self isolate, schools need more staff to cover. This is not claimable. The current catch up funding does not come close to achieving safety levels which government say we have to have in place. Danger is that children are not in school, happy and learning.

C-19 has prompted some transformative relationships between schools and communities. LA role provided support stop gap over recent months in absence of government guidance, particularly for reassurance and for smaller schools. Schools have valued this, however sadly, high needs block deficits are breaking down relationships with schools, as LAs are having to recover these from schools' budgets. We're having to rob Peter to pay Paul, which is really unhelpful, and threatens constructive relationships.

LA education and children's services departments have been eroded over recent years. Has this left councils ill equipped to support schools? Is there a role for LAs to support academies? The initial concept of an academy which was sold to us by the government is that you are 'free', but this doesn't lend to a cohesive approach. All schools, including independent, should be working collaboratively. We need a common language, not a concept of being 'exclusive'. There's too much variation in the education system regarding the quality of relationships between connected parties. It's our job to make these relationships more consistent. The clear need for conversation re common frameworks has been highlighted by this pandemic situation.

Delegate questions

How can we balance the books with significant cost increases in supply staff and increased cleaning?

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If schools cover staff absence internally, there is huge pressure on support staff and NQTs. Massive impact on wellbeing and quality of education. Lots of schools cannot balance their books and are in deficit. Suggested approach is do what you need to do now, for the children you have in your school for this year, and deal with deficit recovery later. Very worrying – we must talk about need for long-term financial planning in schools. Some terrifying forecasts with uncertainty regarding impact of pandemic. Leads inevitably to more temporary staff contracts, especially for support staff. LAs can see enormous variety between schools' budgets, but no question that this year everyone is under pressure. Caution that the impact on staff is going to take a long time to play through, not only with stress and wellbeing, but training, recruitment and retention. Deeply frustrated with government message that there is enough money, but which has already been earmarked for pay increases, pension costs etc, and misrepresents reality.

SoS has today been pushing MATs as the only way in future for collaborative working. Is government's focus on one model helpful?

MAT model of governance is a good one, if administered skilfully, however all too often excludes a strong work relationship with LAs. Could LA officers be recruited as members of MAT LGBs to facilitate a more formal relationship which supports working together? There is a big danger that once you believe there's only one model, you've lost. You should be continually searching for improvement. It is noted that LA relationships with MATs varies wildly across the country.

What training and support is in place for school leaders in this agile environment?

For schools not in a MAT, networking with other school leaders has been the most helpful approach. There are resources out there, but often schools have to research these in their own time. Inter-school collaboration has improved because of the pandemic, and peer to peer / school to school support is really valuable. LAs can support with some functions e.g. high needs provision, admissions, but this needs work from both sides, especially with non-LA schools. SEND parents are particularly confused and concerned by why the systems don't appear to be working well for their children.

In conclusion, the fragmentation of the education system is not proving helpful to the impact and resolution of pandemic issues, and government is often leaving schools to fend for themselves. Just hope someone from the DfE is listening.....