

Schools adapt teaching to help children catch up but COVID-related absence remains a concern

Ofsted has today published a series of reports looking at how the pandemic continues to impact on children and students' learning and personal development, and the approaches education providers are using to help them catch up.

The 3 reports, which follow on from [Ofsted's autumn 2020 series of COVID-19-themed briefings](#), look at the findings of 214 routine inspections, from early years through to post-16 education, carried out this term.

Schools

Despite the disruption to their education, inspectors found that many schools are effectively helping children recover from missed learning.

Catch-up strategies include regular, informal assessments; identifying pupils who need additional, one-to-one support; prioritising practical work that wasn't possible via remote learning; and recapping on the previous year's curriculum to cover what had been missed. Some schools have also extended their hours to offer after-school, before-school or Saturday sessions for those who needed extra support.

However, despite positive progress, it is clear from Ofsted's inspections that low attendance remains a stubborn concern. Schools report that much of the absence is for reasons related to COVID-19, including:

- pupils testing positive for COVID-19
- COVID-19-related anxiety among both parents and pupils
- poorer mental health among pupils as a result of the pandemic
- parents rescheduling or rearranging term-time holidays
- children having low resilience due to setbacks or illness

Some schools also reported they had more COVID-19-related absences among disadvantaged pupils, those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and specific year groups, for example, Year 8, Year 11 and sixth form.

Repeated lockdowns have particularly affected the newest intake of pupils, who are arriving at school with lower starting points compared with intakes from previous years. School leaders told inspectors that these pupils struggle with their behaviour and attitudes to learning, and take longer than usual to settle in with school routines.

Early years

Despite most early years provision remaining open since June 2020, many childcare providers reported that young children are behind with their communication, language and social skills, as well as their physical development. This was particularly true for children born during the pandemic, or who had spent most of their lives in it, which staff attributed to their lack of opportunity to socialise with other children.

To bridge gaps in learning and development, many child carers told inspectors that they are focusing on developing children's communication and language skills; providing more opportunities for children to interact with each other to build on their social and emotional skills; and helping their physical development – particularly for those who did not have access to outdoor space during lockdowns – by adapting their outside play areas.

Further education (FE)

The pandemic continues to disrupt learning for FE students. Inspectors heard from FE providers about interruptions to learning caused by COVID-related absences; the fall in the number of learners on some courses –especially apprenticeships; gaps in students' practical skills as well as their English and maths; and the fact that some placements are not yet fully reinstated for learners. Mental health concerns also remain high for students, and some are finding it difficult to settle back to face-to-face learning.

However, to help learners catch up, inspectors found that providers are repeating elements of courses; offering individual support to develop specific skills; prioritising practical training; and seeking alternative placements where the usual options have become unavailable. A number of providers have also developed new programmes to support those who lost their jobs, or wanted to change career as a result of COVID, giving them the skills and knowledge to re-enter employment.

Many providers also told inspectors they have worked to retain and re-engage learners. The focus on retention has resulted in some providers seeing excellent attendance and learners being eager to engage in face-to-face learning.

Ofsted Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman said:

The pandemic is still with us, and children's education is still being disrupted. But it's clear that many school leaders and staff have responded to these challenges with tenacity, and demonstrated creativity in how they have supported children and learners' education and personal development.

Children have missed out so much already. And some pupils remain persistently absent from school for a variety of reasons. So, as we face further turbulence, we must do all we can to make sure children are able to continue learning in their classrooms.

Notes to editors

- The findings from [Education recovery in schools: autumn 2021](#) are based on evidence collected during routine inspections of 98 primary and secondary schools in England between 25 October and 19 November 2021. This is nearly a quarter (22%) of all school inspections carried out during that time. The selected sample of inspections illustrate the challenges that some schools are facing and the approaches they are taking.
- [Education recovery in early years providers: autumn 2021](#) – the findings are based on evidence collected during inspections of 77 early years providers between 1 and 19 November 2021. This included 39 childminders and 38 nurseries across England. This is around 13% of all early years inspection carried out during this time.
- [Education recovery in further education and skill providers: autumn 2021](#) – the findings are based on evidence from inspections that took place between 1 and 19 November 2021. With the exception of monitoring visits and prison inspections, evidence was reviewed from all 39 inspections of further education and skills providers that took place over this period.