Institute of Education

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Learning through disruption 4: building a more resilient education system post-COVID

COVID has highlighted significant weaknesses in how the primary education system in England is currently managed and resourced. We need to build a more resilient education system post-pandemic.

Our project, *Learning Through Disruption*[1], set out to explore what headteachers, teachers, other school staff and parents in English primary schools had made of keeping education going during the pandemic; and whether any more general lessons could be learnt for the education system going forward from their experiences. In a context where a relatively modest amount of funding had been

committed for recovery in English schools we also wanted to understand whether such funding had been targeted at the issues that schools and parents considered most important.

Findings

1. **The emphasis in policy on 'Catch-up' does not adequately reflect primary schools' concerns.** The funding is for 2021-22 only, and for interventions that in one year are designed to catch children up with where they would have been, had the pandemic never happened. By contrast, primary schools are looking across the range of pupil needs and reviewing what

has been gained and what may have been lost during a prolonged period of disruption. This means planning in the round for teaching that can rebuild learning over the medium to long term.

2. **Catch up funding poorly reflects the multiple and varied impacts that the pandemic has had on children's welfare and mental health as well as learning and attainment.** Catch-up programmes targeted on attainment alone are not sufficient to address these needs. Difficulties in getting speedy referrals to CAMHS for children in need of specialist support were of particular concern to schools.COVID has shown just how fragmented and over-stretched community services now are for children who are vulnerable, struggling with their mental health, or living in poverty. More joined up funding to fully address these needs is required.

3. **A testing and accountability regime that pays no attention to the variation in the depth of impacts from COVID on different communities will not help the system as a whole repair.** Statutory testing, tied to benchmarked standards and fixed timetables, are not fit for purpose in the current context. Purposeful and rewarding teaching builds children's confidence, enhances their social skills and fosters their wellbeing. Schools recognise the value of planning in this way to meet local needs. Their judgements should be respected.

4. **System resilience depends upon staff health and wellbeing.** A pressure-driven approach to education management that places little trust in teachers' knowledge and underestimates the value of their professional judgement militates against good teaching and undermines system resilience.

Recommendations

- **To build a much more sustainable and resilient education system that can repair the damage COVID has done, the government needs to invest for the longer term.** This should be the primary goal rather than short term catch up funding for interventions that may not adequately address local priorities.

- **To create a more resilient education system post COVID, the government needs to listen to schools and respect their knowledge of the problems encountered at the frontline.** Rushing to judgement without meaningful consultation risks poor decision-making, based on insufficient information, and resources being wasted on the wrong targets.

- **Key areas of support for welfare, mental health and for families living in poverty have become fragmented and disjointed. They urgently need repair.** Schools are making enormous efforts to make up for these deficiencies in the interests of the children they teach. The government should audit the welfare and wellbeing demands schools have had to meet during the COVID crisis, and make a clearer assessment of where other support services (e.g. CAMHS) have been stretched too thin. This should lead to a proper funding stream for welfare support for children that matches what schools are already providing.

- **The testing and inspection regime needs radical overhaul.** Current arrangements for testing and inspection apply inappropriate and counterproductive pressure to schools. They do not take key contextual factors into account that impact on children's attainment. A reformed testing and inspection regime post-COVID should aim to make a much more substantial contribution to what pupils can achieve over the longer term.

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