

An evaluation of the Department of Education's Engage Programme in primary and post-primary schools during 2020-2021

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Introduction

Background

In June 2020, the Northern Ireland Executive, as part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, provided £12 million funding to provide additional support to those pupils¹ whose learning had been impacted adversely by the first lockdown (March–June 2020). Subsequently, the Education Minister allocated £11.25 million of the initial funding to a support programme entitled ‘Engage’ to be initiated in the autumn term of 2020 for all primary and post-primary schools. The funding was to be used in the 2020-21 financial year and a further £4.83 million was approved by the Executive in March 2021 to enable the programme to continue in schools from April until the end of June 2021. The allocation of funding to each school was determined according to the assessed level of disadvantage and the number of pupils enrolled, and was awarded with the condition that it be used to employ qualified teachers only.

The Engage Programme sits within the broader context of the Standards and Learning Project of the Department of Education’s (DE) Restart Programme. The purpose of the Standards and Learning Project is to maintain (or to redress) educational standards, acknowledging the period of time pupils have experienced outside of the classroom environment, and to provide continuity of learning going forward.

The Engage Programme

The aim of the Engage Programme is to limit any long-term adverse impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on educational standards, by supporting pupils’ learning and engagement on their return to school through provision of high quality one-to-one, small group or team teaching support in every primary and post-primary school in Northern Ireland.

The objectives of the programme are as follows.

- To provide an appropriately differentiated programme of child-centred, one-to-one, small group and/or team teaching support to pupils of all abilities whom schools identify as those who would benefit from additional support to engage with learning following the COVID-19 period of lockdown.
- To support pupils to increase their confidence, engagement, motivation to learn and to develop the tools and skills they require to become independent learners.
- To develop and enhance pupils’ skills, knowledge and understanding in the key cross-curricular skills of Using Mathematics, Communication and Using Information and Communication Technology (UICT).

¹ The package of measures included also short summer schools for year 5, 6 and 7 pupils and the purchase of online virtual learning resources for year 7 pupils.

- To support and enhance pupils' development of the whole curriculum thinking skills and personal capabilities.
- To develop pupils' understanding of how they learn (metacognition) and their self-knowledge about explicit strategies and behaviours for learning to help build positive mindsets, coping skills and resilience.
- To complement and enhance the existing work of schools (such as, extended schools, special educational needs and/or nurture provision) to provide support for pupils to engage with learning following the COVID-19 period of lockdown.

Schools were given flexibility and autonomy and encouraged to explore creative and innovative approaches which would best suit their context and meet the needs of their pupils.

On 6 January 2021, the former Minister for Education, Peter Weir, MLA, announced a further period of lockdown. Vulnerable children and children of key workers were to have access to schools for supervised learning. The Minister for Education issued an [Educational Continuity Direction](#) to give legal effect to the January 2021 arrangements.

Summary of key findings

- Schools' response to the Engage Programme has been overwhelmingly positive. The programme has enhanced and complemented the existing work of schools to support pupils experiencing barriers to learning. Almost all schools welcomed the additional financial allocations awarded to support pupils at this time.
- Schools were given autonomy to devise their own programmes which resulted in a multidisciplinary approach and a wide range of interventions tailored to meet the academic and emotional health and wellbeing needs of pupils.
- In almost all primary schools, the funding was used to deliver intervention programmes which resulted in improvements in the pupils' literacy and numeracy skills, and their emotional health and wellbeing.
- In most post-primary schools, intervention programmes combined emotional health and wellbeing and academic support across a variety of subjects including English and mathematics. As a result, there was an improvement in a range of pupil outcomes, including pupil attainment, motivation to learn, confidence and engagement.
- During the period of remote learning from January to March 2021, most of the schools sampled continued with the Engage Programme, albeit with modifications to the provision planned initially. The modifications included amendments to the cohort of targeted pupils, moving the programme online and offering targeted pupils access to supervised learning in school.

- Teachers benefitted from the opportunities afforded through the programme to enhance their professional learning, most commonly through upskilling in digital learning strategies and training in counselling for mental health and wellbeing.
- The Department of Education made appropriate modifications to the programme throughout the academic year in response to feedback from the Strategic Oversight Group, comprised of principals, teacher unions, employing authorities, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG), Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). The challenge of securing specialist teachers in Irish-medium schools was addressed by allowing flexibility in the use of classroom assistants. In post-primary schools, flexibility was given to deliver the programme outside of normal school hours.
- A minority of principals in the overall sample reported that the use of the Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME)² criteria for the allocation of the programme's funding to individual schools was not the most appropriate indicator of need. The support was intended for pupils of all abilities whom the schools would identify as benefitting from additional support to engage with learning. A small number of schools in the sample supplemented the provision from their school budgets.
- Some primary and post-primary schools delayed the implementation of the programme in the autumn term due to reported difficulty sourcing a specialist teacher and/or a substitute teacher to deliver the Engage Programme.
- Notwithstanding the challenges of continuing the programme during the second period of sustained remote learning, there was an underspend of £2,517,857 over the period September 2020 to March 2021.

²Schools with an above average level of free school meal entitlement (FSME) received a higher level of funding than those with below average FSME.

Key findings

Objective 1: Have schools provided an appropriately differentiated programme of child-centred, one- to- one, small group and/or team teaching support to pupils of all abilities whom schools identify as those who would benefit from additional support to engage with learning following the COVID-19 period of lockdown?

This objective has been met by those schools sampled as part of the evaluation.

The Engage Programme funding enabled schools to plan for and provide differentiated programmes to meet the needs of pupils impacted by the COVID-19 lockdowns. Crucially, schools report that the Engage Programme funding enabled them to provide more bespoke support programmes for those pupils who did not meet the criteria for the interventions already funded.

Almost all schools used the model of either one-to-one or small group support; a small number of schools reported that team teaching was the preferred approach for delivery of the programme. One-to-one or small group support ensured a more individualised approach, which schools reported had improved the pupils' outcomes aligned with the objectives of the schools' programmes. Significantly, in discussions with inspectors, the pupils expressed the view that the reduced pupil-teacher ratio enabled them to make better progress.

In the most effective practice, there was effective liaison between the class teacher and the Engage teacher to ensure consolidation of the learning strategies used in the one-to-one or small group sessions.

In order for post-primary pupils to access one-to-one or small group teaching, flexibility was required in school timetabling and various approaches were taken. Pupils were withdrawn from classes on a planned and rotational basis; also, sessions outside of normal school hours were provided to avoid loss of class time and to overcome the difficulty of sourcing substitute teachers.

Importantly, a majority of schools used a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to provide a holistic overview of pupil wellbeing, including teacher observations and professional judgement, and input from classroom assistants and parents. Schools that had access to attitudinal survey software used it to better understand the impact of lockdown and remote learning on pupils' attitudes and mind-sets and to design intervention programmes accordingly. Some pupils were already experiencing barriers to learning, including difficult home circumstances, and these had been exacerbated by the removal of face-to-face learning.

A majority of post-primary schools directed the Engage funding towards key stage three and key stage four pupils, as this was the cohort of pupils schools identified as being most impacted by the periods of lockdown. In conversations with district inspectors, almost all principals spoke about their concerns for the year 13 and 14

pupils, given the disruption to face-to-face learning with prolonged spells of self-isolation of both staff and pupils, and the uncertainty around the awarding process during the autumn term, 2020. However, as the academic year progressed and arrangements for Centre Determined Grades became available, only a minority of post-primary schools used the funding to support the older pupils.

Objective 2: Has the programme supported pupils to increase their confidence, engagement, motivation to learn and to develop the tools and skills they require to become independent learners?

This objective has been met by those schools sampled as part of the evaluation.

On return to school in August and September 2020, schools assessed pupils' emotional health and wellbeing, including levels of confidence and readiness to learn. The adverse effect of the first lockdown on societal relationships and the way in which schools closed with limited notification meant that pupils felt disconnected from their friends and wider family support networks. The emotional health and wellbeing of pupils was as much of a concern to schools as the potential loss of learning.

In almost all schools, the Engage Programme addressed improving pupil attitudes to learning, self-esteem, motivation and engagement. Some of the targeted pupils in post-primary were dealing with very serious issues exacerbated by the lockdown including: school refusal; mental health challenges; drug use; anti-social behaviour; and, domestic violence. Schools prioritised supporting pupils with these issues to help them be ready to learn.

In discussions with inspectors, and through schools' own surveys, pupils in receipt of the targeted interventions spoke highly of the benefits, in particular the positive impact on their motivation to learn, confidence and outcomes.

The one-to-one and small group support meant there was time and space to listen and discuss more, encourage and give support on an individual level and pupils felt better understood, more at ease asking questions and comfortable proceeding at their own pace; this contributed to a '*can do*' attitude and an increase in confidence.

Objective 3: Has the programme developed and enhanced pupils' skills, knowledge and understanding in the key cross-curricular skills of Using Mathematics, Communication and Using ICT?

This objective has been met in relation to Using Mathematics and Communication and met partially in relation to Using ICT by those schools sampled as part of the evaluation.

In almost all primary schools, the funding was used to deliver intervention programmes to support pupils with aspects of literacy and numeracy. A significant minority of post-primary schools targeted literacy and/or numeracy at key stage (KS) 3 as an area for improvement. At key stage (KS) 4, a minority of schools targeted GCSE³ English and/or mathematics as an area for improvement. Only a small number of schools overall used the Engage Programme funding to develop and enhance explicitly knowledge, skills and understanding in Using ICT.

³ GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education

Schools reported that it was easier to evaluate the extent to which this objective was met, compared to the other objectives, due to the existing literacy and numeracy assessment tools and internal quantitative data. In addition, almost all schools included teacher professional judgement in the identification of pupils for the programme, which ensured a more holistic assessment of individual need.

Almost all primary schools reported and provided evidence of overall improvement in pupils' literacy and numeracy skills as a result of the Engage support.

Most post-primary schools reported and provided evidence that the programme improved standards in the pupils' literacy and/or numeracy and increased their confidence and motivation to learn in these cross-curricular areas. Where schools reported low or no impact, this was attributed to a difficulty resourcing the programme with a suitable teacher.

Objective 4: Has the programme supported and enhanced pupils' development of their thinking skills and personal capabilities?

This objective has been met partially by those schools sampled as part of the evaluation.

In most schools, this was not an objective prioritised by them when developing the programme and therefore was not planned for in their interventions. However, schools were able to identify, through discussions with district inspectors, a number of positive outcomes regarding pupils' development. Pupils' thinking skills and personal capabilities were developed through the one-to-one and small group teaching programmes; this included improved interaction with peers and staff.

There were improvements in: pupils' organisational skills; self-management; their sense of ownership of their learning; and, their own understanding of the skills and capabilities they were developing. This, in turn, impacted positively on their attendance, increased their confidence and ability to learn independently, and enabled them to work more effectively with others.

Objective 5: To develop pupils' understanding of how they learn (metacognition) and their self-knowledge about explicit strategies and behaviours for learning to help build positive mind-sets, coping skills and resilience.

This objective has been met by those post-primary schools sampled as part of the evaluation, and met partially by primary schools in the sample.

While metacognition may not have been an explicit key focus in the post-primary schools' online planner or action plans, in visits to schools, district inspectors found that developing pupils' understanding of how they learn was an integral part of the targeted interventions. In the most effective practice, post-primary schools showed evidence of how the Engage teacher monitored and tracked pupils' progression in their meta-cognitive skills and in how they applied these skills across the curriculum.

In some schools where interventions that were designed to improve pupils' metacognition were successful, the schools provided supplementary funding to enable pupils outside of the Engage cohort to benefit also from the intervention strategies.

Post-primary pupils understood and could articulate to inspectors how an improved/better understanding of their own thought processes impacted on their learning. The pupils reported that they had become better at self-regulation to the benefit of their learning, making positive changes to their behaviour both in school and outside of the classroom.

Areas of focus in schools included developing coping strategies, building resilience and supporting positive mind-sets for the pupils about coming back to school, keeping up-to-date with their work, having high expectations and self-belief, stress management, positive thinking and self-talk⁴. In visits to post-primary schools, district inspectors reviewed evidence of how well this objective was met, including data from the Pupil Attitudes to Self and School survey (PASS), data from pupil and parental surveys and attendance data. The inspectors heard first-hand from pupils who spoke about their positive experiences of Engage and how it reduced their levels of anxiety, improved their concentration, and improved their learning overall.

This objective was less applicable to primary schools and consequently was not a priority in their online planners. However, a minority of primary schools in the sample reported to district inspectors that positive learning messages were promoted by the Engage teacher, such as, talking to the pupils about their learning, including emphasising to them that 'it's okay not to know', there are different ways to do things and to find the way that works best for them. Pupils' awareness of this was evident in discussions with inspectors when, for example, they talked about how they completed their multiplication tables in different ways.

Objective 6: Has the programme complemented and enhanced the existing work of schools (such as, extended schools, special educational needs and/or nurture provision) to provide support for pupils to engage with learning following the COVID-19 period of lockdown?

This objective has been met by those schools sampled as part of the evaluation.

Almost all schools recognised the opportunity to enhance their existing work and most schools thought strategically about how they utilised the Engage resource.

The additional teaching resource, coupled with the autonomy for schools about how they used it in their Engage programmes, has enabled enhancement of the existing work of schools to support pupils experiencing barriers to learning. The Engage Programme has built on and developed the support for pupils at a critical time.

⁴ Your inner voice, the voice in your mind that says the things you don't necessarily say out loud.

Successes include: improving the special educational needs provision to meet more effectively the breadth of pupils' needs; greater opportunities for the application of staff's continuing professional development through Engage programmes; nurture provision included within the Engage Programme; and, the better tailoring of small group work to pupils' individual needs.

As a result of the Engage Programme, the middle leaders' capacity in monitoring and evaluating learning and teaching, and, in the use of explicit measurement for tracking of pupil wellbeing, has improved. Where beginning teachers were employed to deliver the Engage Programme, they were supported in a range of ways by more senior teachers prior to, and throughout, the intervention period. These supportive mechanisms included: team teaching; shadowing; and, upskilling and training in specific teaching approaches and processes used in the school.

Schools highlighted the positive impact of the programme on the wider school community through upskilling parents in aspects of literacy, numeracy and also in Irish language specific terminology in Irish-medium educational settings. In addition, schools provided training for parents in the use of dyslexia support programmes and Reading Recovery⁵ principles.

Conclusion

At its inception, the Engage Programme was planned as a year-long intervention that would support pupils in their return to face-to-face learning and develop further their thinking skills and capabilities to enable them to deal with future periods of remote learning. However, as the year progressed and there were further disruptions to in-class teaching due to COVID-19, it was recognised that the repercussions of the restrictions were much more far-reaching on the pupils' learning experiences and would require a longer-term strategy.

The Engage Programme has had a positive impact overall in primary and post-primary schools and its key strength is the support to individual pupils which is not predicated on previous academic attainment or need. The programme focussed support on those schools with above average levels of FSME pupils. Large post primary schools with over one thousand pupils and below average FSME experienced the greatest challenges in providing support for pupils due to funding constraints. The programme did not, however, take account of the fact that need is not exclusive to pupils who are entitled to free school meals. Large schools impacted by the £8 100 funding ceiling⁶ experienced the greatest challenges in providing support for pupils.

The announcement in June 2021 that the programme would be extended into the next academic year, 2021-22, has been welcomed by schools, and has enabled them to plan for the new term. This extension is in recognition that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing. The programme has been extended appropriately to include funded pre-school settings, special schools and Education Other Than At School (EOTAS).

⁵ Reading Recovery is a short-term intervention to support early reading and writing.

⁶ See table 1 and table 2 in the guidance.

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/engage-programme-guidance-for-schools-%28version-2-5-october-2020%29.pdf>

Considerations going forward

- The online planning tool needs to be modified to allow schools to enter baseline data from their individual context and set clear, measurable targets to support more effective self-evaluation; it should have a designated section for contingency planning.
- Schools need more support to develop robust, measurable and practical approaches to baseline, monitor and evaluate in more depth the impact of the programme. They should have contingency plans in place to ensure continuity of the Engage Programme during periods of remote learning.
- Schools should monitor, review and evaluate the efficacy of the overall aim of the programme and its impact in a regular cycle of self-evaluation, so that practice can be modified, where necessary, to reflect current context and to make the best use of resources.

Appendices

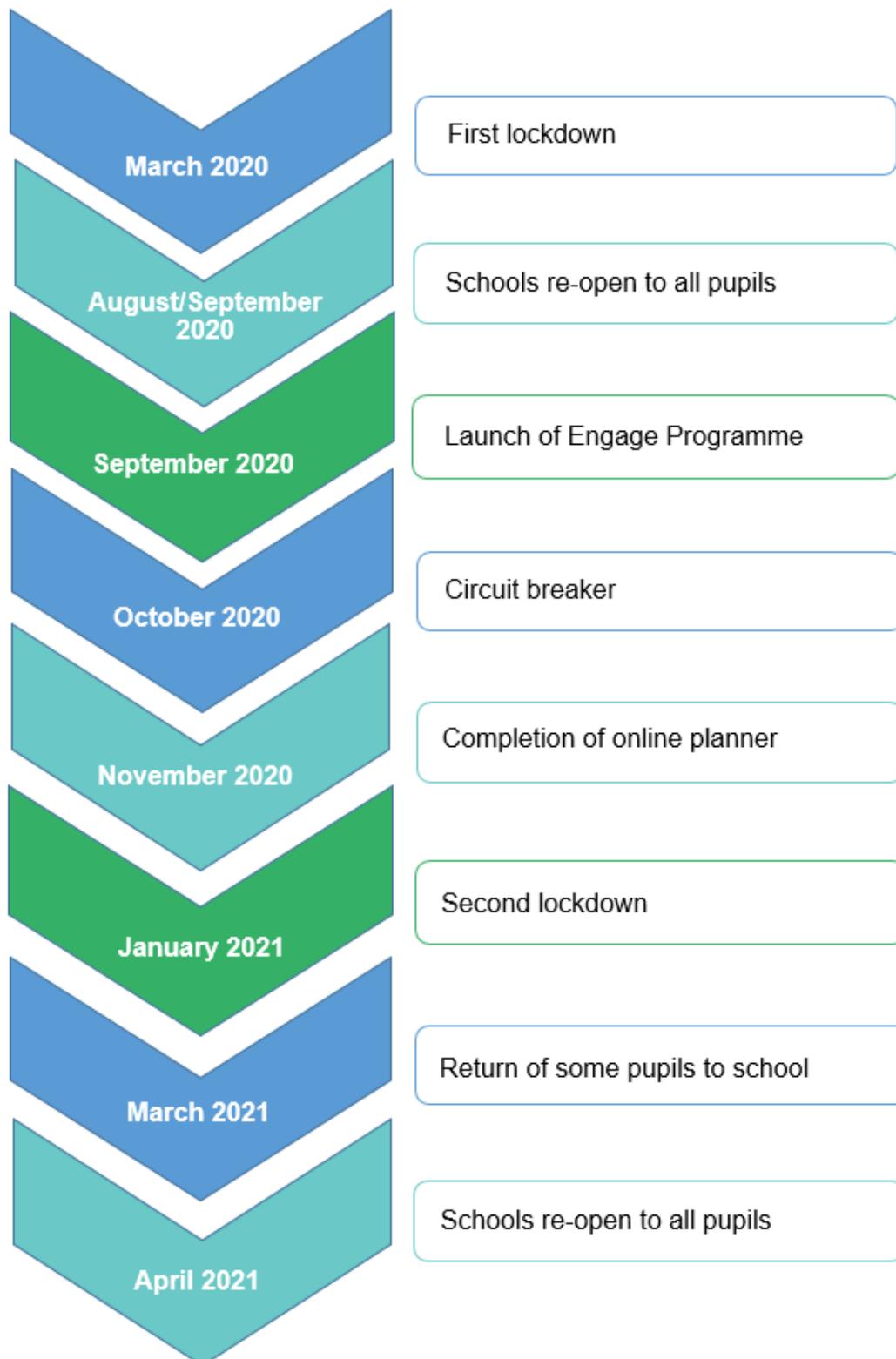
Appendix 1: Evaluation methodology

The Department of Education commissioned the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to evaluate the effectiveness of the Engage Programme during the 2020-2021 academic year and in particular its impact on children and young people's learning.

The ETI conducted the evaluation through:

- an evaluation of the online planners completed, as part of the Engage Programme application, by 245 primary schools and 193 post-primary schools;
- ongoing and focused district inspector communication with schools; and
- on-site and virtual visits to 40 post-primary schools and 115 primary schools, including end of programme visits to ten primary and thirteen post-primary schools. The on-site visits included observations of sessions, scrutiny of school documentation and discussions with key staff and pupils.

Appendix 2: Timeline



Appendix 3: List of schools that participated in an end of programme virtual discussion or an on-site visit with ETI District Inspectors

Primary Schools

Brooklands Primary School
Bunscoil Feirste
Dungannon Primary School
Holy Trinity Primary School, Cookstown
Jones Memorial Primary School
Leaney Primary School
Maghera Primary School
Nettlefield Primary School
St Dallan's Primary School
St Mary's Primary School, Dunamore

Post-Primary Schools

Carrickfergus Academy
Glengormley High School
Grosvenor Grammar School
Hazelwood College
Limavady High School
Lisneal College
New-Bridge Integrated College
Sacred Heart College, Omagh
St John the Baptist College
St Kevin's College
St Mary's Christian Brothers' Grammar School, Belfast
St Patrick's High School, Keady
Thornhill College

Appendix 4: Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

Quantitative terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

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