EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE

Post-primary Phase Report

September 2018 - December 2020

Contents

Foreword

The last year has brought challenges to education and training in Northern Ireland unlike anything we could have imagined. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) along with many others, had to re-think priorities quickly in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, including pausing inspection indefinitely.

Successful responses to the pandemic both, here and across the world have required understanding, adaptable and flexible leadership, underpinned by technological creativity; testing to the extreme the very attributes our education and training curricula endeavour to foster. Personal resilience is at a premium.

Maintaining operational integrity within and across the education and training system, continues to be a demanding, and increasingly exhausting undertaking for individuals and organisations. The long held ambition of providing access to education online had to be put in place virtually overnight.

Since March 2020, inspectors have been focusing largely on supporting leaders and practitioners to provide continuity of learning for children and young people and to support their wellbeing. Inspectors have shared their expertise and worked collaboratively with other key education and training stakeholders, to develop advice and guidance for a range of sectors.

This report is one of a series of seven individual reports (for Pre-school; Primary; Post-primary; Special; Education Other Than At School; Youth; and Further Education and Work-based learning) covering the period September 2018 to December 2020, replacing the previous biennial Chief Inspector's Report.

This series of reports sets out: to help to promote improvement in the interests of all learners; to identify, affirm, and share evidence of effective learning, so that all learners can benefit; and to provide a basis to continue the professional educational discourse between inspectors and educators, for the benefit of all children and young people.

The reports are intended to stimulate debate and discussion on what we are discovering about the nature of effective learning and teaching, that can not only support a swifter recovery but that can influence and shape the future of education in Northern Ireland.

The immediate future continues to be uncertain, but I feel privileged to lead ETI, in continuing to contribute our impartial and objective analysis, evaluation and expertise to the collective work of addressing the challenges facing the education and training system in Northern Ireland.

These reports mark a change of direction and a fresh start to our organisation and our work. I welcome your thoughts and contributions as to how we can continue to support learners and educators to adapt flexibly and quickly to changing and unforeseen circumstances in the future through capturing and building on the experiences of educators before and during the pandemic.

Faustina Graham
Chief Inspector

Inspection findings: September 2018 - March 2020

Context

The findings that follow are based on the evidence gained through: inspections that were not impacted by industrial action; inspections that were impacted by action short of strike but in which there were varying levels of engagement; and, all other district and survey/evaluation visits to schools. Inspection was paused on 18 March 2020, owing to Covid-19.

Views of pupils

In three-quarters of the schools inspected (28 of 37 full school inspections or 76%) pupils had the opportunity to respond to the post-primary pupil questionnaire[1]. A total of 8001 young people responded. Their responses made clear that they value meaningful opportunities to be involved in the development of key aspects of school provision. Their evidence showed them having a positive impact in schools, occasionally at a strategic level but overall across a breadth of areas that bring about improvements to provision, for example continuous professional development of staff informed by pupil feedback.

Most pupils agreed that teachers and other staff listen to their views and value their opinions. Almost all indicated they benefit from opportunities to undertake leadership roles and responsibilities within and beyond school, and develop their employability and wider skills such as communication, organisation and teamwork. They benefit also from having access to a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities.

The pupils' responses were positive also about their experience of learning. In particular, they affirmed the feedback they receive from their teachers, the inclusive and respectful ethos of their schools and they stated they know who to go to if they are concerned about anything. A minority (21%) of pupils at Key Stage 4 (KS4) and post-16 indicated that they would benefit from more access to careers education. Over one-quarter (28%) of KS4 and post-16 pupils indicated that they are not given opportunities to link their learning to real-life situations.

Learning and teaching

Across all inspections during action short of strike, of the 80 lessons observed, the quality of learning and teaching in nearly all (94%) was evaluated as good or better with a majority (59%) being very good or outstanding. The most effective lessons incorporated a broad range of strategies, which included: well-targeted questioning to develop the pupils' thinking and problem-solving skills: differentiated tasks with supportive feedback on progress: and a good variety of practical and theory work to

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[1] See Appendix 1: Questionnaire responses during the period September 2018 to March 2020.

reinforce and secure the learning. These lessons were characterised by: excellent relationships in the classrooms; the teachers' realistically high expectations of the pupils; and, the pupils' purposeful engagement in, and understanding of, the relevance of their learning, including the important transferable skills they were developing.

Barriers to learning

Most schools are using effectively a range of internal performance data and other information to identify low- and under-achievement and put in place targeted interventions for individual and groups of pupils to support progress in learning. Tailored learning and pastoral interventions include, for example: timetabled literacy and numeracy classes; mentoring to ameliorate disengagement and improve motivation; and, support for emotional health and well-being. Pupils made clear that these interventions make a positive contribution to their progress in learning. However, robust monitoring and evaluation of these interventions needs to be supported by system-wide comparative data to gauge added value, which includes re-testing pupils against baseline data (standardised and attitudinal tests) to show qualitative and quantitative progress.

Supervised withdrawal

Some post-primary schools operate supervised withdrawal for pupils as part of their learning and teaching and/or positive behaviour policies. The appropriateness of such withdrawals is considered by ETI on a case-by-case basis and is not to be confused with pupils being withdrawn from class, unsupervised and unattended. Notwithstanding, school leaders need to monitor supervised withdrawal arrangements, keeping under review the impact on a pupil's statutory curriculum entitlement and the quality of learning experiences and progression. In addition, the impact of withdrawal on learning behaviours and on the emotional and social well-being of learners needs to be measured against any reduction in the risk of disengagement from education.

Attainment in public examinations

Outcomes in public examinations for pupils, including those entitled to free school meals have continued to increase. Overall, headline attainment in GCSE and Advanced level qualifications (including equivalents) has increased and the narrowing of attainment gaps for target groups of pupils continued; however, under-achievement by certain groups of learners remains, namely pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and in particular pupils entitled to free school meals, boys and children who are looked after.

Needs and interests of pupils

All schools need to consider how the curriculum offer allows for the pupils' holistic development and progression to the next stage of education or into employment.

ST CATHERINE'S COLLEGE, ARMAGH

FOCUS: SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING, FURTHER DEVELOPING THE CURRICULUM

CHALLENGE

The school wanted to effect improvement by supporting the emotional health and well-being of the whole school community, alongside further development of its curricular provision.

RESPONSE

An audit was carried out to identify the range and extent of emotional health and well-being issues within the school community. In consultation with the pupils, a framework addressing the identified health and well-being issues of the school community was implemented.

The school also carried out a comprehensive review of the curriculum offer at both key stage (KS) 4 and post-16. This has led to the introduction of a number of vocational qualifications at KS 4 with progression routes to level three courses and to further and higher education. At post-16, the curriculum offer continues to be extended by collaboration within the Armagh Area Learning Community.

ETI'S EVALUATION OF IMPACT

There is a holistic approach to the promotion of the pupils' resilience and management of their emotional and mental health. Pupils are very appreciative of the way in which the staff support them in all aspects of their lives and how self-belief is fostered at all levels. The preventative curriculum is highly responsive to contemporary issues and is complemented by a well-conceived programme of teacher professional learning. Staff well-being is also prioritised with school development days allocated to promote healthy minds and bodies.

The needs of the pupils are at the centre of the school improvement agenda. As a consequence, the school's curriculum is flexible, responsive to the pupils' needs and aspirations: well-informed by transitional data; and adapted annually to ensure personalised provision. It takes very good account of current labour market intelligence and the careers programme facilitates strong links with industry and employers.

The pupils have equal opportunity of access to the range of curriculum pathways at both KS4 and post-16; those pupils who experience barriers to learning are identified early and, an extensive range of therapeutic and other interventions is available.

The outcomes achieved by the pupils in public examinations at KS 4 and post-16 continue to be a key strength of the work of the school. Additionally, pupils have many opportunities to develop leadership skills, and across the key stages they speak confidently and with pride about the values and skills they are developing.
Sustaining Improvement Inspection, March 2020

A majority of schools have adapted their curriculum offer to meet the abilities and changing needs and interests of pupils, by including an increasing number of applied and vocational subjects with viable pathways. However, issues identified in a minority of schools included: low-impact careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG); and an inappropriately narrow curriculum offer which was insufficiently matched to the needs, interests, abilities and aspirations of all the pupils. This was particularly evident in some of the small sixth forms.

Statutory education ends at age 16 and at post-16 a range of practices has developed across schools. Inspection evidence shows there are issues associated with bridging and transition year options/programmes (repeating or studying new level 2 courses or repeating or studying new level 2 courses along with a level 3 offer). Such courses must be educationally sound, beneficial to pupils, and provide appropriate progression pathways.

While schools' curriculum design and provision is informed year-on-year by quantitative and qualitative data, the perceived value of qualifications and duplication are also necessary considerations, with close attention required to the potential impact of curriculum and qualifications development in neighbouring jurisdictions and in particular, England. The continuing budgetary pressures in schools is a challenge.

Schools, further education (FE) colleges and other providers largely co-operate well within area learning communities, learning lessons from each other, and making provision through effective co-ordination and quality assurance processes. There are common priorities across individual development plans and examples of agreed joint policies within area learning communities.

Collaboration includes: a variety of shared events, for example CEIAG and science, technology, engineering and mathematics events, including the involvement of FE colleges; a range of clusters at senior and middle leadership focusing on pastoral, curriculum, careers, and quality assurance; and, partnerships with local district councils and community groups.

The development and implementation of a more contemporary, strategic cross-sectoral approach to CEIAG will further support informed decision-making by pupils and parents about viable progression pathways. In addition, a strengthening of collaboration and proactivity between FE colleges, work-based learning providers and post-primary schools should include taking account of area-based plans.

Action to promote improvement

Schools identify key priorities through the school development planning process, using internal qualitative and quantitative data to place a high priority on improving the quality of provision.

School development planning is most effective when it is: informed and supported by rigorous and robust self-evaluation, extensive consultation and professional learning for staff aligned well to improvement. However, quality action planning as part of the monitoring and evaluation process remains an issue in a significant minority (14 of 37 full school inspections or 38%). Schools need to use their qualitative and quantitative data to establish baseline positions in order to set targets, inform actions, measure progress and evaluate the impact on the quality of the learning experiences and the pupils' outcomes.

School leadership at all levels would benefit from agreed system-wide information to better support the effectiveness of their monitoring and evaluation processes.

Governance

In all full school inspections (37), the governors met with the inspectors; they were well-informed about the life and work of the school. In almost all inspections there was confidence[2] in the aspects of governance evaluated, with the vision, ethos and aims of the individual school shared by all. Governors continue to be responsive to due process and risk management in some instances of highly complex and challenging child protection and safeguarding matters.

Safeguarding

At the time of inspection, the arrangements in almost all of the post-primary schools in which safeguarding was inspected, reflected or reflected broadly guidance from DE. In any instance of a school not providing evidence that the arrangements for safeguarding reflected or reflected broadly the guidance from the Department, ETI returned within six weeks to follow-up on safeguarding. School safeguarding teams address the health and well-being, the social and emotional needs and the safety of pupils. Policies are updated on a rolling basis, in consultation with pupils, parents, staff and governors, including for example policies on anti-bullying, positive behaviour, and relationships and sexuality education.

Schools seeking Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) provision must ensure that no pupils are placed in an unregulated setting; the referral process, set out in DE EOTAS guidance 2014/24, must be followed by school leaders, including governors.

Lessons learned during the Covid-19 response phase, including a focus on remote learning: March – June 2020

Context

The findings that follow are based on the available evidence gained through: the ETI's roles as district inspectors, as C-19 link officers[3]; and, through meeting with reference groups of Heads of Departments from across Northern Ireland to seek their views on the challenges of remote learning and teaching, and the approaches they might take in moving towards the return to school. The Post-primary Curricular Challenges and Approaches Taken publication (June 2020) identified that schools are on a continuum in their response to the needs of their communities; and they are addressing the impact within their schools owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, with some schools better placed than others to deal with the specific issues that emerged from delivering education remotely.
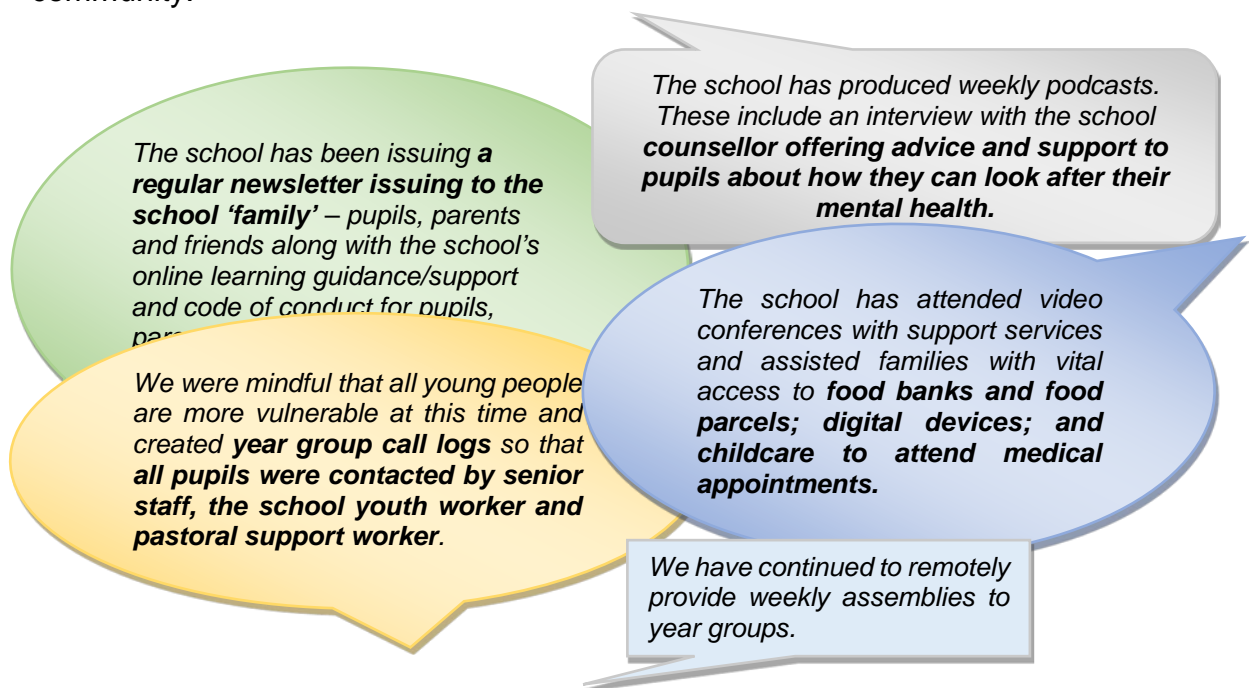
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[2] Given the impact of Action Short of Strike and based on the evidence presented at the time of inspection.

[3] A cross-organisational role in response to the closure of schools due to Covid-19 in March 2020, involving the Catholic Council for Maintained Schools, the Controlled Secondary Schools Council, the Education Authority and the Education and Training Inspectorate.

Responsive and adaptable

During this period and as a consequence of the pandemic, schools were dealing directly with uncertainty which impacted on delivery of education, health and well-being of the school community, pupil engagement and attainment. School leaders conducted risk assessments within the developing guidance from DE and the Public Health Agency (PHA), including in relation to health and safety to lead and keep their schools safe and open for education.

With the support of the Education Authority (EA) Critical Incident Response Team, a number of schools managed purposefully and with empathy, sudden and unexpected critical incidents which impacted on pupils, their families, staff and the wider community.

*The school has been issuing **a regular newsletter issuing to the school 'family'** – pupils, parents and friends along with the school's online learning guidance/support and code of conduct for pupils, par...*

*The school has produced weekly podcasts. These include an interview with the school **counsellor offering advice and support to pupils about how they can look after their mental health.***

*We were mindful that all young people are more vulnerable at this time and created **year group call logs** so that **all pupils were contacted by senior staff, the school youth worker and pastoral support worker**.*

*The school has attended video conferences with support services and assisted families with vital access to **food banks and food parcels; digital devices; and childcare to attend medical appointments**.*

We have continued to remotely provide weekly assemblies to year groups.

Middle leaders, teachers and support staff adjusted planning, learning, teaching and assessment at very short notice to take account of the move from the school to remote learning at home; they worked well together to develop and share resources. Understanding of how technology could support learning and teaching increased incrementally; this involved review, selection, adaptation and creation of online resources for remote learning and for simulating practical work, including demonstrations/simulations of key experiments.

All schools were at various stages of devising safe, effective and efficient arrangements for the beginning of the 2020-21 academic year, including for the delivery of practical aspects of the curriculum.

Learning at a distance

Schools were at different starting points. Where a school prior to the Covid-19 pandemic had focused on e-learning, developing their Information and Communications Technology (ICT) provision and its use across the curriculum, it was much better placed to take on remote learning on the scale required; teachers possessed the confidence and expertise to do so, and pupils were already familiar with the technology and platforms.

Learning, teaching and assessment and providing pastoral support for pupils at a distance was challenging and pressurised for teachers, while parental support and the ability to create an environment conducive to learning varied for a complexity of reasons. Despite instances of synchronous lessons taking place remotely, teachers and pupils missed the interaction in learning between teacher and pupil, and between pupils, that comes from the physical learning environment. In the absence of face-to-face interactions, some teachers found providing feedback via learning online challenging. Synchronous feedback is not always possible and teachers reported that conventional summative assessment of work was more time consuming under remote arrangements.

Across all key stages, non-subject specific issues that emerged included: ICT deficiencies in pupil access, along with connectivity issues not just in rural areas, but also in urban areas and in homes where the connectivity was needed for working adults or siblings or there was only one device in the family; staff training needs around all issues of remote learning; and, teachers trying to compensate for lack of conventional classroom structures.

Disruption to public examinations

Schools know it is important that sufficient information is provided to enable pupils to make secure judgements and decisions about their next stage in education, training or employment. As a consequence of the pandemic, there was unprecedented disruption to public examinations, with the resulting alternative awarding arrangements for summer 2020.

The cancellation of public examinations, coupled with a period of uncertainty about the arrangements for summer 2020 contributed to anxiety for pupils, parents and teachers. Many schools increased their contact with parents to support them and their children pastorally, answer any queries and allay anxieties.

Managing KS 4 and post-16, with external examinations posed greater problems for pupils and teachers than KS 3. Additionally, challenges emerged around equality of opportunity for the pupils from year 11 and year 13, with variation in knowledge, skills and understanding compared to other years.

Pupil engagement

Relationships with peers and staff are paramount for pupils, along with developing positive dispositions and attitudes to learning and self-regulation. Some pupils struggled with maintaining engagement given the sudden loss of routine, structure and face-to-face interaction with peers and teachers. Although many pupils had previously demonstrated high levels of ICT skills, some were less confident in applying these skills to access learning.

Importantly schools analysed and reflected on engagement levels. Some pupils disengaged significantly and this gave serious cause for concern, with instances of as much as half of a year group not submitting work despite staff following up with letters and phone calls home. While there was variation in pupil engagement with remote learning across year groups and schools, similarities emerged over time: for example, a decline in engagement by pupils in key transition years, where year 10 had already made KS4 subject choices and years 12 and 14, where pupils had their formal examinations cancelled.

During the period, schools identified that the pupils who were struggling were not necessarily asking for help, whereas more able pupils or those better able to adapt to independent learning were coping well, meaning there was potentially a widening experiential and attainment gap between these pupils. Consideration was being given to what is best delivered through classroom-based learning and teaching within school, and what aspects could be managed better remotely. There were discussions about providing appropriate levels of support and scaffolding for new learning, to help pupils manage with greater autonomy, through for example, online breakout rooms for differentiated work, group feedback and individual support.

Importantly, analysis and reflection on engagement levels during this period was informing forward planning for learning, teaching and assessment for the next academic year, 2020-21.

Lessons learned during the Covid-19 recovery phase, including a focus on remote learning: August – December 2020

Context

The findings that follow are based on the evidence gained through: the ETI's roles as district inspectors and C-19 link officers; a questionnaire with follow-on engagement[4]; and, engagement with post-primary associate assessors in December 2020.

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[4] See Appendix 2: The consultation ran from 08 October 2020 to 16 October 2020, with follow-on engagement by district inspectors.

School is the best place for pupils

The resumption of school routine and structure was welcomed by pupils after the forced isolation of the lockdown period from March to June 2020. Many not only realised, but also acknowledged that school is the best place for them. In the main, pupils coped well and were happy being back with their friendship groups and engaging in learning.

Schools' adaptability to overcome significant challenges was demonstrated through the embedding of safe practices and provision of pastoral support, to secure effective and more normalised learning in as far as was possible. Pupils accepted and adapted quickly to new routines, and schools felt that, in general, parents were supportive of new routines and necessary mitigations.

The experience and commitment of staff in providing pastoral care, was important in terms of re-engaging pupils and providing additional layers of support as and when required. Appropriately, there was a strong focus on emotional health and well-being initiatives for pupils and staff. Schools welcomed the additional funding from the Engage Programme[5] to support the learning and engagement of identified pupils.

Concerns existed about the impact on pupils due to the limitations on extra-curricular activities and post-16 enrichment opportunities. While there are examples of schools providing experiences for pupils through online mediums, overall pupils did not have sufficient opportunities for development of the wider and social skills outside of the classroom, important for their holistic development. Additionally, work experience and placements which enable pupils to gain further insight to inform their choices about progression pathways, including further study or employment were significantly impacted or no longer possible.

There was an increase in requests for support from a range of external agencies. Schools were dealing with a greater number of mental health matters, some of which were directly related to lockdown, including increased cases of domestic violence; more young people taking on the role of carers as the health and social care system was not able to provide respite; greater incidence of self-harm, anxiety and depression. There were increased numbers of child protection and safeguarding referrals, with an associated workload for the designated teacher; and, some schools identified a need for enhanced roles in-house to deal with pupil mental health. While counselling is being extended through for example, the Wellbeing funding[6], Extended Schools funding[7] and community help, it does not meet the needs of all the pupils being referred or self-referring. Absence of input on the ground from outside agencies,

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[5] The DE Engage Programme aims to limit any long-term adverse impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on educational standards by supporting pupils' learning and engagement through provision of high quality one to one, small group or team teaching support in every school in Northern Ireland.

[6] The DE Wellbeing funding is a £5million fund to help educational settings support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

[7] The DE Extended Schools funding is targeted at those schools serving the most disadvantaged communities.

with support delivered online and longer waiting times for referrals put pressure on staff in schools across this time period.

ST JOHN THE BAPTIST'S COLLEGE, PORTADOWN

FOCUS: SUPPORTING VULNERABLE PUPILS WITH BARRIERS TO THEIR LEARNING

CHALLENGE

At the point of the Baseline Monitoring Inspection in April 2019, the school demonstrated how it collated and analysed a wide range of data to inform provision for learning and teaching and to address the pastoral needs of the pupils, including a nurture programme for pupils requiring additional emotional support. There was a highly co-ordinated and collaborative approach to the care and welfare of the school community and the school had already established community links and relationships with parish and local community organisations to support their pupils.

At the beginning of the lockdown there was an immediate focus on support for a group of the school's most vulnerable pupils. Prior to March 2020, staff were using the Seesaw App, Google Classroom and Show My Homework, and moved quickly to build on the use of these platforms and to provide a portal on the school website to support parents.

In this academic year (2020-21), there has been a continued focus on support for the school's most vulnerable pupils. The school has continually engaged with and enabled evaluation with parents and pupils via Google Forms, a parent app and through focus groups.

RESPONSE

With the closure of schools from 20 March 2020, the staff used the Seesaw App to provide an 'emotional check-in' each morning and had a strategy in place to follow-up on any pupil not engaging. Key staff were given monitoring responsibilities for quality of learning and pupil engagement, and classroom assistants continued to provide literacy support and delivered physical exercise routines to pupils at home. A safeguarding team member was allocated to each remote learning platform, with provision for confidential messaging about pupil safety and signposting of helpline numbers such as ChildLine[8].

A co-ordinated approach by the school through established community links ensured provision of hot meals for vulnerable pupils during the summer months.

In term 1 2020-21, the school's use of data highlighted distress and anxiety among some pupils; the school increased its SEN provision and created physical environments as places of physical and psychological safety as part of the whole school approach to trauma-informed care.

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[8] Childline is a service provided by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Children.

Pupils who are self-isolating at home have access to lessons through online learning platforms, where work is uploaded alongside instructional videos, to enable those pupils to complete work along with those pupils in class.

To combat the restrictions on practical work, staff are recording practical lessons for all pupils to access on Google Classroom.

IMPACT:

Funding from the Engage Programme is helping to support a small group of pupils who receive additional curriculum and pastoral support. Key adults have been chosen carefully to meet daily at allocated times and informally at lunchtime with the Designated Teacher (DT) to provide continuity. An additional two Hope and Resilience groups receive daily social and emotional support from the Nurture Co-ordinator (DT and a member of the school Senior Leadership Team) and the Nurture teacher (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy registered Integrative Counsellor).

The school reports that 'Catch up' measures in place, including support to build the self-esteem of identified pupils, have had a significant impact on the behaviour and attendance of those targeted, who are now more settled following the absence of routines and structures during lockdown. The school reports that pupils are communicating online with growing confidence.

Feedback has informed planning and helped to shape changes to schemes of work, pedagogical approaches, resourcing, pastoral and curricular withdrawal support plans and teacher professional development for 2020-21. A number of teachers have delivered online conferences and training sessions on remote learning, including areas of good practice as part of the EA Supporting Learning[9] project.
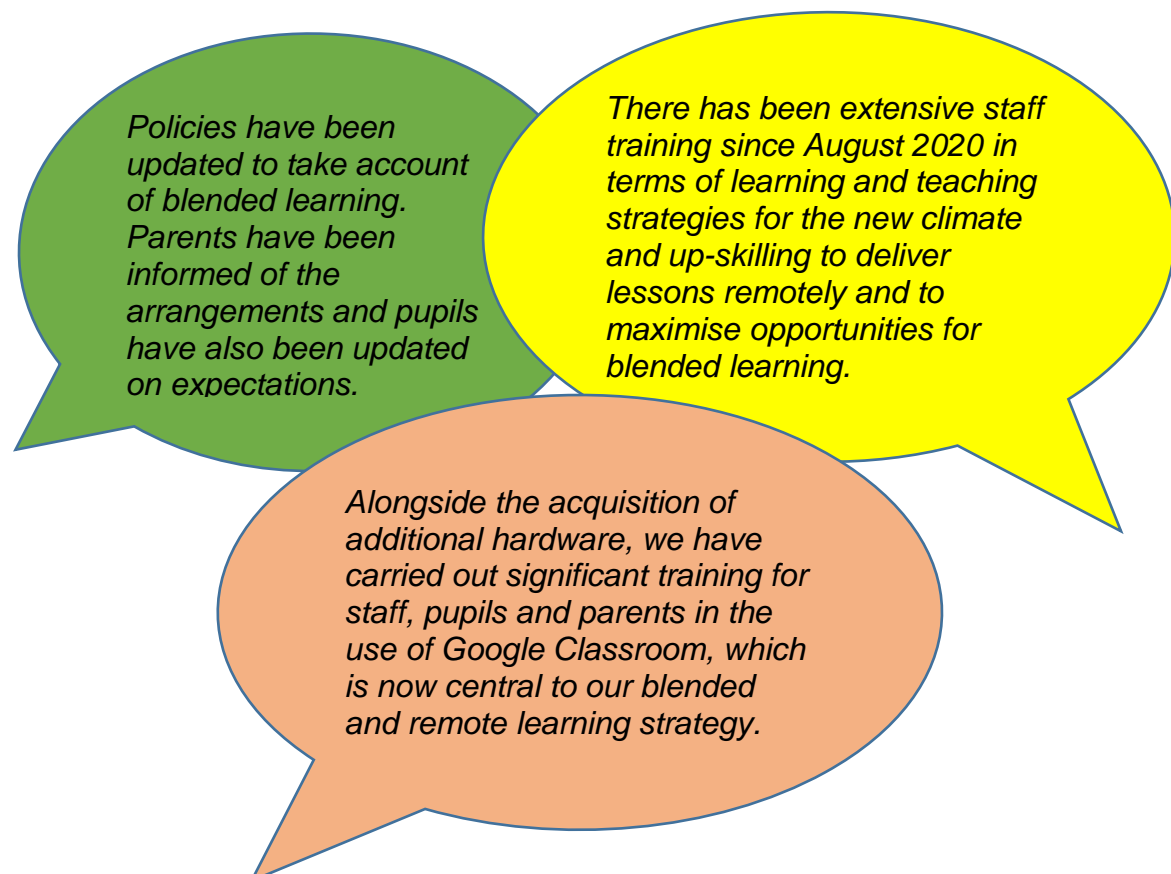
Resilient and reflective

Crucially, leadership and management teams have demonstrated resilience to deal with what can be an overwhelming array of issues, including securing continuity of learning, managing pupil and staff anxieties, along with parental expectations and facilitating continuing professional development for remote learning. In the period since schools re-opened, in areas where there have been a marked increase in Covid-19 cases and local restrictions imposed by the Executive, schools have dealt with the time-consuming track and trace system, coupled with staffing shortages (due to positive cases/self-isolation) and a lack of available specialist substitute teachers. The collegiality of staff has been a noticeable feature reported. Area learning community cluster groups have provided much needed and invaluable support for principals; the principals report that they are working well together to get a consistency in approach for various issues and challenges.

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[9] The EA Supporting Learning project website has been designed to support teachers through the academic year 2020/2021, and beyond. Its aim is to promote the reflective practice which is central to the DE Learning Leaders A Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning.

School routines (with risk assessments and contingency plans) have been put in place and have become more established in the course of the term. In some cases this has created an opportunity to review established routines and new routines will be retained, for example, split breaks/lunchtimes. Some schools report that locating the pupils in one area as a result of the bubble arrangement at these times has been very settling, leading, for example, to a reduction in incidents in the playground.

All schools have contingency plans in place and principals reported that they were better prepared to handle any future school closures. Learning from the lockdown experience, schools moved from expediency to a considered and informed strategy; including in choice of digital learning platforms and means of communication with pupils, parents and staff. Schools have been streamlining from multiple platforms, with some rationalisation to consolidate and aid consistency across the curriculum; some have reported better engagement and communication with parents, capitalising on a new wave of parental involvement in pupil learning; and, there is clearer knowledge of the pupils who face difficulties with access to IT and connectivity. However, some families still proved hard to reach and while schools audited in relation to pupil access to devices and connectivity, issues were still evident when pupils were asked to self-isolate.

Policies have been updated to take account of blended learning. Parents have been informed of the arrangements and pupils have also been updated on expectations.

There has been extensive staff training since August 2020 in terms of learning and teaching strategies for the new climate and up-skilling to deliver lessons remotely and to maximise opportunities for blended learning.

Alongside the acquisition of additional hardware, we have carried out significant training for staff, pupils and parents in the use of Google Classroom, which is now central to our blended and remote learning strategy.

Schools seized the opportunities while addressing the challenges of online systems. Teachers were flexible in adapting assemblies, facilitating staff and board of governors meetings, conducting parent-teacher meetings and interviews, liaising with feeder primary schools, and providing open days/nights (with a greater focus on pupil involvement through for example, production of short pupil-led video clips to showcase the school). Schools reported that they intended embedding some of the changes/practices implemented as a result of the pandemic into future planning.

Safeguarding policies were reviewed and updated to take account of remote learning. They often include acceptable use of the internet in online lessons and agreed protocols for engaging appropriately in online lessons for pupils, parents and staff (for example to take account of teacher voice-overs, sharing of images and audio).

Learning, teaching and collaboration

Middle leaders, teachers and support staff adjusted planning, teaching and assessment to cater for remote learning including: the adaptation of specialist accommodation, classrooms, and curricular resources to meet the needs and abilities of their pupils within school and remotely. A wide range of learning and teaching strategies were used to engage pupils with in-school, remote, and concurrent in-school and remote learning due to positive cases of Covid-19 or self-isolation.

Teachers balanced the relationships between curriculum offer, bubble sizes and in-school/remote attendance. As a consequence, teacher planning and delivery was more complex and demanding. Schemes of work were adapted for the physical and digital learning environments, with staff working collaboratively to produce resources for remote learning for current and future use. There was an increasing understanding of preferences in relation to online learning, for example, some pupils reported they prefer 'recorded' lessons compared to 'live' lessons as they can watch and learn at their own pace. The use of platforms for digital homework/assessment submissions and feedback increased.
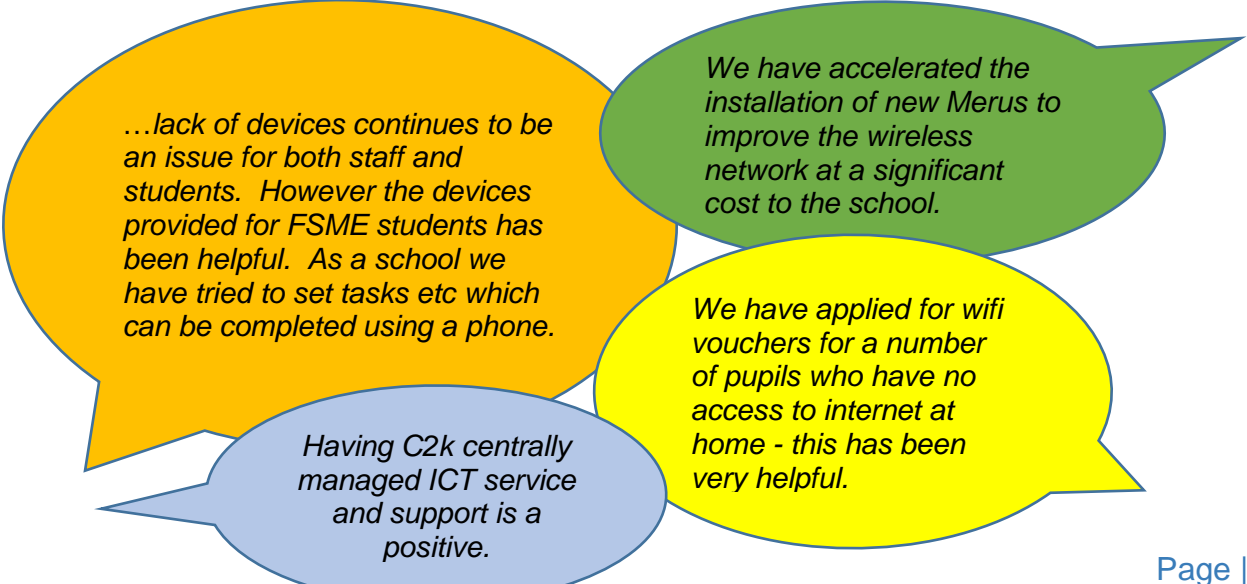
Schools reported, that after a slow start as new routines took hold, teachers had begun to catch up on the volume of work to be covered, in part due to the limitations on extra-curricular activities, school visits and taking part in external competitions. However, with Covid-19 related mitigations and safe practices, significant restrictions were placed on key aspects of the Northern Ireland Curriculum pedagogy and curriculum choices. Lessons had to be modified to take account of room timetabling and social distancing between the teachers and pupils within classrooms. The content delivery focused upon the didactic with a consequent loss of active learning strategies which are important for the acquisition, development and application of skills. There were also challenges in providing at-elbow support for pupils.

There was variation across schools and for individual year groups in the provision of classroom-based learning and teaching, and in the application of remote learning approaches. This changed over time, in line with school attendance and guidance from DE and the PHA. Continuity of learning and curriculum delivery, including specification coverage at KS4 and post-16 was challenging due to the impact of a loss of teaching time due to in-school Covid mitigations; and, positive cases/self-isolation resulting in sporadic patterns of in-school, remote and concurrent in-school and remote attendance of pupils and staff.

Mitigations, including risk assessments and strategies for practical activities meant a graduated return to practical work, where possible. However at KS3 in particular, there were reduced opportunities for pupils to engage in practical work, resulting in work being dominated by theory and video/practical demonstrations by teachers. A challenge with the base room approach for bubbles at KS3 was that pupils were not experiencing the subject identities of departments, and neither teachers nor pupils had full access to equipment and resources, with fewer or sometimes no 'hands on' experiences.

Area learning community collaboration continued, albeit on a reduced provision but schools and pupils were positive about continued collaborative classes. While there was an impact on the offer and uptake of some subjects with the differing social distancing requirements for schools and further education, local solutions were implemented to enable access to the entitlement framework through further education.

A system-wide focus on digital pedagogy was necessitated as a consequence of the pandemic. The challenge was embraced with a willingness and commitment within and across schools and area learning communities; consequently, schools reported that development of approaches to remote learning and upskilling of teachers have accelerated, in some instances from an indicated low-base. Ongoing continuing professional development programmes for teaching and support staff are being accessed and delivered through the EA and other providers, along with self-generated groups of teachers who have made a notable contribution at school and system level. There was also induction for pupils and parents on the use of online platforms.

…lack of devices continues to be an issue for both staff and students. However the devices provided for FSME students has been helpful. As a school we have tried to set tasks etc which can be completed using a phone.

We have accelerated the installation of new Merus to improve the wireless network at a significant cost to the school.

We have applied for wifi vouchers for a number of pupils who have no access to internet at home - this has been very helpful.

Having C2k centrally managed ICT service and support is a positive.

The DE has been working with the EA, in partnership with British Telecom, to provide a range of connectivity solutions for pupils, particularly for those in rural settings. There has been significant investment in the provision of new and additional devices to schools[10]. Furthermore, schools have also been working to update legacy devices and lend them to individual pupils. The EA C2k has been providing technical support to schools in respect of hardware, software and infrastructure, as well as for example a range of training on learning platforms.

Everything counts

Schools have internal assessment plans and reporting windows for the school year, to monitor progress, allow for diagnostic intervention and ensure there is available data as required for the awarding arrangements in summer 2021[11]. These are kept under review and adapted as circumstances evolve.

Overall, pupils have shown themselves to be resilient; however, the impact of positive cases and self-isolation led to disruption for and variation in the learning experiences of individual pupils, classes, year groups and schools. School leaders reported concerns of pupils, parents and staff about awarding arrangements for summer 2021.

An 'everything counts' view of assessment has led to pressures on pupils and staff, with an increased number of assessment focused queries from parents and pupils across schools. There is a concern about pupils studying vocational, applied and practical subjects and not being able to have the opportunity to fully develop and apply the subject specific skills; schools report that the subjects most impacted have been technology and design, construction, home economics, physical education, science, drama, ICT, music and art and design. Where there is a workplace-based component for subjects, this has been negatively impacted.

Considerations for all in post-primary schools going forward

How digital technologies are used is changing and increasing, as adaptations are made to include remote learning provision as part of pastoral care, learning, teaching and assessment. Important and reflective discussions are taking hold about the focus of learning, pedagogy and the nature and purpose of the examination and qualification system. The ongoing development of dispositions such as adaptability, emotional literacy and resilience is increasingly important.

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[10] The Minister for Education announced: a digital devices process to lend digital devices to disadvantaged pupils who may be unable to access devices at home on 21 May 2020 and the scheme remains open; and a free wi-fi and mobile connectivity scheme to support children and young people who may not have had access to digital technology during lockdown on 8 July 2020.

[11] Education Minister's Statement to the Assembly, 15 December 2020: Contingency Arrangements for Summer 2021 Exams.

There are concerns about the medium- and longer-term impact on pupils' experiences, skills development and progression due to the reduced or lack of access to practical experiences and work, as well as the limitations on extra-curricular activities, post-16 enrichment opportunities and work experience and placements.

Schools have welcomed the guidance provided by DE on school development planning for 2020-21[12], with the flexibility to address emerging priorities and take the necessary action. By necessity, operational issues have informed much of the school improvement work, with time being re-directed, to Covid-19 related mitigations and safe practices. While schools have been moving forward to varying extents with school improvement, they continue to monitor and evaluate provision.

Key considerations going forward include:

- how effectively pupils have learned and progressed over the period of the pandemic;

- what the impact has been of the reduced or lack of access to practical work and experiences on pupils' development of knowledge, understanding and skills;

- what aspects of learning and teaching during the pandemic, and in particular of remote learning and the use of digital technology can be embedded into mainstream provision;

- what lessons are learned through the pandemic for leadership and management at individual school and system level;

- how effective is the support at all levels for school leaders, staff, pupils and parents in relation to their emotional health and well-being;

- how a cross-sectoral approach to CEIAG can help pupils and parents make better informed choices about the most appropriate progression pathways;

- how assessment and qualifications may need to change in the future; and

- how support for teacher professional learning should be managed in the future.

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[12] **DE Guidance on School Development Planning for 2020/21**.

Appendix 1: Questionnaire responses

Full inspections

Pupils

During the period from September 2018 to March 2020, the ETI has increased significantly the use of pupil questionnaires as an evidence base. There were responses from 28 of the 37 full school inspections, involving 8001 pupils.

Parents/carers

Following a change of parental questionnaire platform, there were 1909 responses from parents, with more than three-quarters of the responses during the academic year September 2019 to March 2020.

Staff

In the context of ongoing action short of strike, there were responses from 558 teachers, teaching assistants and support staff in 26 of the 37 full school inspections.

Baseline monitoring inspections

The post-primary pupil questionnaire was extended to include baseline inspections, from September 2019, providing not only parents/carers and staff with an opportunity to express their views on the amalgamation or establishment of the new school, but importantly pupils too.

Pupils

There were 1030 responses from the pupils during the 3 baseline inspections of 2019-20.

Parents/carers and staff

From the six baseline school inspections during 2018-20, there were 396 responses from parents and responses from 281 teachers, teaching assistants and support staff.

Appendix 2: Consultation

The ETI post-primary *Curriculum delivery and contingency planning for blended/remote learning* consultation ran from 08 October 2020 to 16 October 2020.

All respondents indicated there had been contingency planning to deliver remote learning or a blended approach to learning. Most respondents (87%) indicated contingency planning to deliver remote learning had been implemented.

	Total number of responses	Percentage
Controlled post-primary	14	26
Catholic Maintained post-primary	16	29
Controlled Integrated post-primary	*	-
Grant-Maintained Integrated post-primary	*	-
Controlled Grammar	*	-
Voluntary Grammar	15	27
Irish Medium post-primary	*	-
Overall	55	100

* Fewer than 5

The ETI engaged with the remaining 138 of the 193 post-primary schools in Northern Ireland after the consultation closed, to clarify that there had been contingency planning and whether or not it had been implemented.

At 4 November 2020:

- all schools (193 or 100%) had undertaken contingency planning to deliver remote learning or a blended approach to learning; and

- most (174 or 90%) had implemented contingency planning to deliver remote learning.