



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Return to school: Summary of research

September - December 2020

Inspectorate
Department of Education
February 2021

1. INTRODUCTION

This document summarises the key findings from six reports on research carried out by the Inspectorate, Department of Education between September and December 2020. The reports are as follows:

- *Return to School: Report on analysis of data from principals, October and November 2020*
- *Return to School: Report on focus groups with pupils and students, September and October 2020*
- *Return to School: Report on focus groups with pupils and students, November 2020*
- *Return to school: Report on findings of surveys in primary schools, post-primary and special schools, October 2020*
- *Return to School: Report on findings of surveys in primary schools and special schools, December 2020*
- *Return to School: Report on findings of surveys in post-primary schools, December 2020*

2. OVERVIEW

- The focus of the research was on how well primary, post-primary, special schools and Youthreach centres were operating in the context of the new arrangements relating to COVID-19 during the September-December 2020 period.
- The research captured a range of perspectives, including those of principals, teachers, parents and pupils/students. It involved surveys of different stakeholders, discussion with school principals and focus groups of pupils/students during the September-December period.
- The report on the analysis of data from principals is based on information gathered from 1,753 school principals and eighty-seven co-ordinators in Youthreach centres. This follows an earlier report on the analysis of data gathered from principals in September 2020; that report was published in December 2020.
- The three reports on surveys are based on responses from principals, teachers, parents, and pupils/students across a sample of 250 primary, post-primary and special schools in October 2020 and another sample of 250 schools in December 2020.
- The two reports on focus groups are based on discussions with pupils and students on their experience of schooling in six schools in late September/early October 2020 and eleven schools in November 2020. Pupils and students shared valuable insights with inspectors on the impact of the pandemic on their experience of school and on the teaching approaches they experienced. They also shared valuable suggestions on how their learning and wellbeing could be supported at school in the pandemic context.
- The Inspectorate's research indicates that, overall, during the September-December 2020 period, schools operated safely, pupils/students settled in well to school and teachers successfully adapted their teaching approaches in response to COVID-19 arrangements. The analysis also identifies the challenges for provision during this period and identifies a number of specific issues that are particularly important for schools to address.

3. KEY FINDINGS

3.1 Safe operation of schools

Positive findings: Safe operation of schools

- The safe and sustainable operation of schools is a national priority and schools, upon re-opening in September 2020, were required to adopt practices to minimise the risk of COVID-19 for staff, learners and the wider community. Overall, schools and centres operated in a safe and sustainable way in the September to December 2020 period. Principals reported to inspectors that the new COVID-19 measures had resulted in a sense of order, security and calm for school and centre communities. Survey findings indicate that schools were successful in ensuring sustained compliance with the COVID-19 measures. They also indicate that there was widespread cooperation among teachers, pupils/students and parents with schools' arrangements regarding COVID-19. It is also evident that there was effective communication between schools and parents in relation to COVID-19 measures.
- Principals were positive about the resources provided by the Department; of particular note in this regard were the additional funding provided and the increased administration days for teaching principals in primary schools. Most teachers indicated that they had accessed the advice and guidance provided by the Department of Education to prepare for the reopening of schools and the mediation of the curriculum during the 2020/21 school year.

Challenges: Safe operation of schools

- Principals indicated that there were a number of practical challenges as schools and centres sought to implement public health advice. While significant financial investment was provided to schools, a number of principals in the September-December 2020 period were concerned that the funding provided to support effective virus mitigation practices would not be adequate to meet ongoing needs in this area.

3.2 Wellbeing

Positive findings: Wellbeing

- The guidance documents made available by the Department of Education to schools in the preparation for the reopening in September 2020 emphasised that priority be given to activities to support the wellbeing of pupils and students. The Inspectorate's research indicates that promoting the wellbeing of school communities was an

important element of the successful return to school in September 2020. It was evident that schools went to great lengths to put additional supports in place for the wellbeing of learners and teachers. Many aspects of provision for wellbeing were reported to be working very well in schools and centres. Principals and Youthreach co-ordinators reported that co-operation, collaboration, teamwork, regular updates and communication were all contributing positively to the wellbeing of staff and learners.

- Almost all school principals indicated in surveys that additional supports had been put in place to support the wellbeing of pupils/students. Almost all special school teachers, most primary teachers and almost three-quarters of post-primary teachers considered that schools were supporting learners' wellbeing. Similarly, parents expressed high levels of satisfaction with the supports available for the wellbeing of learners. Almost all primary pupils and most post-primary students confirmed that they knew who to approach in school if they needed help.
- Primary pupils and post-primary students who participated in focus groups highlighted the importance of socialising with their friends and classmates. Survey responses strongly indicate that most pupils/students had opportunities to socialise with their friends during the school day despite measures to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19.

Challenges: Wellbeing

- Nonetheless, discussions with principals and pupils/students in focus groups indicated that anxiety about COVID-19 remained a concern for school communities. The need for ongoing support for the wellbeing of principals, school leaders and teachers was evident. Principals reported stress associated with the challenge in accessing substitute teachers. A significant minority of teachers, particularly at post-primary level, indicated uncertainty about feeling safe in their schools and dissatisfaction with the wellbeing supports provided by their school. Participants in pupil/student focus groups highlighted how more attention needs to be given to pupils' and students' physical wellbeing, for example, by being allowed to wear (non-uniform) warm clothes and, in post-primary schools, by having more air breaks.

3.3 Experience of School

Positive findings: Experience of School

- The Inspectorate's research shows that the return to school in September 2020 was successful and was a positive experience for many pupils/students in primary, post-primary and special schools. Feedback from focus groups indicated that pupils/students were very pleased to be back in school and were happy to be reconnecting with friends. These pupils/students also indicated a very strong

preference for being in school rather than working from home and many articulated a new appreciation for the work of their school and teachers.

- Learners, parents, principals and teachers overwhelmingly agreed in the different surveys that schools were operating effectively and that learners, including junior infant pupils and first year students, had settled well into school. Parents also agreed that schools/teachers had supported their child in this process.
- Most parents of learners in special schools and almost all parents of learners in primary schools agreed that their children were happy to be in school. Similarly, most pupils/students in primary and post-primary schools indicated that they were happy to be in school. Just over half of the post-primary students surveyed agreed that they were happy to be in school. Over two-thirds of parents of post-primary students indicated that their children were happy to be at school.

Challenges: Experience of school

- In the main, principals and teachers indicated that they were coping well in their respective roles. However, a substantial proportion of principals that the Inspectorate engaged with throughout the September-December 2020 period indicated that they had not been able to access substitute cover when a teacher was absent from their school.
- During focus groups, pupils and students commented frequently on the impact of the new rules, particularly the use of masks and physical distancing measures, on the experience of school and on interaction with others. Participants expressed empathy with younger pupils/students and those new to the schools as they did not have the same opportunities to make friends outside of their own bubbles and pods. For some students, mask wearing made it difficult to make friends and get to know their teachers or to read or gauge emotion.
- Pupils and students in focus groups also raised concerns about not being included at school in the consultation and information process related to school rules and new protocols. They also highlighted the need to be consulted on decisions that affect them.

3.4 Teaching and Learning

Positive findings: Teaching and learning

- Unsurprisingly, the Inspectorate's research indicated that there was a greater focus on the core work of the school - teaching and learning - after the initial period of settling back to school in September 2020. At the start of the term, teachers took time to identify where pupils/students were at in their learning and to build on these starting points. Surveys and discussions with principals indicate that there were high levels of professional collaboration among colleagues.
- While the disruption to day-to-day school life caused by COVID-19 was unprecedented, survey respondents were generally positive about provision for

teaching and learning although respondents from post-primary schools were somewhat less positive than those from primary schools. Almost all principals, teachers and parents in primary and special schools indicated that learning was progressing well. Most learners in these schools indicated that they were enjoying their lessons most or all of the time. Almost all primary and special school respondents were positive about the level of learner engagement during lessons.

- Almost all principals and the majority of post-primary teachers indicated that teaching and learning were going well in their school. Positive levels of student engagement were reported by the majority of teachers. Students were generally in agreement that learning was progressing well with the majority agreeing that they were enjoying their lessons most or all of the time. However, a significant minority of post-primary students indicated that this was true only some of the time.
- Almost all principals of schools with pupils/students who were at very high risk from COVID-19 indicated that they had measures in place to ensure that these pupils/students could continue their learning. In general, survey responses showed that this support was provided by mainstream class teachers/subject teachers, special educational needs teachers, and by teachers who were themselves working from home because they were designated to be at very high risk from COVID-19.
- The Inspectorate's research indicates very positive findings with regard to the availability and use of digital technologies in schools. School principals and Youthreach co-ordinators who spoke to inspectors described learners' high levels of enthusiasm about their new learning and praised the creative and innovative approaches used by many teachers. Pupils and students who participated in focus groups were very positive about the increased use of digital technologies by their teachers.
- Almost all principals indicated that their schools had a digital learning platform in place to support teaching and learning and that teachers and pupils/students were familiar with using the digital learning platforms.

Challenges: Teaching and learning

- Survey responses also indicate that there was varied knowledge among schools, particularly primary schools, on how to use digital platforms. Principals also reported that some settings experienced difficulties with connectivity to high-speed broadband, limiting their opportunity to embed digital technologies in their approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.
- Notwithstanding the many positive findings in the Inspectorate's research, it was also evident that the range of measures put in place by schools to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus had, in some cases, impacted negatively on teaching approaches. In particular, a substantial proportion of teachers across primary, post-primary and special schools indicated that their classroom arrangements had reduced opportunities for pupils/students to work collaboratively during lessons. Pupils and students that participated in focus groups reported that they were being provided with fewer collaborative and practical learning opportunities and that this

impacted negatively on their learning experiences, including their enjoyment of learning.

- Principals and Youthreach co-ordinators who spoke to inspectors during the September-December 2020 term also remained alert to the possible impact of the March to summer 2020 period of school and centre closures on learners. Pupils and students who participated in focus groups alternated between enthusiasm about being back at school and apprehension about gaps in their learning and assessment. Such concerns are likely to have been exacerbated in light of the period of school closure since January 2021.
- For some post-primary students, the quality of feedback from teachers was an issue. A significant minority of post-primary students indicated that only 'some' teachers provided them with regular feedback on their learning while most learners in primary and special schools agreed that their teachers did so. Pupils and students who participated in focus groups referred to the difficulty of getting one-to-one feedback, whether in the classroom or for homework, arising from the new arrangements at school.

4. Main conclusions

The Inspectorate's research identified a number of significant positive findings relating to the operation of schools and provision of schooling in the September-December 2020 period:

- Overall, schools and Youthreach centres operated in a safe and sustainable way during September-December 2020.
- Collaboration among members of school and centre communities contributed significantly to the successful operation of schools and centres during the first term of the 2020-21 school year.
- Teachers had generally adapted their approaches to teaching and learning to good effect in the context of the pandemic. There was a significant increase in the use of digital technologies.
- Findings indicate that good support was being provided to sustain the learning of pupils/students who could not be physically present in school because they were at very high risk from contracting COVID-19.
- Being in school is critical for pupils'/students' educational and social development as well as their overall wellbeing. This was particularly evident in the survey and focus group responses from pupils and students.

The Inspectorate's research identified some key challenges for consideration by the Department:

- Teacher supply continued to be a challenge for principals and school leaders over the course of the September-December 2020 period.
- For a number of schools, access to broadband continued to be a challenge.
- It is important that resources to support ongoing mitigation of the virus continue to be available as schools re-open.

The Inspectorate's research also highlights a number of areas for schools generally to consider, and to develop further where necessary, as they strive to ensure that teaching and learning experiences are as meaningful as possible for children and young people in a face-to-face schooling context in pandemic times.

- There is need for all to be vigilant in relation to the wellbeing of staff and learners.
- All teachers need to ensure that their pupils/students receive regular feedback on their work whether in a face-to-face or remote learning context.
- It is important that schools and teachers continue to monitor the impact of COVID-19 mitigation measures on their pupils'/students' experience of school, including their engagement in collaborative learning and practical activities.