An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Return to school: Report on analysis of data from principals

October and November 2020

Contents

1. Introduction

This report presents an analysis of data from the Inspectorate's advisory sessions with principals and other school leaders during the period 28 September 2020 to 27 November 2020. Almost all of these sessions were undertaken either by phone or online. A small number were carried out face to face.

The purpose of this analysis is:

- To provide an overview of the successes and challenges experienced by schools in the October-November 2020 period following the re-opening of schools in September 2020.
- To identify the main areas prioritised by schools for further advice and support.

This report is one of a series of reports on the Inspectorate's research activity in schools during the 2020/21 school year.

2. Overview of the engagements with schools

2.1 Aims of advisory sessions

One of the main focuses of the Inspectorate's engagement with schools in the first term of the 2020/21 school year was on the provision of advice and support to principals as schools re-opened. The aims of the advisory sessions were set out in Circular 0040/2020 (Primary) and Circular 0041/2020 (Post-primary). During advisory sessions, inspectors provided advice and support to principals and other school leaders in the following areas:

- Supporting the wellbeing of learners and staff
- Delivering the curriculum during the 2020/21 school year
- Establishing protocols and routines to facilitate a safe learning and working environment.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling methodology

This report is based on a random sample (approximately 60%) of the 2,985 advisory sessions conducted in primary and post-primary schools during the period 26 September to 30 November 2020. The final data set included Irish-medium schools, special schools, and schools participating in *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS), the action plan of the Department for educational inclusion. The report also includes data from the eighty-seven advisory sessions undertaken with Youthreach centres in the same period. The analysis in this report is based on the number of schools and centres as shown in the final data set below:

Sector	October	November	Final
Primary	888	565	1453
Post-Primary	244	56	300
Youthreach	77	10	87
Total	1209	631	1840

3.2 Analysis of data

In the first round of coding or data classification, successes and challenges were divided into broad areas as outlined in the following table:

Data classification system used in the first layer of analysis
Establishing protocols and routines to facilitate a safe learning and working environment
Delivering the curriculum during the 2020/21 school year
Supporting the wellbeing of learners and staff
Other

While the broad areas mirrored those used in the September analysis, there were slight differences in the codes or subthemes used to analyse individual successes and challenges. As additional themes or issues emerged from the October and November data, the codes

from September were refined, expanded or excluded as necessary. A system to ensure reliability and consistency was implemented that involved the collation, analysis and peer-review of data sets.

3.3 Limitations of the study

Although the sample in this study is very large, the source of information is limited to principals and other school leaders. The views of other members of school communities such as teachers, parents and learners are not included. It should be noted that the data relates to discussions with principals who were reflecting on their experiences since the start of the 2020/21 school year. The difference in sample size between primary schools (n=1453), post-primary schools (n=300) and Youthreach centres (n=87)[1] should be borne in mind both in reading this report and in forming direct comparisons between primary schools, post-primary schools and Youthreach Centres.

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[1] The eighty-seven centres referenced in this report represent a 79% sample of the total number of Youthreach centres nationally (n=110).

4. Core Messages

4.1 Overview of core messages

The core messages are captured under the following three headings:

1) Establishing protocols and routines to facilitate a safe learning and working environment
2) Delivering the curriculum during the 2020/21 school year
3) Supporting the well-being of learners and staff

Core messages from these three areas involved both successes and challenges for schools, centres, and for the system generally.

By far, the success that was most commonly reported by principals/centre co-ordinators (n=1320) across these areas was that schools and centres had reopened and were operating safely. The second most frequently reported success (n=847) was the nature of the relationships and communication practices within the school/centre community. The third most frequently reported success (n=829) related to the general wellbeing of the school/centre community and/or issues relating to learner behaviour, such as the way in which learners interacted and attended to their work over the course of the school/centre day. The full breakdown of the successes reported by principals/co-ordinators is presented in Appendix 1.

Wellbeing, including anxiety about COVID-19 among members of the school community, was the challenge most commonly reported by principals/co-ordinators (n=544). As in the findings in the Inspectorate's September 2020 report[2], the shortage in the availability of substitute and other short-term contract teachers continued to present significant challenges for schools. The next most commonly mentioned area related to issues around teaching and learning, such as learner attainment and providing for the range of learners' needs (n=330). The complete list of challenges in order of prevalence can be viewed at Appendix 2.

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[2] This report presents an analysis of data from the Inspectorate's advisory sessions with principals and other school leaders during the period 01 September 2020 to 25 September 2020 and is available at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/87634-resumption-of-schooling-autumn-2020-report-on-analysis-of-data-from-principals/.

4.2 Establishing protocols and routines to facilitate a safe learning and working environment

Successes relating to establishing protocols and routines to facilitate a safe learning and working environment	Primary principal responses[3]	Post-primary principal responses	Youthreach co-ordinator responses	Total responses [4]
Reopening school/creating and promoting a safe learning and working environment	1077 (74%)	198 (66%)	45 (52%)	1320
Compliance of school community with protocols	409 (28%)	101 (34%)	18 (21%)	528
Supports from Department of Education	176 (12%)	28 (9%)	2 (2%)	206
Supports from other agencies	61 (4%)	20 (7%)	16 (18%)	97
July provision/summer camps	29 (2%)	3 (1%)	N/A	32

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[3] These figures refer to the number of principals in each sector who reported a success in this area. The percentages relate to the proportion of primary, post-primary schools or Youthreach centres who reported success in the area. A similar approach is used for the presentation of data in other areas relating to successes supported by principals and Youthreach co-ordinators throughout the report.

4.2.1 Successes

Process of school opening- promotion of a safe learning and working environment

By far, the most frequent response in this area was that principals were satisfied that the process of school reopening and the promotion of a safe learning and working environment had been successful. This is consistent with the findings from the Inspectorate's September 2020 report on data from principals, where almost all primary and post-primary principals reported successes relating to the safe re-opening of their schools. In October and November 2020, a majority of primary (74%) and post-primary (66%) principals reported successes relating to the safe re-opening of their schools. Just over half of Youthreach co-ordinators (52%) also reported successes in this area. Principals/co-ordinators typically referenced the extent to which high levels of planning and preparation had contributed to the successful reopening. They noted that the new measures in place under the COVID implementation plan were resulting in a sense of order, security and calm for the school community, and described the successful implementation of these new procedures and routines by learners and staff.

Compliance with COVID-related protocols

The second most commonly reported success in the promotion of a safe working and learning environment related to the compliance of the school community with the range of COVID-related protocols, such as those relating to the wearing of face-coverings, and guidelines on physical distancing. Just over a quarter of primary principals (28%), approximately a third (34%) of post-primary principals, and a fifth (21%) of Youthreach co-ordinators spoke positively about how their school/centre community was working together to minimise the risks posed by the virus. Responses typically praised staff, learners and parents for their adherence to the school's/centre's preventative measures. Schools and centres reported that the ongoing monitoring of routines and protocols was necessary to ensure that these high standards were maintained. The findings highlighted principals'/co-ordinators confidence that the range of measures in place was working well and that those measures were very well supported by the wider school/centre community.

Supports

At primary and post-primary level, the third most frequently reported success from principals in the promotion of a safe working and learning environment related to the supports provided by the Department of Education. Approximately one tenth of primary (12%) and post-primary (9%) principals highlighted the importance of the range of resources provided to them by the Department to support the full re-opening and safe operation of their school. As in September, principals referred to the importance of the additional administrative days describing them as 'beneficial', 'helpful' or 'essential'. The additional funding package was also welcomed, with responses referencing the value of the grants in enabling schools to prepare their buildings and classrooms for re-opening. Other principals noted the important role played by the COVID-19 aides in implementing the logistical changes required, and

spoke positively of the support provided by the lead worker representative. For Youthreach centres, the third most frequently reported success in promoting a safe working and learning environment related to the supports provided by agencies such as the Education and Training Boards management bodies, and counselling services.

Observations from primary principals

- *The measures in place are leading to a sense of order, security and calm for pupils and parents.*
- *The pupils demonstrate resilience and positivity and comply readily with all health and safety systems in school.*

Observations from post-primary principals

- *The school is very ordered and well organised (staggered breaks; different entrances/exits; procedures); yard supervision is easier.*
- *Keeping a sense of normality in the school; whole school community working together; focus on communications to parents/students.*

Observations from Youthreach coordinators

- *Safe return to the centre and induction of students. All complying with the rules and respectful of each other.*
- *Effective planning and preparation over the summer led to a smooth reopening in September.*

4.2.2 Challenges

Challenges to establishing protocols and routines to facilitate a safe learning and working environment	Primary principal responses	Post-primary principal responses	Youthreach co-ordinator responses	Total responses[5]
Cleaning/Sanitising/Personal Protective Equipment (and all issues relating to procurement and/or finance)	241 (17%)	49 (16%)	2 (2%)	292
School accommodation (including class size)	169 (12%)	62 (21%)	31 (36%)	262
Communication with the Department of Education	179 (12%)	54 (8%)	3 (3%)	236
Reopening school, maintaining safe environment (including Lead Worker Representative)	167 (11%)	48 (16%)	15 (17%)	230
Compliance of school community with protocols	156 (11%)	54 (18%)	8 (9%)	218
Communication with Health and Safety Executive (including Health and Safety Authority/public health issues)	114 (8%)	32 (11%)	2 (2%)	148
Communication with other agencies	88	9	4	101

	(6%)	(3%)	(5%)	
Supervision	24 (2%)	15 (5%)	0 (0%)	39
School transport	18 (1%)	6 (2%)	0 (0%)	24

Cleaning, procurement and/or financial matters

Across all schools and centres, the aspect of facilitating a safe learning and working environment most frequently reported by principals as a challenge related to cleaning, sanitising, procurement and/or financial matters. These concerns were also strongly evident in the Inspectorate's September 2020 report on data from school principals. Issues mentioned by principals throughout October and November 2020 typically referenced difficulties with the procurement and delivery of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). An issue causing particular concern was principals' need for clarity on when the second round of funding for additional PPE would be provided. A number of principals described the challenges associated with the recall of sanitisers[6], noting the additional stress caused by the necessity to respond to this issue during the October 2020 mid-term break. The increased costs associated with enhanced cleaning arrangements continued to feature prominently in discussions with principals throughout October and November 2020. Many principals spoke of their anxiety in respect of funding and described their concerns that funding supports in this area would not suffice for the remainder of the term. A number of principals commented on the negative impact of COVID-related routines and procedures on their waste management systems. In particular, they referenced the increased volume and frequency of refuse collection and detailed the associated financial and environmental costs. Responses from principals of a number of fee-charging post-primary schools highlighted the particular difficulties caused by their reported ineligibility for additional financial supports.[7]

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[6] A product recall notice on ViraPro hand sanitiser (PCS100409) was issued by the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine on 22 October 2020.

[7] Fee charging schools were not automatically entitled to receipt of COVID capitation funding but there were circumstances where they could seek support from the Department of Education. These schools were required to clearly demonstrate difficulties in implementing necessary control measures outlined in the *Roadmap for the Full Return to Schools* and how the provision of additional support from the Department would help to overcome those particular difficulties.

Physical accommodation

The second most frequently reported challenge in the facilitation of a safe learning and working environment related to the physical accommodation of the school or centre. Across all levels, principals and centre co-ordinators described the practical difficulties of achieving appropriate physical distancing in a constrained classroom space. This was reported to have presented additional challenges for Youthreach centres. A number of Youthreach co-ordinators described constraints on their ability to accommodate all learners safely, and outlined how their centres had responded to this challenge by adopting a combined approach of centre-based provision and blended learning. Other centres reported that they were rotating attendance on different days to appropriate physical distancing.

Across all three sectors, many principals expressed their concerns in respect of the ventilation and heating of classrooms as winter approached; a number of principals reported that they had received complaints from parents about cold classrooms. In this regard, the Department's advice on practical measures for the deployment of good ventilation practices in schools has been of assistance to schools.[8] Another frequently referenced challenge in this area related to the practical difficulties caused by the repurposing of classrooms and learning spaces within some schools and centres. In particular, a number of principals described how school halls had been variously repurposed as classrooms, staffrooms or storage areas, and the resultant challenges caused by the lack of available space for Physical Education (PE).

Communication with the Department

The third most frequently reported challenge related to principals' concerns over communication with the Department. Issues typically cited referenced the timing of communication, and the challenges experienced by principals in ensuring that they remained up-to-date with guidance and other information.

Maintenance of a safe learning environment

Discussions with principals and co-ordinators throughout October and November 2020 showed that the additional pressures created by the work involved in maintaining a safe environment remained as a serious challenge. Many principals and co-ordinators referred to the additional administrative demands created by the range of COVID-19 protocols. Principals spoke of the difficulties of managing pods and bubbles, and outlined their worries about the difficulties of maintaining adherence to the range of COVID-related measures as the term progressed. These concerns were also strongly evident in the September analysis. At post-primary level, while students were, for the most part, compliant during class periods, the removal of face coverings and the maintenance of physical distancing requirements during recreation periods presented particular challenges. As in the Inspectorate's September 2020 report, a number of post-primary principals spoke of the challenges created

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[8] *Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools*, is available at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4288d-practical-steps-for-the-deployment-of-good-ventilation-practices-in-schools/.

by a cohort of parents opposed to the wearing of face coverings. School transport was also highlighted as an area of concern at primary and post-primary level. A particular issue of concern reported by some principals was that pupils/students who were in contact with a pupil/student who had used the school bus and was subsequently diagnosed as having COVID-19, were not automatically identified as close contacts of COVID-19.

Supervision and substitution

As reflected in the September 2020 report, many principals reported that challenges in the areas of supervision and substitution were continuing to impact on their ability to provide a safe learning environment. The difficulty in securing substitute teachers was frequently referenced, with challenges noted as being particularly evident in Irish-medium schools and in Youthreach centres. Securing substitute Special Needs Assistants was also reported as a difficulty for schools. An additional issue particular to Youthreach centres, related to the difficulties of preparing and providing food safely and efficiently in the current context. A few Youthreach co-ordinators described how the closure of canteens was impacting negatively on learners' wellbeing.

Observations from primary principals

- *The procurement process was challenging.*
- *Ventilation of rooms and the resultant coldness is a cause of ongoing debate among staff.*

Observations from post-primary principals

- *Very anxious about continuation of grants for PPE: perceived lack of clarity regarding funding streams for PPE.*
- *Concerns over managing when the weather changes in winter - fears this will compromise ventilation and outdoor mask breaks.*

Observations from Youthreach coordinators

- *The two-metre social distance requirement means that in a twenty-five place centre, sixteen learners is all the centre can accommodate.*
- *Canteen facilities closed and learners not getting either breakfasts or lunch.*

4.2.3 Synthesis of key points

- Principals were satisfied that the process of school reopening and the promotion of a safe learning and working environment had been largely successful.

- While practical challenges were evident, the new measures in place were reported by principals/co-ordinators to have resulted in a sense of order, security and calm for school communities.
- High levels of compliance were reported across schools and centres, with routines and protocols implemented successfully by learners and staff.
- Finding substitute teachers was reported to be a significant challenge for principals and Youthreach co-ordinators.

4.2 Delivering the curriculum in the 2020/21 school year

4.2.1 Successes

Successes relating to delivering the curriculum during the 2020/21 year	Primary principal responses	Post-primary principal responses	Youthreach co-ordinator responses	Total responses
Digital technologies	366 (25%)	138 (46%)	37 (43%)	541
Teaching including curriculum implementation	375 (26%)	68 (23%)	27 (31%)	470
Learner attainment	60 (4%)	10 (3%)	18 (21%)	88
Assessment	30 (2%)	16 (5%)	0 (0%)	46
Homework	23 (2%)	2 (1%)	1 (1%)	26

Use of digital technologies
The findings show that primary and post-primary schools were much more adept in relation to the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning and there was improvement in relation to the level of digital resources now available to staff/students. A notably higher

proportion, just under half (46%) of post-primary principals, reported successes in this regard with a similar proportion of Youthreach co-ordinators (43%) also identifying it as a key success. Many principals described their pride in seeing how digital technologies had become embedded in curriculum and assessment practices. One principal noted that 'the pace of change in the use of digital technologies by teachers has been transformative and students are delighted'. A common theme across primary and post-primary level was the success experienced by individual schools in supporting the readiness, confidence and skills of teachers and learners in this area. Principals also noted how digital technologies were facilitating teacher collaboration and communication across the broader school community. Many primary school principals also noted that digital platforms were now playing a central role in their approach to assigning and reviewing homework.

Youthreach co-ordinators also described successes in the use of digital technologies; eleven co-ordinators (13%) noted that staff were accessing continuing professional development in the area. Almost a fifth (18%) of co-ordinators reported that the centres were providing laptops for learners. A number of centres also reported successful curriculum delivery through a combination of on site and remote learning.

Teaching approaches

A significant number of principals reported successes in teaching. Approximately a quarter of primary (26%) and post-primary (23%) principals, and just under a third of Youthreach (31%) co-ordinators reported successes in this regard. At primary level, many principals spoke about how teachers had initially concentrated on revision and on the consolidation of learning from pupils' previous classes. They had now progressed to full implementation of the curriculum. It was also noted that many learners were displaying high levels of enthusiasm for their new learning. Many principals spoke positively about the creative and innovative approaches being used by teachers to implement the curriculum. The use of integrated approaches also emerged as a success, with many principals outlining how this was enriching pupils' learning experiences. Many principals referred to fewer distractions from external visitors, noting that this had impacted positively on their school's implementation of the curriculum.

Across both primary and post-primary schools, many principals described the successful use of the outdoor environment in supporting active learning. A number of post-primary principals spoke positively of their school's decision to operate hour-long lessons. Many post-primary principals described how practical lessons were running well, and outlined the additional safety measures implemented in these classes. A number of post-primary schools also reported successes in their Transition Year (TY) programme, and described how co-ordinators had reviewed the plan for TY to ensure that students continued to experience a wide range of educational activities. Nonetheless, other post-primary principals indicated that their schools were not in a position to replicate the same level of experiences for learners as in previous years. A number of Youthreach co-ordinators noted that students had engaged well in learning and were adapting well to their new learning environment.

Observations from primary principals

- *The curriculum is being successfully re-engaged with across all areas. The school is working on developing a literacy plan going forward.*
- *The children are back, learning has re-commenced and the teachers are slowly extending the curriculum to include the SESE and arts subjects.*

Observations from post-primary principals

- *Huge buy-in from staff with regard to use and incorporation of digital technologies in teaching and learning.*
- *Successful, progressive return to practical work and to the more usual extensive range of activities of the school in a safe way.*

Observations from Youthreach coordinators

- *The pandemic has acted as a catalyst in progressing digital learning/blended learning - new devices have been bought and given to students.*
- *The curriculum being delivered. All learners who needed to progress achieved their QQI[9] levels; learners attending every day either morning or afternoon.*

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[9] Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

4.2.2 Challenges

Challenges to delivering the curriculum during the 2020/21 school year	Primary principal responses	Post-primary principal responses	Youthreach co-ordinator responses	Total responses
Teaching and Learning (learner attainment, differentiation)	294 (20%)	9 (3%)	6 (7%)	309
Learners with additional needs (high/very high risk, SEN, Traveller, reference to SET teachers)	224 (15%)	21 (7%)	2 (2%)	247
Digital technologies and/or remote learning	149 (10%)	32 (11%)	27 (31%)	208
Curriculum implementation	129 (9%)	18 (6%)	5 (6%)	152
Assessment	75 (5%)	9 (3%)	2 (2%)	86
Exam-related issues	0 (0%)	42 (14%)	9 (10%)	51
Practical subjects	19 (1%)	26 (9%)	6 (7%)	51
Extra/co-curricular activities	31 (2%)	12 (4%)	0 (0%)	43
Erosion of teaching time	29 (2%)	7 (2%)	0 (0%)	36

Teacher collaboration	28 (2%)	3 (1%)	0 (0%)	31
Managing resources for teaching and learning	18 (1%)	5 (2%)	0 (0%)	23
Transition Year	0 (0%)	17 (6%)	0 (0%)	17

Learner attainment and providing for the range of learners' needs

Across all schools and centres, the most prevalent challenge to delivering the curriculum reported by principals and co-ordinators related to issues around learner attainment and providing for the range of learners' needs. Challenges in this regard were referenced by a significant minority of primary principals (20%). Primary principals articulated concerns in relation to the literacy attainment of younger pupils. Concerns were also reported in respect of the numeracy attainment of more senior pupils. This challenge was also highlighted at meetings of inspectors where it was noted that many primary principals were very concerned about the adverse impact of the closure on younger pupils, particularly in areas such as the development of learners' phonological awareness and their ability to work independently. Principals in some English-medium primary schools noted that the period of extended closure had impacted negatively on pupils' oral Irish proficiency. Some principals of Irish-medium schools reported that learners' competency in oral and aural Irish had declined as a result of the period of extended school closure.

The percentage of post-primary principals and Youthreach co-ordinators reporting concerns in the areas of learner attainment and provision for the range of learners' needs was proportionally less than that at primary level, with just 3% of post-primary principals and 7% of Youthreach co-ordinators highlighting concerns. Disparities in learners' attainment at second and fifth year level were highlighted by a number of post-primary principals.

13% of principals/co-ordinators across all three sectors highlighted challenges associated with ensuring that they were providing appropriately for learners who had additional needs. Principals described the particular difficulties they were experiencing in integrating learners from special classes into mainstream classes and also noted the increased number of learners requiring support. A number of principals reported that learners were presenting with higher levels of need, such as anxiety-related issues. Some principals referenced the particular challenges created by the pandemic for Traveller children and young people, citing a range of concerns around learners' attendance, engagement and attainment. At meetings of inspectors, it was noted that some schools were placing an increased emphasis on the

provision of support for learners through withdrawal approaches. In discussions with inspectors, a number of post-primary principals had also highlighted the practical difficulties of organising timetables for special education provision in the current school year.

Exam related issues

The most frequently reported challenge to delivering the curriculum at post-primary level concerned how schools could best support students' preparation for certificate examinations. 14% of principals reported concerns in relation to this area. This was also the second most commonly reported challenge relating to curriculum delivery in Youthreach centres, with 10% of co-ordinators reporting concerns about how best to support learners. Principals referred to the anxiety experienced by current sixth years that the Leaving Certificate 2021 examinations would not be conducted in the usual format in response to public health advice. A number of Youthreach co-ordinators reported concerns that Leaving Certificate Applied students had been particularly disadvantaged by the period of centre closure.

As in September, concerns over the calculated grades process were also evident. A few post-primary schools (14%) and Youthreach centres (10%) reported high levels of anxiety among staff and students arising from issues related to the 2020 calculated grades system, and the impact in to the current school year. For example, some post-primary principals commented that 'over-assessment' had now become a common feature of teachers' practice, and described the negative impact of this on student wellbeing.

Access to technology and/or remote learning

Notwithstanding the notable successes reported by many school principals and Youthreach co-ordinators on the increased use of digital technologies, challenges in the area of digital technologies and/or remote learning was the third most commonly reported challenge relating to the delivery of the curriculum. These related to poor broadband, connection speeds, and inequitable access to devices and were of particular concern within the Youthreach sector, with almost a third (31%) of co-ordinators reporting challenges. A sixth (16%) of Youthreach co-ordinators reported that students did not have adequate access to suitable technology. A further 5% of co-ordinators reported that devices had been ordered for students but had not yet been received. While these observations relate primarily to the period of centre closure, public health advice meant that many Youthreach centres continued to provide blended learning throughout October and November. In discussions with inspectors, Youthreach centre co-ordinators highlighted the impact of the additional physical distancing requirements for Further Education and Training courses with some centres rotating access to the centre and providing blended learning for students at home. Students in other Youthreach centres were reported as not having received face-to-face tuition time as the country moved to Levels Four and Five of the *Living with COVID* plan[10]. It

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[10] *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19* is available here.

was reported that this was resulting in a significant gap in continuity of learning for these students.

> *Observations from primary principals*
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> - *Continuity of teaching and learning is a challenge as the children are all at different stages of learning.*
> - *The school worked hard to develop active learning and this is difficult to implement now. Pupils miss the benefits of classroom interactions and extra-curricular activities.*

> *Observations from post-primary principals*
>
> - *Inadequate internet and mobile phone coverage in the school and the surrounding geographical area; exhausted all channels to remediate this.*
> - *Practical lessons are proceeding well but continue to be challenging as teachers are anxious about the risks of Covid-19 during such lessons.*

> *Observations from Youthreach coordinators*
>
> - *The centre previously had a wide range of activities to engage learners and develop competencies (but the challenge is) how to replace these in virtual format.*
> - *Junior cycle is not suiting students because CBA1[11] and CBA2 cannot be completed in one year; leaving no time for progressing to QQI or LCA[12].*

4.2.3 Synthesis of key points

- Notwithstanding the inequities in learners' access to technology, many schools and centres reported that they have made significant progress in integrating digital technologies into their approaches to curriculum delivery, assessment, teaching and learning.
- Having initially concentrated on revision, many schools have progressed to full implementation of the curriculum. Principals described learners' high levels of enthusiasm about their new learning and praised the creative and innovative approaches used by many teachers to implement the curriculum. Principals are mindful of the

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[11] Classroom-based assessments.
[12] Leaving Certificate Applied.

additional challenges presented by the pandemic for learners with additional educational needs.

4.3 Promoting the wellbeing of the school community

4.3.1 Successes

Successes in supporting the wellbeing of learners and staff	Primary principal responses	Post-primary principal responses	Youthreach co-ordinators	Total responses
Relationships and communication within the school community	729 (50%)	98 (33%)	20 (23%)	847
General wellbeing of school community/ learner behaviour	714 (49%)	88 (29%)	27 (31%)	829

Promoting the wellbeing of school communities was reported as a fundamental element of the successful return to school in September 2020. This trend continued throughout October and November 2020.

Relationships and communication within the school community
Half of all primary schools (50%) identified successes in their relationships and communication practices within the school community. This area was not as commonly reported in the post-primary and Youthreach sectors. A third of post-primary principals (33%) and almost a fifth of Youthreach co-ordinators (22%) identified successes with regard to relationships and communication in the school community. Typically, responses acknowledged the importance of positive relationships within the community and referenced the sense of buy-in from parents, staff and learners.

General wellbeing
Approximately half of primary schools (49%) reported successes in relation to the general wellbeing of the school community, including learner behaviour. Almost a third of post-primary schools (29%) and Youthreach centres (31%) reported successes in this areas. The increase in the number of additional release days for teaching principals at primary level was cited as particularly important for principals' wellbeing. As in September 2020, the return to the structure and routine of day-to-day school life was also reported to have impacted positively on learners' well-being. Co-operation, collaboration, teamwork, regular updates

and communication were noted as contributing positively to the wellbeing of both staff and learners. Youthreach co-ordinators also highlighted the positive contribution to learner wellbeing made by the availability of counselling.

Observations from primary principals

- *Staff are incredibly flexible, pupils are resilient and all have embraced the new routines.*
- *Calmness both inside school building and in the yard – lack of disruptions and staggered breaks.*

Observations from post-primary principals

- *There is a 'can do' attitude in the school.*
- *Students like to go outside at lunch to get a break from masks. Created a lot of outdoor spaces and seating areas so students have a nice place to go.*

Observations from Youthreach co-ordinators

- *Learners are back and they feel safe. They love the structure and routine.*
- *Learners delighted to be back, excellent retention; Youthreach is often a place of stability for many learners; packed lunches are provided.*

4.3.2 Challenges

Challenges to supporting the wellbeing of learners and staff	Primary principal responses	Post-primary principal responses	Youthreach co-ordinator responses	Total responses
General teacher, staff and/or parent wellbeing (including COVID-related anxiety)	461 (32%)	65 (22%)	18 (21%)	544
General staffing issues (teacher absence, recruitment, substitutions, Special Needs Assistants)	284 (20%)	67 (22%)	14 (16%)	365
Wellbeing of principal/senior management	241 (17%)	63 (21%)	5 (6%)	309
Learner wellbeing and/or behaviour	147 (10%)	41 (14%)	29 (33%)	217
Learner absence	103 (7%)	28 (9%)	7 (8%)	138
Staff relations issues	85 (6%)	9 (3%)	5 (6%)	99

General teacher, staff and/or parent wellbeing
Although notable successes were evident in the promotion of wellbeing in the school community, significant challenges in this area were also evident; this was also reflected in the analysis of the September data. Across all schools and centres, the most commonly reported challenge in this area related to general teacher, staff and/or parent wellbeing. This was reported as a particular challenge by almost a third (32%) of primary principals, and approximately one fifth of post-primary principals (22%) and Youthreach co-ordinators (21%). Throughout October and November, it was evident that fear and anxiety about COVID-19 had remained as a very prevalent concern for school communities. Principals

also described the difficulties in maintaining staff morale. A number of principals noted their concerns that face coverings were contributing to vocal strain for teachers.

Staffing issues

The second most frequently reported challenge to the promotion of wellbeing related to general staffing issues in schools and centres. Principals and co-ordinators described the difficulties arising from teacher absences, and the resulting logistical challenges caused by the shortage of substitute teachers. Principals in Irish-medium schools referenced difficulties in the recruitment of teachers with the required competence in the Irish language to fill vacant teaching positions. In September, a significant proportion of responses referenced the challenges in this area.

Wellbeing of principals and school leaders

The third most frequently reported challenge related to the wellbeing of principals and school leaders. This also emerged as a dominant theme in September and many of the issues identified then remained very relevant throughout October and November. Responses across all three sectors referenced the significant difficulties caused by the increased administrative demands of this school year. Issues specific to post-primary principals and Youthreach co-ordinators included the additional challenges caused by the scheduling of the Leaving Certificate examinations in November and December.

Learner wellbeing

Of the three sectors, learner wellbeing was highlighted most frequently in Youthreach centres (33%) as an area of particular concern. The importance of purposeful use of kitchen facilities as a means of enhancing learners' wellbeing was also strongly evident in the commentary from co-ordinators in Youthreach centres; a commonly reported concern referred to difficulties in the provision of hot food/canteen facilities. It was also noted that students' reduced opportunity to engage in physical activities was impacting negatively on their wellbeing. Access to counselling services was also raised as an issue causing significant concern.

A number of post-primary principals described the challenges students were experiencing in wearing face coverings during lessons, and talked about the impact of these on learners' concentration, engagement, participation and attainment. Despite these challenges, it was acknowledged by principals that students were, in the main, very compliant in relation to the wearing of face coverings during lesson periods.

The issue of learner absence was highlighted as a well-being related concern in a few schools and centres at all levels. Reasons for absences as reported by principals and centre co-ordinators included learners being kept at home as a consequence of parental anxiety or other family members being at very high risk. Throughout October and November 2020, the potential impact of learner absences on staff allocation numbers emerged as a particular concern at primary level.

Staff relations issues were noted in a few schools and centres. As in September 2020, responses by principals suggest that these issues arose from the impact of reduced interactions between staff. High levels of anxiety among staff were also reported. Principals in particular reported particularly high levels of stress and fatigue in the weeks before the October 2020 mid-term break. Newly appointed co-ordinators in Youthreach centres reported that they had not received any training, noting that this had resulted in significant stress and anxiety.

Observations from primary principals

- *Very concerned about the wellbeing of staff - sense of isolation, loss of interaction with colleagues.*
- *The pressure on principals to be on call all the time, managing staff wellbeing but who is managing principals' wellbeing?*

Observations from post-primary principals

- *The school is challenged by a wide range of emotions and anxiety evident with pupils since school closure and the onset of the pandemic.*
- *Hard for the current sixth years to keep motivated, upset about the grades, worried about courses etc. for next year.*

Observations from Youthreach centre co-ordinators

- *Mental health, specifically anxiety, is a growing issue; learners need the stability and routine of Youthreach.*
- *Stress levels are very high among staff and learners.*

4.3.3 Synthesis of key points

- While anxiety about COVID-19 has remained a concern for school communities, many aspects of provision for Wellbeing were reported to be working very well in schools and centres.
- The structure and routine of school life were reported to have impacted positively on learners' well-being. In discussions with inspectors, principals described how co-

operation, collaboration, teamwork, regular updates and communication were all contributing positively to the wellbeing of staff and learners.

5. Areas identified where schools and centres require further advice

The final item that inspectors enquired about in their discussions with school principals concerned areas in which the schools would benefit from support and guidance as the September-December 2020 term progressed. In a number of instances, principals/co-ordinators indicated multiple areas in which they would like further support or guidance. Teaching and learning, followed by 'Other' topics and establishing a safe working and learning environment were prioritised as the main areas for further support and advice.

Areas where schools and centres indicated support and guidance was required	Primary principal responses	Post-primary principal responses	Youthreach co-ordinator responses	Total responses
Teaching and Learning	695	116	23	834
Other	369	118	28	515
Establishing a safe working and learning environment	283	50	14	347
Assessment	173	61	8	242
Leadership and Management	199	31	2	232

In 515 schools and centres, inspectors indicated that further support or guidance in 'other' areas was required. In 322 of these schools and centres[13], additional detail was included to indicate the nature of this support or guidance.[14] In a number of instances, multiple areas of support or guidance were referenced. The three most commonly mentioned areas were:

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[13] The 322 schools and centres consist of 223 primary schools, eighty-six post-primary schools and thirteen Youthreach centres

[14] In the remaining excluded instances, the original data fields were either empty or included extraneous information which was not considered relevant to the analysis.

- Convening meetings (Parent-teacher meetings, board of management meetings, staff meetings, open days/nights for parents (Forty-four responses)[15]
- Provision for learners with additional and special educational needs (Forty-four responses)
- Health and safety (Thirty-six responses)

The table at Appendix 3 details the remaining 'other' areas in which a need for advice or support was indicated.

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[15] An advice note on supporting collaboration with partners was published on www.gov.ie in November 2020.

6. Key findings

The key findings and emergent themes in this report broadly mirror those in the previous report on advisory sessions with principals in September 2020. Progress has been made in the implementation of the recommendations of the September report although actions to address issues such as teacher supply and wellbeing are ongoing. Detail on the implementation of the recommendations is available in Appendix 4. Nonetheless, it is evident in the October and November period that as would be expected once schools and learners had settled back into school, there was a greater focus in the commentary from principals on the core work of the school - teaching and learning.

Establishing protocols and routines to facilitate a safe learning and working environment
Most schools and centres continued to operate in a safe and sustainable way in the October to November 2020 period. The new measures in place were reported as having resulted in a sense of order, security and calm for school and centre communities. High levels of compliance were reported, with routines and protocols implemented successfully by learners and staff. Principals were positive about the resources provided; of particular note was the additional funding provided and the increased administration days for teaching principals in primary schools. However, as in September 2020, a number of practical challenges remained as schools and centres sought to implement public health advice. While significant financial investment was provided to schools, a number of principals remained concerned that the funding provided to support effective virus mitigation practices would not be adequate to meet ongoing needs in this area.

Supporting the wellbeing of learners and staff
Promoting the wellbeing of school communities was reported as an important element of the successful return to school in September 2020.This continued to be a success throughout October and November 2020. While anxiety about COVID-19 has remained a concern for school communities, many aspects of provision for wellbeing were reported to be working very well in schools and centres. Principals and co-ordinators reported that co-operation, collaboration, teamwork, regular updates and communication were all contributing positively to the wellbeing of staff and learners. However, stress and anxiety levels among school communities were again reported to be high. The need for ongoing support for the wellbeing of principals, school leaders, and teachers was evident.

Delivering the curriculum during the 2020/21 school year
As reported by principals and Youthreach co-ordinators, schools and centres had worked to make digital technologies an integrated feature of teaching, learning and assessment. Many centres, schools, teachers and learners had adopted new platforms, applications and modes of learning. However, 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. Many schools had progressed to full implementation of the curriculum. Principals and co-ordinators described learners' high levels of enthusiasm about their new learning and praised the creative and innovative approaches used by many teachers. As was evident in the September 2020 report, principals and co-ordinators remained alert to the possible impact of the lengthy period of school and centre closures on learners. Shortage in the availability of substitute and other short-term contract teachers continued to be a challenge for principals and school leaders.

7. Main conclusions

- Principals indicated that schools and centres continued to operate in a safe and sustainable way during September-December 2020.
- It is important that resources to support ongoing mitigation of the virus continue to be available as schools re-open.[16]
- Teacher supply continued to be a challenge for principals and school leaders.
- For a number of schools, access to broadband continued to be a challenge.
- Wellbeing supports continue to be important in the context of staff and learner wellbeing.
- It is important that schools remain vigilant in relation to meeting the needs of learners with additional educational needs who continue to learn in a remote environment because they are very vulnerable to COVID-19.

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[16] On 7 January 2021, the Minister for Education confirmed that all schools would remain closed to learners from 11 January 2021 for a period of three weeks which was subsequently extended to take account of evolving public health advice. Special schools and special classes in mainstream schools re-opened to pupils/students in February 2021. At the time of publication of this report, plans were in place to initiate a phased reopening of schools to all other students in March 2021.

Appendix 1

Numbers of principals/co-ordinators who reported successes in specified areas[17]				
Area in which success was reported	Number of primary principals[18]	Number of post-primary principals	Number of Youthreach co-ordinators	Total
Reopening school/creating and promoting a safe learning and working environment	1077 (74%)	198 (66%)	45 (52%)	1320
Relationships and communication within school community	729 (50%)	98 (33%)	20 (23%)	847
General wellbeing of school community / learner behaviour	714 (49%)	88 (29%)	27 (31%)	829
Assessment	30 (2%)	16 (5%)	0 (0%)	46
Digital technologies	366 (25%)	138 (46%)	37 (43%)	541
Compliance of school community with protocols	409 (28%)	101 (34%)	18 (21%)	528

[17] Where multiple responses were returned for an individual area, these were discounted. Multiple responses that occurred within an individual area were counted as individual occurrences only.
[18] As indicated previously, the total number of schools and centres in the sample was 1,453 primary schools, 300 post-primary schools and eighty-seven Youthreach centres. The numbers in the tables are the numbers of principals/co-ordinators in each sector. The percentage is the proportion of the total number of schools/centres in each sector.

Teaching including curriculum implementation	375 (26%)	68 (23%)	27 (31%)	470
No response	265 (18%)	37 (12%)	18 (21%)	320
Supports from Department of Education	176 12%	28 (9%)	2 (2%)	206
Supports from other agencies	61 4%	20 (7%)	16 (18%)	97
Learner attainment	60 (4%)	10 (3 %)	18 (21%)	88
General[19]	45 (3%)	10 (33%)	4 (5%)	59
Homework	23 (2%)	2 (1%)	1 (1%)	26
July provision/summer camps	29 (2%)	3 (1%)	0 (0%)	32

[19] Response items categorised as 'general' were those which were few in number and could not be connected to other data themes.

Appendix 2

Overview of numbers of principals who reported challenges in specified areas				
Area in which challenge was reported	Number of primary principals	Number of post-primary principals	Number of Youthreach co-ordinators	Total
General teacher, staff and/or parent wellbeing (including COVID-related anxiety)	461 (32%)	65 (22%)	18 (21%)	544
No response	371 (26%)	45 (15%)	17 (20%)	433[20]
General staffing issues (teacher absence, recruitment, substitution, Special Needs Assistants)	284 (20%)	67 (22%)	14 (16%)	365
Teaching and Learning (learner attainment/differentiation)	294 (20%)	30 (10%)	6 (7%)	330
Wellbeing of principal/senior management	241 (17%)	63 (21%)	5 (6%)	309
Cleaning/Sanitising/Personal Protective Equipment (and all issues relating to procurement and/or finance)	241 (17%)	49 (16%)	2 (2%)	292
School accommodation (including class size)	169 (12%)	62 (21%)	31 (36%)	262

[20] In these instances, inspectors typically entered data for a single field, and did not need to populate the remaining fields. Empty data fields were subsequently classified as 'no response' items.

Learners with additional needs (high/very high risk, Special Educational Needs, Traveller, ref. to Special Education Teacher provision	224 (15%)	21 (7%)	2 (2%)	247
Reopening school, maintaining safe environment (including Lead Worker Representative)	167 (11%)	48 (16%)	15 (17%)	230
Compliance of school community with protocols	156 (11%)	54 (18%)	8 (9%)	218
Digital technologies and/or remote learning	149 (10%)	32 (11%)	27 (31%)	208
Learner wellbeing and/or behaviour	147 (10%)	41 (14%)	29 (33%)	217
Communication with Department of Education	179 (12%)	24 (8%)	3 (3%)	206
Curriculum implementation	129 (9%)	18 (6%)	5 (6%)	152
Communication with Health Service Executive (including Health and Safety Authority /public health issues)	114 (8%)	32 (11%)	2 (2%)	148
Learner absence	103 (7%)	28 (9%)	7 (8%)	138
General	98 (7%)	12 (4%)	17 (20%)	127
Communication with other agencies	88	9	4	101

	(6%)	(3%)	(5%)	
Staff relations issues	85 (6%)	9 (3%)	5 (6%)	99
Assessment	75 (5%)	9 (3%)	2 (2%)	86
Exam related issues	0 (0%)	42 (14%)	9 (10%)	51
Planning for future school closures	48 (3%)	3 (1%)	0 (0%)	51
Practical subjects	19 (1%)	26 (9%)	6 (7%)	51
Erosion of teaching time	29 (2%)	7 (2%)	0 (0%)	36
Extra/co-curricular activities	31 (2%)	12 (4%)	0 (0%)	43
Supervision	24 (2%)	15 (5%)	0 (0%)	39
Teacher collaboration	28 (2%)	3 (1%)	0 (0%)	31
School transport	18 (1%)	6 (2%)	0 (0%)	24

Managing resources for teaching and learning	18 (1%)	5 (2%)	0 (0%)	23
Transition Year	0 (0%)	17 (6%)	0 (0%)	17

Appendix 3

Other areas in which additional advice / support was indicated			
Area in which additional advice/support indicated	Number of primary principals	Number of post-primary principals	Number of Youthreach co-ordinators	Total
Convening meetings (Parent-teacher, Board, staff, open days/nights)	27	17	0	44
Provision for learners with additional and special educational needs	37	6	1	44
Health and safety	25	8	3	36
Health and Safety Executive-related	19	3	0	22
Supports for school leadership/Wellbeing of school leaders	16	5	0	21
Certificate examinations	0	19	1	20
Learner absence (including COVID-related absences)	14	5	1	20
Wellbeing supports for staff	12	5	1	18
Curriculum planning and/or implementation	16	0	1	17
Substitution	14	3	0	17
Accommodation and school building	12	3	0	15
Financial matters	11	4	0	15
General	13	2	0	15
Communication with Department of Education	12	2	0	14

Contingency planning for school closures	10	2	1	13
Staffing including resourcing/retention	6	5	0	11
DEIS planning and/or implementation	6	3	0	9
Extra-curricular activities	7	2	0	9
Digital technologies	6	1	1	8
Practical subjects	2	4	1	7
Issues relating to Special Needs Assistant deployment and/or allocation	3	3	0	6
Remote teaching/live streaming of lessons	3	3	0	6
Transition Year	0	6	0	6
Assessment	3	1	1	5
Enrolment issues	4	1	0	5
Leaving Certificate Applied programme	0	3	2	5
Learner outcomes	4	0	1	5
Staff absenteeism	4	1	0	5
Homework	3	0	0	3
Learner experiences	0	3	0	3
Relations with parents	3	0	0	3
School self-evaluation	2	1	0	3
Staff collaboration	3	0	0	3
Students on school placement	3	0	0	3

Appendix 4

Recommendations in September report	Status at the time of publication of this report
• The Department should keep the PPE requirements of schools under review to ensure that schools have adequate volumes in line with their COVID-19 response plans.	In the course of their advisory sessions with schools throughout October and November 2020, inspectors gathered information on the PPE requirements of schools and centres. This information was shared with the relevant sections of the Department to inform decision-making. Funding for the academic year 2021/2022 was reviewed in line with the latest public health advice available. A central contingency reserve was allocated in the 2021 Budget by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, which included funds earmarked for schools for the remainder of 2021. In anticipation of the planned return to school in January 2021, schools were asked to ensure that all public health advice measures were still in place, including updated advice for SNAs and the provision of appropriate medical grade masks and PPE. The Department of Education also confirmed that funding for all required PPE would be provided for the January- March 2021 term. Any school requiring additional funding for PPE, or was experiencing issues in relation to supply, was advised to contact the Department of Education.
• The current work-related pressure on principals needs to be monitored on an ongoing basis; additional supports and resources may be necessary as the school year continues.	The Employee Assistance Service (EAS) continues to provide advice and support to principals and teachers in relation to health and wellbeing issues in the workplace. As part of the EAS, Spectrum Life is also providing a series of webinars and

	presentations to promote wellbeing in schools during the 2020/2021.
• As the school year progresses, the wellbeing supports provided to schools will need to be reviewed to ensure that they remain current and responsive to the evolving needs of school communities.	NEPS issued a letter to all schools in early November 2020 outlining their plans for work in schools and support for wellbeing. The Department's Employee Assistance and Wellbeing Programme continues to be available to support principals and teachers. Details may be accessed at the following link: DE – Employee Assistance and Wellbeing Programme
• Actions to address the issue of teacher supply should continue to be progressed.	The Teacher Supply Steering Group established by the Department of Education, and the working groups reporting to it, continue to progress actions to address issues relating to teacher supply.
• Greater use should be made of social media to assist principals in navigating the suite of guidance and advice currently available on the COVID-19 section of www.gov.ie. In particular, social media channels should be used to alert principals when guidance has been updated, and to identify the specific aspects of guidance which have been amended.	The Department's Esinet system and Twitter account are used to advise schools when guidance and other documents are issued or updated.
• An important priority for all schools should be to re-establish, plan for and implement interventions for the particular needs of learners with additional educational needs.	Inspectorate discussions with schools and centres indicate that principals and co-ordinators are very aware of the need to differentiate content and activities to ensure that interventions are appropriate to the particular needs of learners with additional educational needs.
• Schools will need to be supported to reimagine extra-curricular and co-curricular activities in the current	In addition to the guidance documents previously published in advance and during

circumstances. The Department's *Returning to School Transition Year* guidance document which offers good practical examples of alternative activities and includes direct advice on resources and relevant websites should be useful in this regard. The sharing of case studies from schools that have been successful in continuing to provide a range of extra- and co-curricular activities may also be useful.	the September-December 2020 period, the Department of Education issued guidance on arrangements for end-of-term celebrations and gatherings in December 2020.
• Schools will continue to require support on provision for practical subjects including PE and Music to ensure full curriculum delivery in the current context. This may include ensuring that schools are aware of the supports available such as the Department's *Return to School Guidance for Practical Subjects in Post-Primary Schools and Centres for Education* and providing additional guidance where necessary.	Inspectors continued to provide advice and support during their advisory sessions with schools during the October- December 2020 period. An advice note from the Department of Education on Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools was published on the gov.ie website on 30 November 2020.
• While teaching and learning continues in a new context for schools, and teachers are working to ensure that learners experience a responsive, balanced and challenging curriculum, there will be a long-term need to analyse and evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning.	There has been initial consideration of how to advance this recommendation.