



An Roinn Oideachais  
Department of Education

# **Return to school: Report on findings of surveys in primary, post-primary schools and special schools**

October 2020

Inspectorate  
Department of Education  
February 2021

# Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>1. Introduction.....</b>                               | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>2. Methodology .....</b>                               | <b>5</b>  |
| 2.1 Design of the survey                                  | 5         |
| 2.2 Data sample   | 5         |
| 2.3 Limitations of the survey                             | 6         |
| 2.4 Response Rates  | 6         |
| 2.5 Quantitative terms used in this report                | 7         |
| 2.6 Respondents   | 7         |
| 2.7 Analysis of data                                      | 10        |
| <b>3. Overview of survey findings .....</b>               | <b>11</b> |
| 3.1 Survey of principals                                  | 11        |
| 3.2 Survey of teachers                                    | 11        |
| 3.3 Survey of learners                                    | 11        |
| 3.4 Survey of parents                                     | 12        |
| <b>4. Core Messages .....</b>                             | <b>13</b> |
| 4.1 Experience of school                                  | 13        |
| 4.1.1 Settling back to school.....                        | 13        |
| 4.1.2 Transitions .....                                   | 14        |
| 4.1.3 Day-to-day experiences.....                         | 15        |
| 4.1.4 Operational matters .....                           | 16        |
| 4.1.5 Supports for the reopening of schools.....          | 18        |
| 4.1.6 Accessing substitute cover for absent teachers..... | 19        |
| 4.2 Wellbeing   | 20        |
| 4.2.1 Supports for learner wellbeing.....                 | 20        |
| 4.2.2 Awareness of where to seek help .....               | 22        |
| 4.2.3 Supports for staff wellbeing .....                  | 23        |
| 4.2.4 Opportunities for learners to socialise .....       | 24        |
| 4.2.5 Schools as safe working environments.....           | 25        |
| 4.3 Teaching and Learning                                 | 26        |
| 4.3.1 Overall Teaching and Learning .....                 | 26        |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| 4.3.2 Teaching approaches .....   | 28        |
| 4.3.3 Supports for Teaching .....                                       | 29        |
| 4.3.4 Learning experiences .....  | 30        |
| 4.3.5 Learner outcomes.....   | 31        |
| 4.3.6 Feedback on Learning.....   | 33        |
| 4.3.7 Supports for Learners.....  | 34        |
| 4.3.8 Availability and use of digital technologies.....                 | 34        |
| 4.3.9 Arrangements for learners at very high risk .....                 | 37        |
| <b>4.4 Implementation of COVID-19 measures</b> .....                    | <b>38</b> |
| 4.4.1 Training.....   | 38        |
| 4.4.2 Policies and procedures .....                                     | 38        |
| 4.4.3 Hand sanitising .....   | 44        |
| 4.4.4 Face coverings .....  | 45        |
| 4.4.5 Communication with parents .....                                  | 45        |
| 4.4.6 Arrangements in the event of full or partial school closure ..... | 47        |
| <b>5. Findings and conclusions .....</b>                                | <b>48</b> |
| 5.1 Main findings .....   | 48        |
| 5.5.1 Experience of school .....  | 48        |
| 5.5.2 Wellbeing .....   | 48        |
| 5.5.3 Teaching and Learning.....  | 48        |
| 5.5.4 Implementation of COVID-19 measures .....                         | 49        |
| 5.2 Main conclusions .....  | 49        |

# 1. Introduction

Irish primary, post-primary and special schools closed on 12 March 2020 based on advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) as part of the government's efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19, and teaching was provided remotely by teachers for pupils and students. By 1 September 2020, all schools had re-opened. This report presents an analysis of data from a series of surveys carried out by the Inspectorate during the period, 14 October to 23 October 2020, approximately six weeks after schools re-opened. Surveys were administered to learners, parents, principals and teachers in a sample of primary, post-primary and special schools across the country.

The lines of enquiry were informed by information gathered during the Inspectorate's advisory sessions with school principals and by emerging issues raised by stakeholders with the Department. The surveys were conducted online. All responses were anonymous.

The purpose of this analysis was to:

- Provide an overview of the successes and challenges experienced by schools during the September-October 2020 period under four key themes
- Identify specific issues relevant to primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools.

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

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Design of the survey

The survey questions were based on four key themes:

| Survey Themes                          |
|--|
| 1) Experience of school                |
| 2) Wellbeing                           |
| 3) Teaching and Learning               |
| 4) Implementation of COVID-19 measures |

*Table 1: Survey Themes*

The surveys were administered to groups of respondents as illustrated in Table 2.

| Respondents | Primary schools | Post-primary schools | Special schools |
|-------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Principal   | ✓               | ✓                    | ✓               |
| Teacher     | ✓               | ✓                    | ✓               |
| Learner     | ✓               | ✓                    | ✓               |
| Parent      | ✓               | ✓                    | ✓               |

*Table 2: Surveys designed*

### 2.2 Data sample

The principals of all the schools were contacted in advance, by telephone, to inform them about the surveys. A link to the surveys was sent to schools by email during the period 14 October to 23 October 2020. The surveys involved a total of 250 schools. The number of respondents in each category (parents, pupils/students, principals and teachers) is set out in Table 3. A different sample of schools was used for each group of respondents. The sample of schools included schools that had DEIS status, as well as special schools and Irish-medium schools. The survey was available in English and

Irish. In the survey of primary school pupils, pupils from third class to sixth class were asked to complete the survey.

| Survey           | Primary schools | Post-primary schools | Special schools | Total Surveys administered |
|------------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Principal</b> | 45              | 50                   | 5               | 100                        |
| <b>Teacher</b>   | 29              | 18                   | 3               | 50                         |
| <b>Learner</b>   | 29              | 18                   | 3               | 50                         |
| <b>Parent</b>    | 29              | 18                   | 3               | 50                         |

**Table 3: Numbers of schools in which surveys were administered**

## 2.3 Limitations of the survey

The data sets of principals, teachers, learners and parents were spread across a sample of 250 different schools. Surveys for pupils in primary school and students in post-primary and special schools were administered through the schools, and information was sent by schools to parents inviting them to support their children in responding to the survey. The number of special schools sampled in the parent, learner, teacher and principal surveys was smaller than those sampled in the primary and post-primary categories.

## 2.4 Response Rates

Table 4 indicates the number of responses received from each group of respondents in primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools. There was a very good response to the principal survey, with 82 principals in the 100 schools that were surveyed responding. The average school size at primary level was much smaller than the average school size at post-primary level. Schools sampled at primary level ranged from two-teacher schools to forty-four teacher schools. In contrast, the average school sampled at post-primary level catered for 526 students, with schools in the sample ranging from 39 students to 1012 students.

Parents were invited to complete the survey for all their children who were attending school.

| Survey    | Responses from primary schools | Percentage of total responses received | Responses from post-primary schools | Percentage of total responses received | Responses from special schools | Percentage of total responses received | Total Responses Received (n) |
|-----------|--------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| Principal | 39                             | (48%)                                  | 38                                  | (46%)                                  | 5                              | (6%)                                   | <b>82</b>                    |
| Teacher   | 206                            | (37%)                                  | 317                                 | (57%)                                  | 31                             | (6%)                                   | <b>554</b>                   |
| Learner   | 1024                           | (31%)                                  | 2263                                | (68%)                                  | 24                             | (1%)                                   | <b>3311</b>                  |
| Parent    | 1724                           | (39%)                                  | 2669                                | (60%)                                  | 83                             | (2%)                                   | <b>4476</b>                  |

**Table 4: Numbers of responses (and percentages of total responses received)**

## 2.5 Quantitative terms used in this report

Descriptors used in this report represent the following percentage ranges:

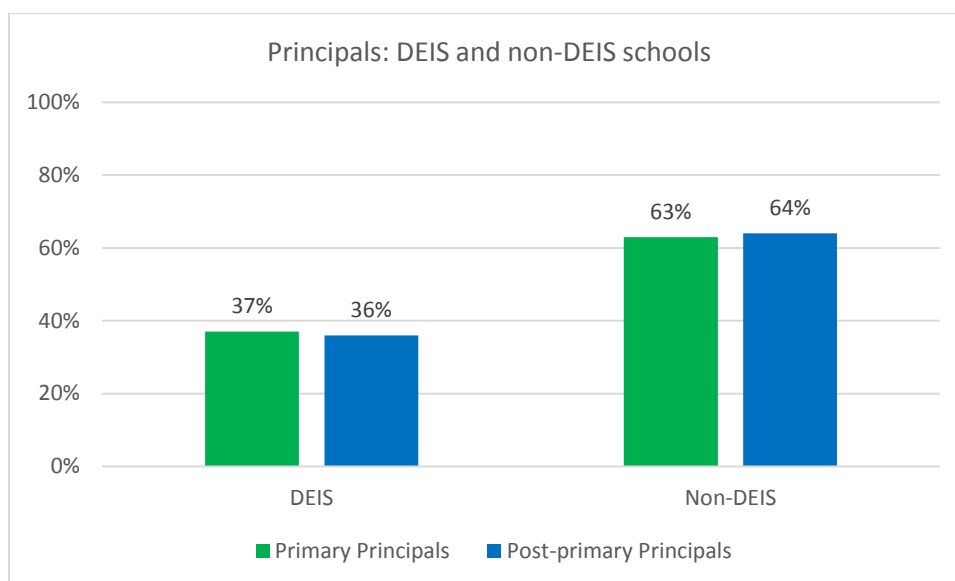
|   |               |
|---|---------------|
| Almost all                              | More than 90% |
| Most                                    | 75% – 90%     |
| Majority* / more than half              | 51% – 74%     |
| Half                                    | 50%           |
| Less than half / a significant minority | 25% – 49%     |
| A small number / less than a quarter    | 16% – 24%     |
| A few                                   | Less than 15% |

**Table 5: Quantitative terms used**

## 2.6 Respondents

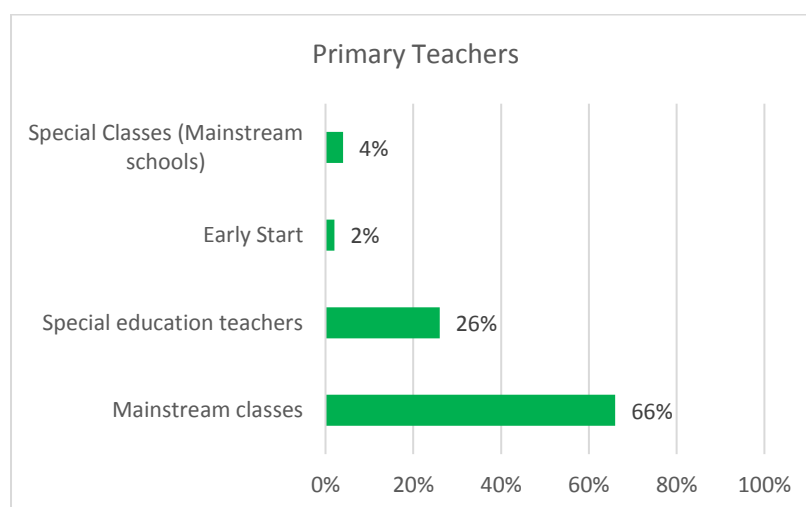
### *Principal survey*

Of the 39 primary principals who responded, almost two-fifths were teaching principals. More than one-third of all primary and post-primary principals who responded worked in DEIS schools. All principals of special schools who received a survey responded.

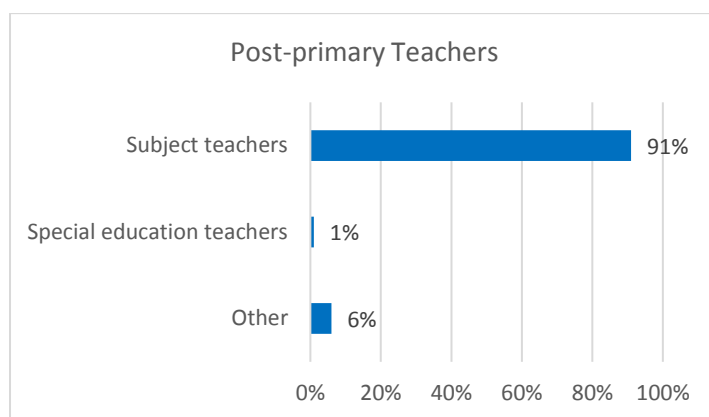


### Teacher survey

Two-thirds of primary teachers who responded taught in mainstream classes and were spread almost evenly across the range of classes from junior infants to sixth class. Just over one-quarter were special education teachers. A very small number of Early Start teachers and special class teachers also responded. One-quarter of the primary teachers who responded worked in DEIS schools. At post-primary level, almost all teachers who responded worked in non-DEIS schools. Almost all post-primary teachers who responded were subject teachers. Thirty-one teachers from special schools responded.

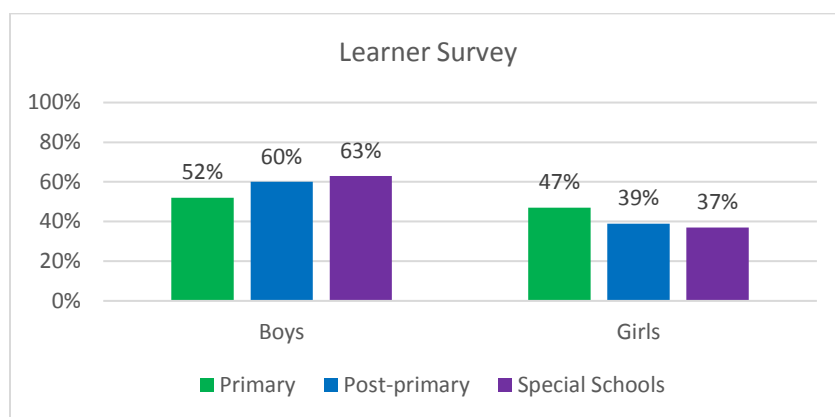






### Learner Survey

More boys than girls responded to the learner surveys at all levels.<sup>1</sup>



Primary pupil respondents were almost evenly distributed across the classes from third to sixth class. Post-primary respondents were spread almost evenly across the year groups from first to sixth year. Learners in special schools who responded were aged between ten and seventeen years old and their responses were evenly spread across the age-groups.

### Parent Survey

A large number of parents of children at both primary and post-primary levels responded. There was also a good response from parents of children in special schools.

---

<sup>1</sup> Learners were also given the option of 'prefer not to say' or 'other'.

## **2.7 Analysis of data**

Each set of responses to the surveys was analysed using reporting and survey analytics software.

## **3. Overview of survey findings**

### **3.1 Survey of principals**

Responses to the principal surveys indicated that, overall, schools were operating effectively in the weeks following the re-opening of schools. Principals indicated that teaching and learning were going well in their schools. Additional supports had been introduced to support the wellbeing of staff and pupils/students. Almost all schools had digital platforms in place, and teachers and pupils/students were familiar with using them. Principals indicated that arrangements had been made to ensure that students could continue their learning in the event of a partial or full school closure. They agreed that measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in schools were being implemented successfully.

### **3.2 Survey of teachers**

Most teachers felt that their school was running effectively and indicated that they were coping well in their role as teachers in the period following the re-opening of schools. They had accessed online resources to support their teaching, and most were happy with the progress their pupils/students were making with their learning. Teachers expressed confidence in their ability to use digital platforms to support teaching and learning. Notwithstanding the measures being implemented to stop the spread of COVID-19 in classrooms, the majority of teachers expressed their satisfaction with how their teaching was going and with how pupils/students were engaging in their learning. Some teachers experienced limitations with regard to the range of methodologies they could use in light of social distancing measures in schools. Some teachers also expressed anxiety about their safety in school, and some felt that pupils/students were not adhering closely to the requirements with regard to hand sanitisation and social distancing.

### **3.3 Survey of learners**

The overall responses from learners indicated that they were happy to be back at school, that they were very satisfied with their school experiences and that they were afforded opportunities to play/socialise with their peers. Learners' responses were generally very positive in relation to teaching and learning, albeit slightly less so amongst post-primary students. There were some differences in the reported responses of primary and post-primary learners regarding adherence to the COVID-19 regulations that were in place in their schools. Primary and special school learners reported higher levels of engagement with the rules, particularly relating to hand-sanitisation and social

distancing requirements. However, post-primary students agreed that they understood and followed the requirements regarding the wearing of face coverings.

### **3.4 Survey of parents**

Parents of pupils/students at all levels reported that their children were happy to be back at school, although parents of primary school pupils reported greater levels of happiness among their children than parents of post-primary students. Parents generally agreed that their children had settled well in school in the first term. The majority of parents also indicated that their children were making progress with their learning, although there was less awareness among parents of post-primary students about their children's progress. Overall, parents indicated that schools had communicated very well about the measures in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and they were satisfied that schools were making great efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

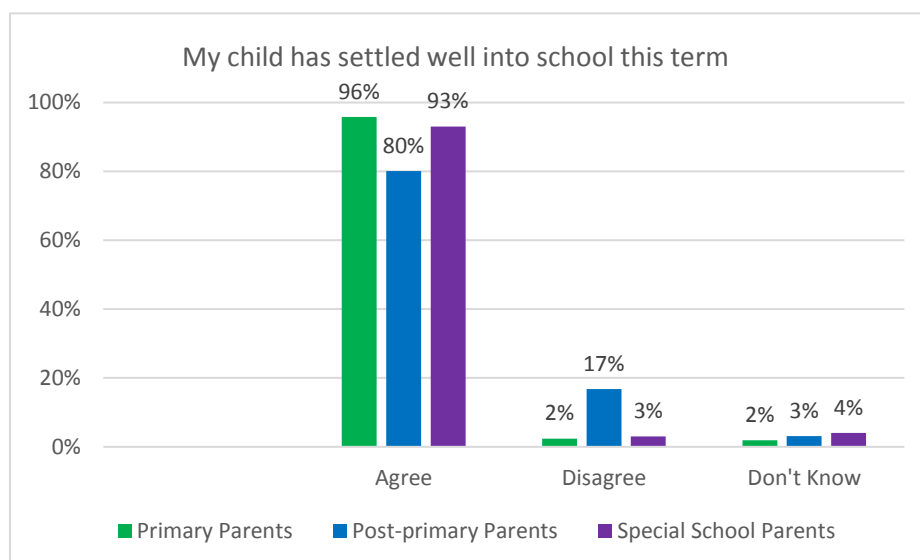
## 4. Core Messages

### 4.1 Experience of school

The return to school in September 2020 was successful from the perspectives of the majority of all categories of respondents. Children, parents, principals and teachers were overwhelmingly in agreement that the reopening of schools had been successful and that pupils/students had settled well into school. Principals and teachers reported that their schools were running effectively and that they were coping well in their respective roles. School personnel had accessed the documentation prepared and published by the Department of Education to prepare for the reopening of schools.

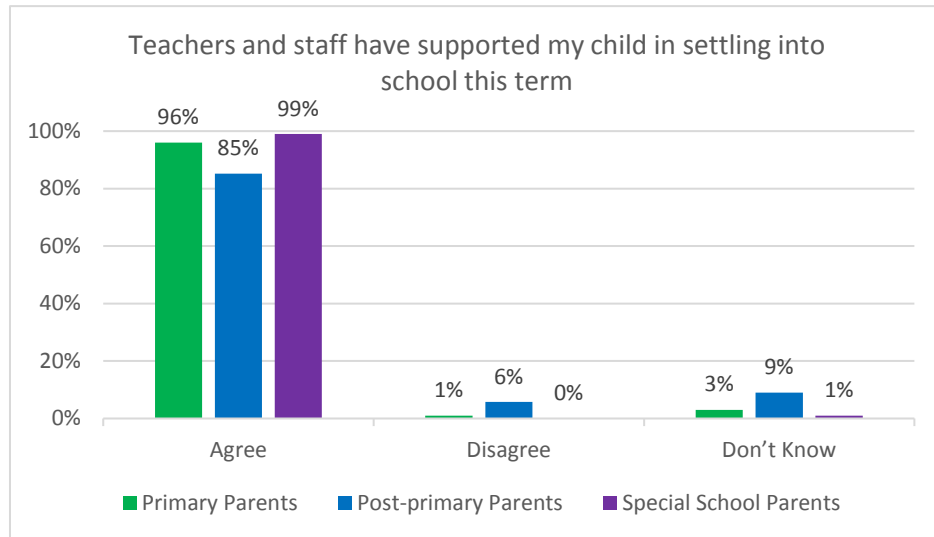
#### 4.1.1 Settling back to school

Parents were very positive about how their children settled back into school during the September-December term and the overwhelming majority of parents agreed that their child had settled well into school.



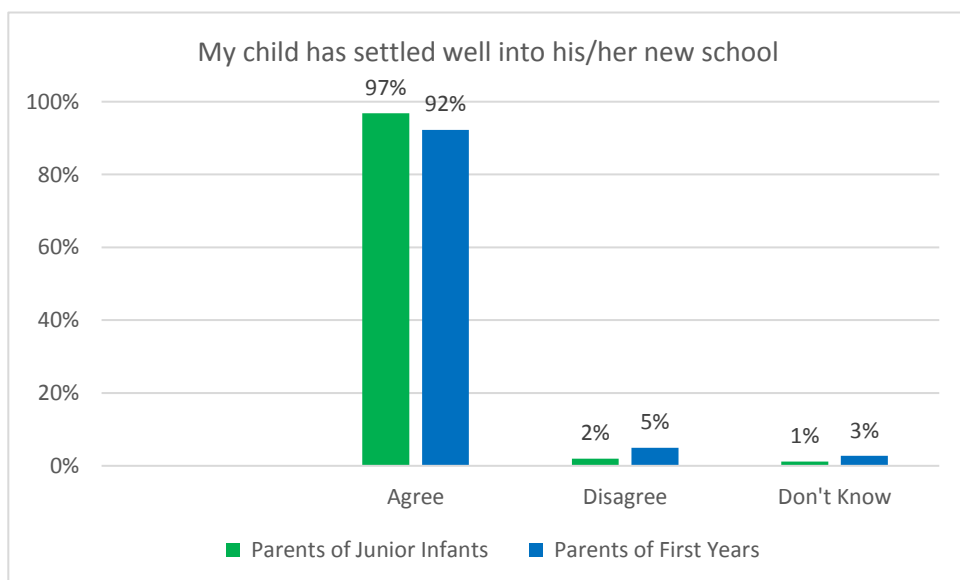
Parents were also very positive about and appreciative of the supports provided by teachers and staff to their children in settling back into school. Almost all parents of primary school pupils and of students in special schools agreed that teachers and staff had supported their child in settling into school in the September-December 2020 term. Similarly, most parents of students at post-primary level were very positive about the

level of support provided by teachers and staff to their child in settling into school in the September-December term.



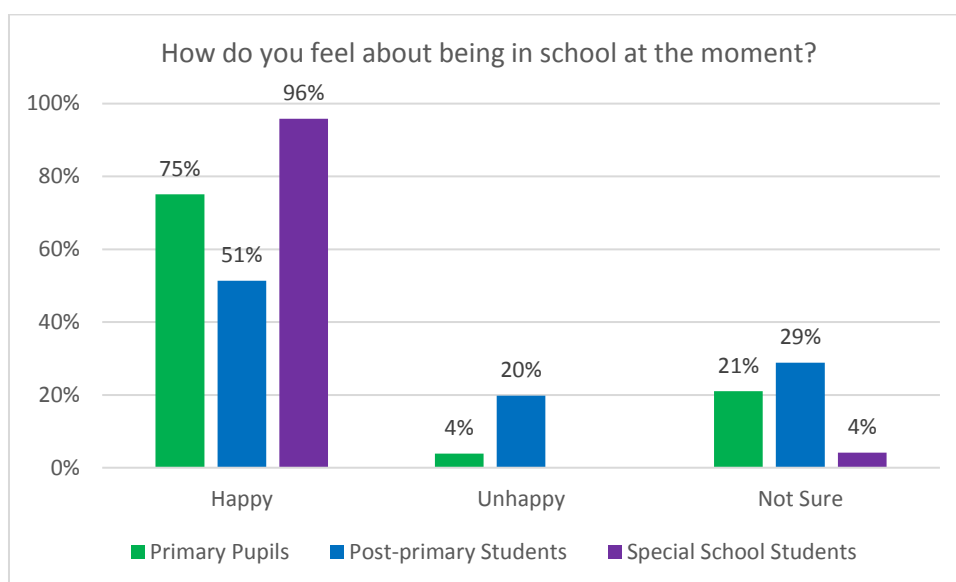
#### 4.1.2 Transitions

Where children were starting new schools in September, the transitions were reported to be extremely successful at both levels, with almost all parents of children making those transitions at both junior infant and first year levels agreeing that their children had settled well into their new school.

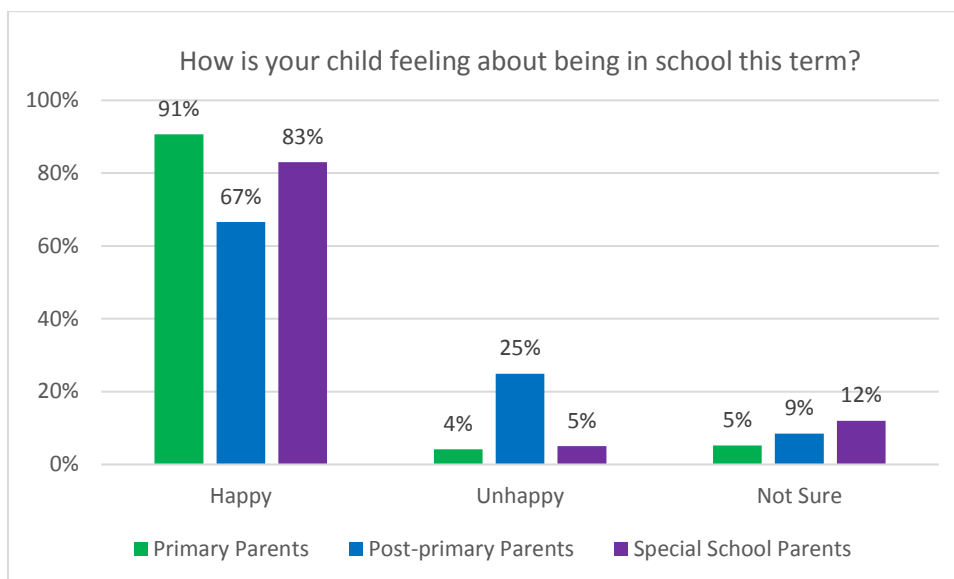


### 4.1.3 Day-to-day experiences

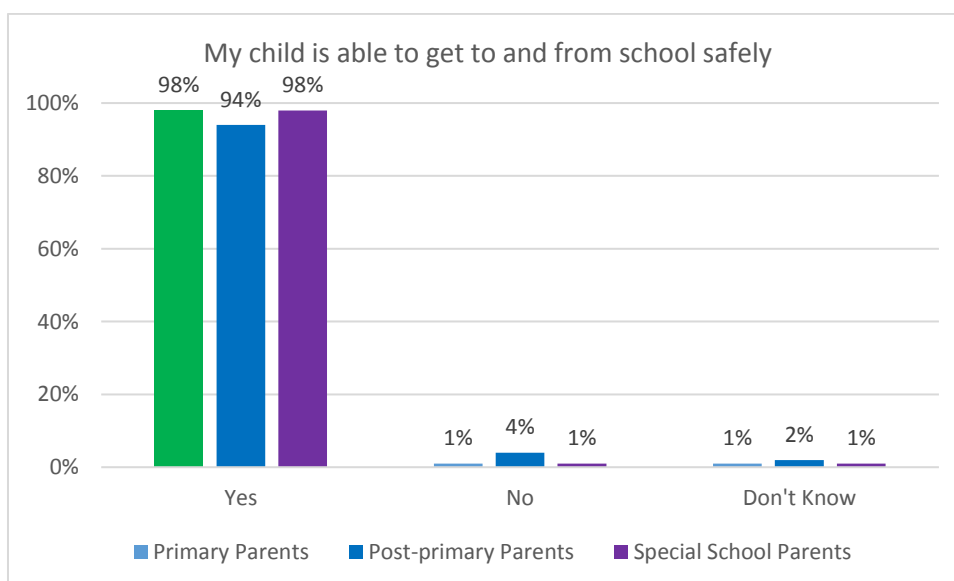
Pupils at primary level and students at post-primary level and in special schools demonstrated high degrees of satisfaction regarding their school experiences during the September-October period. Three-quarters of primary pupils and almost all students in special schools indicated that they were happy to be in school. However, only a little more than half of post-primary students indicated strongly that they were happy at school. While the surveys did not explore the reasons for this difference between primary and post-primary learners, the Inspectorate's engagement with focus groups of pupils and students during the September-December 2020 period suggested that preventative measures related to COVID-19, such as the wearing of face masks, coupled with anxiety levels around COVID-19, may have adversely affected some post-primary students' experience of school.



Parents of pupils/students in primary, post-primary and special schools indicated that their children were happy to be back at school, although the proportion of primary parents indicating this was much higher than that of post-primary parents. Almost all parents of primary school children and most parents of children in special schools reported that their children were happy about being back at school.



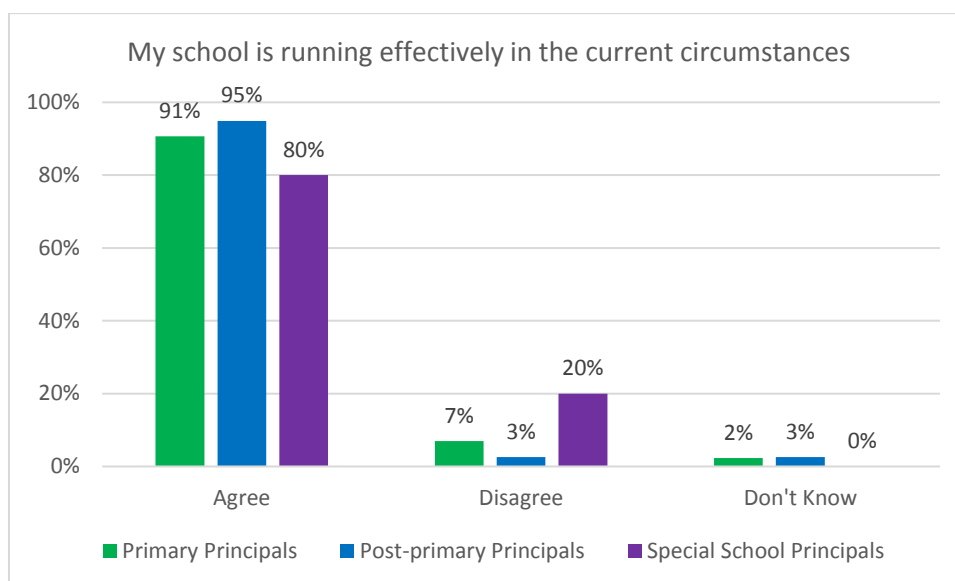
Almost all parents of children in primary, post-primary and special schools agreed that their child was able to get to and from school safely.



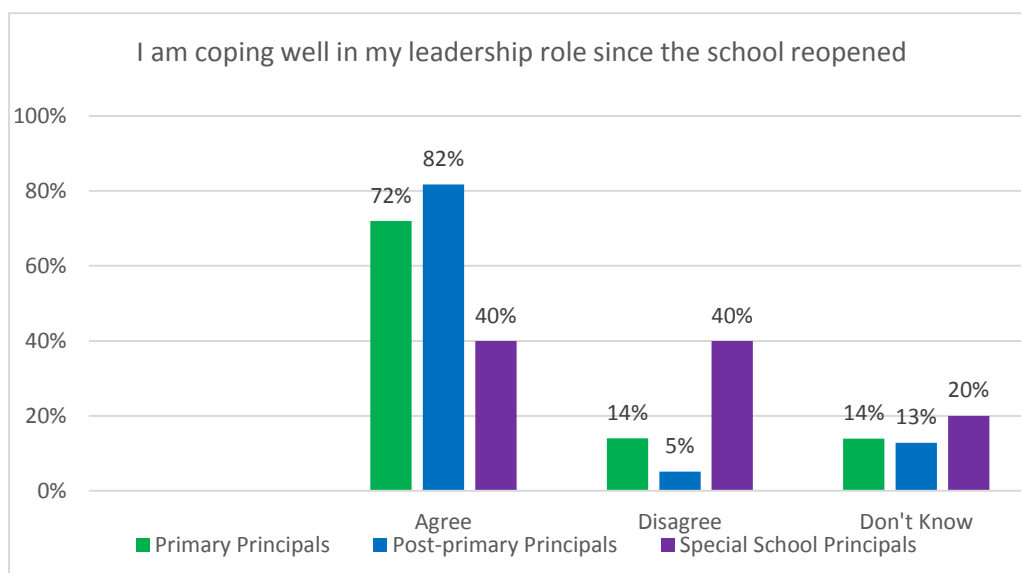
#### 4.1.4 Operational matters

Overall, the return to school was a very successful and positive experience for those principals and teachers who responded. Despite the challenges, principals and teachers indicated that schools were operating effectively in the first half of the new term.

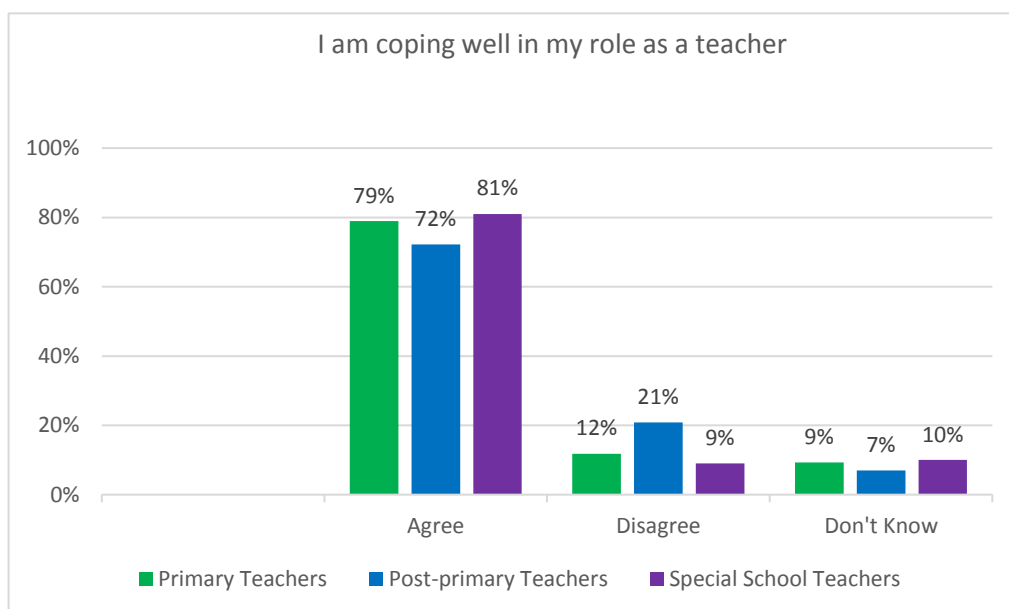




Most primary and post-primary principals indicated that they were coping well in their leadership roles since their schools reopened. However, less than half of principals in the special schools sampled indicated that they were coping well in their leadership roles at the time of the survey.



In general, most teachers agreed that they were coping well in their teaching roles although just over one-fifth of post-primary teachers indicated that they were not coping well.



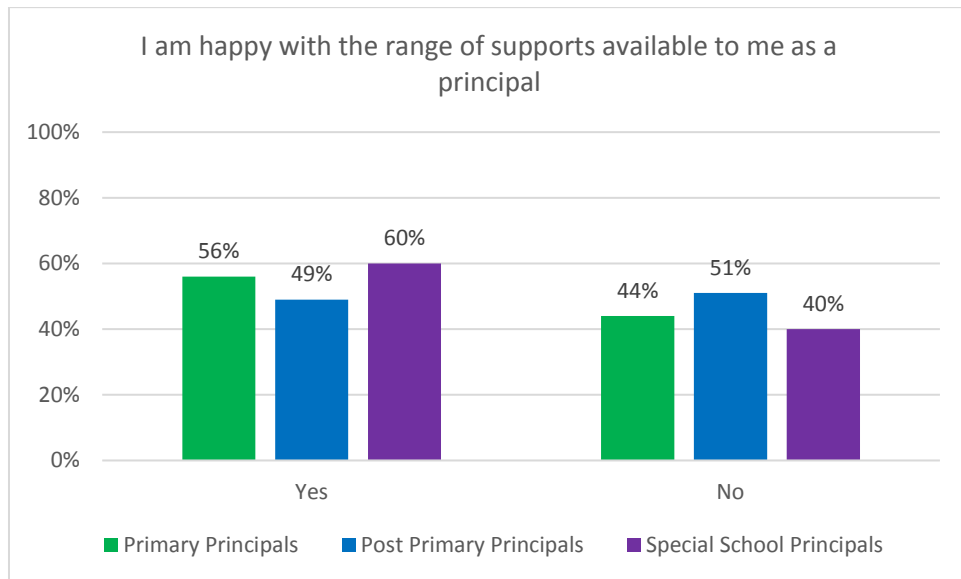
#### 4.1.5 Supports for the reopening of schools

In preparation for the reopening of schools in September, the Department prepared and published a range of documents, including a COVID-19 response plan for the safe reopening of schools, training and resources, supports for the special education sector, adherence to COVID-19 regulations in the school environment, guidance on mediating the curriculum in a COVID context and assessment arrangements for 2021<sup>2</sup>. Principals and teachers indicated that there had been widespread access to these support documents. More than half of primary principals and almost half of post-primary principals agreed that they were happy with the range of supports available to them.

---

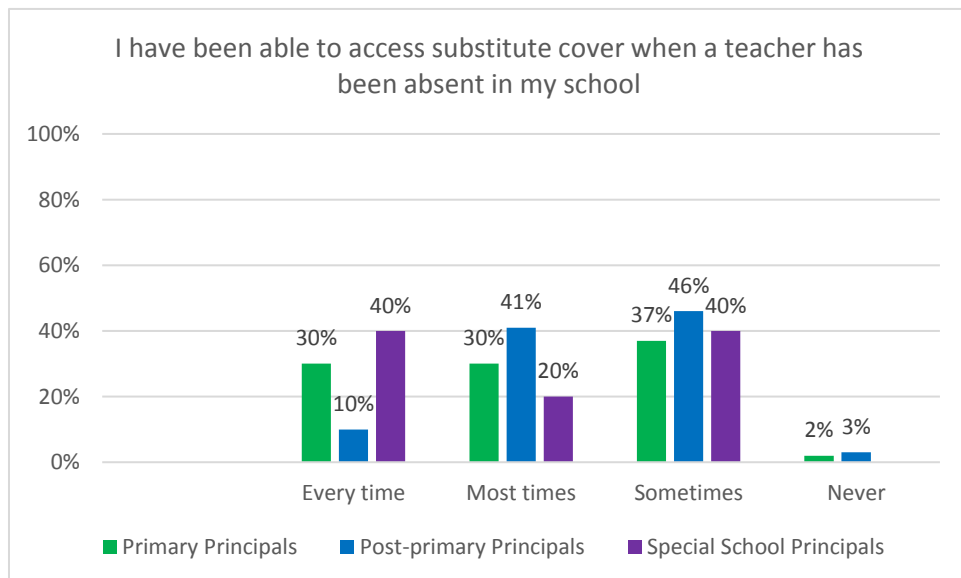
<sup>2</sup> The full range of guidance documents provided by the Department to support the re-opening of schools is available at the following links:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/>  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7acad-reopening-our-post-primary-schools/>



#### 4.1.6 Accessing substitute cover for absent teachers

Responses to the surveys indicated that between one-third and one-half of principals experienced difficulties accessing substitute cover for absent teachers.

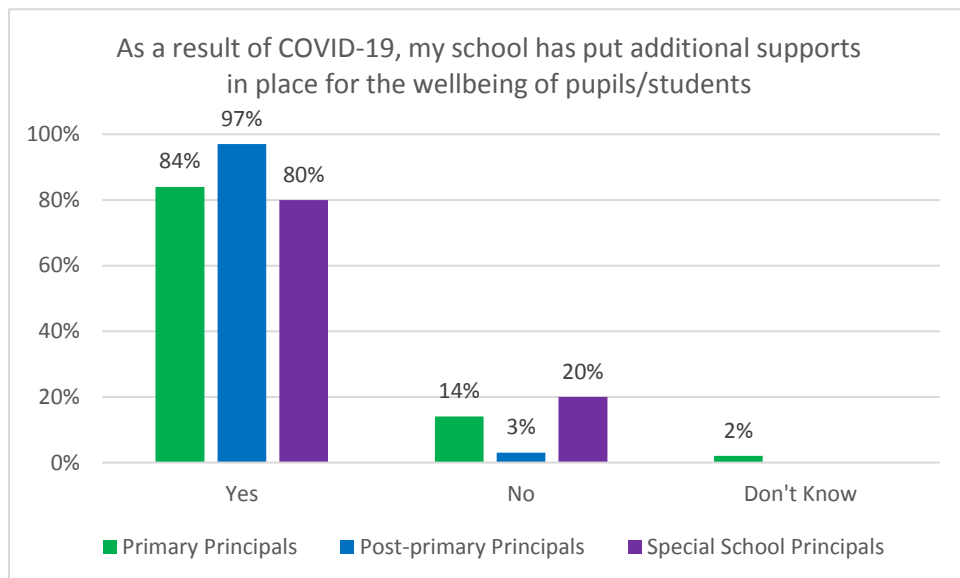


## 4.2 Wellbeing

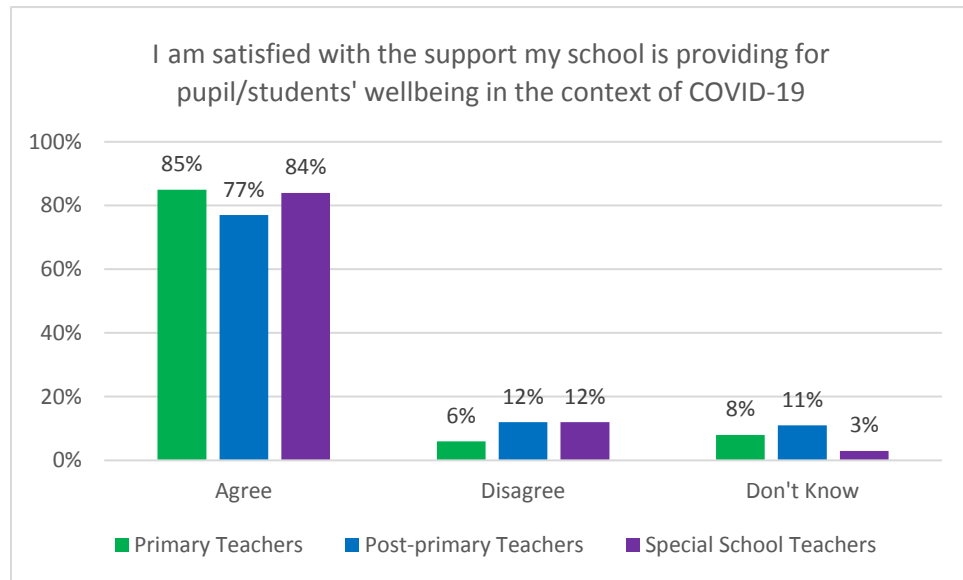
The importance of schools prioritising activities to support the wellbeing of pupils/students was emphasised in many of the guidance documents made available to schools in the preparation for the reopening in September. The evidence from this survey suggests that considerable success was achieved in this regard. Schools also made supports available for the wellbeing of staff.

### 4.2.1 Supports for learner wellbeing

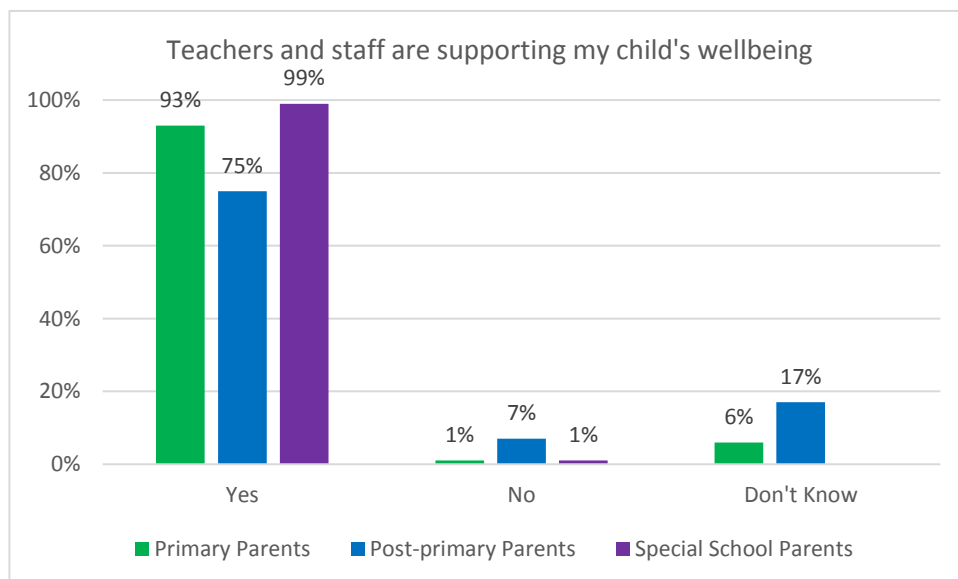
Most primary and special school principals and almost all post-primary principals responded that their schools had put additional supports in place for the wellbeing of pupils/students.



Most teachers expressed satisfaction with the support their school was providing for learners' wellbeing in the context of COVID-19.

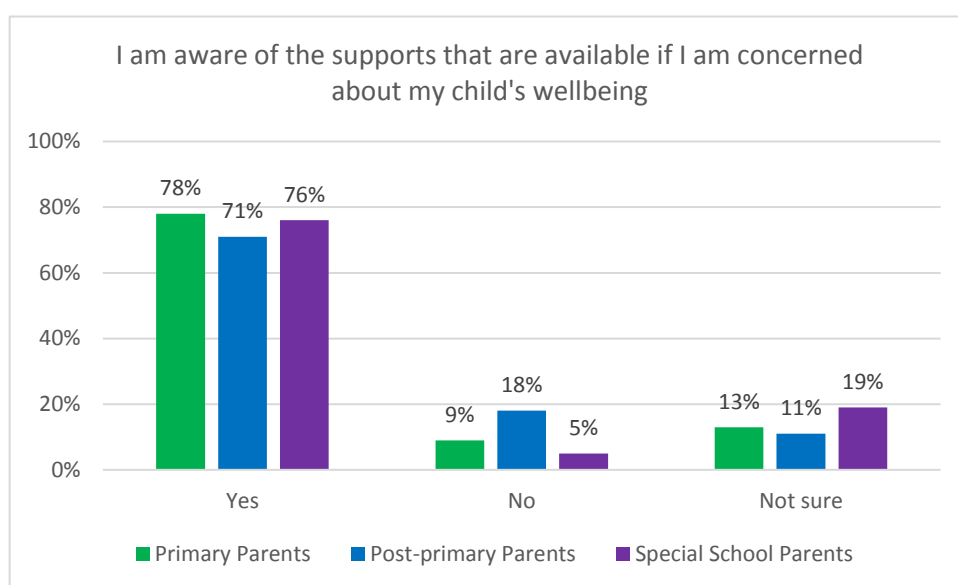


Parents also expressed high levels of satisfaction with the supports that schools were providing for their children's wellbeing. Almost all parents of pupils/students at primary level and in special schools agreed that teachers and staff were supporting their children's wellbeing, while three-quarters of all parents of students at post-primary level who responded agreed.

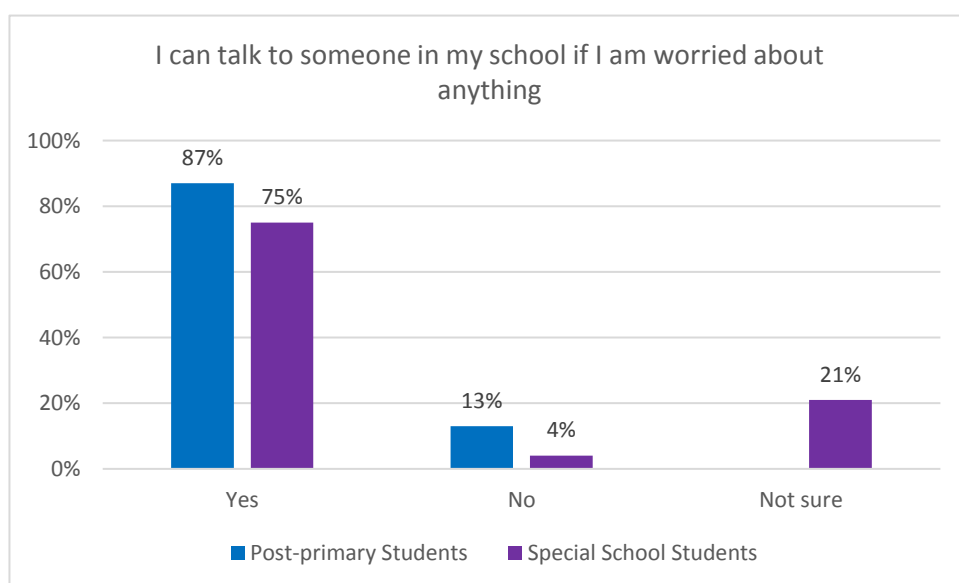


#### 4.2.2 Awareness of where to seek help

Among the supports available, the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) developed advice and resources for young people to manage and stay well during COVID-19. The majority of parents indicated that they were aware of the supports available if they were concerned about their child's wellbeing.

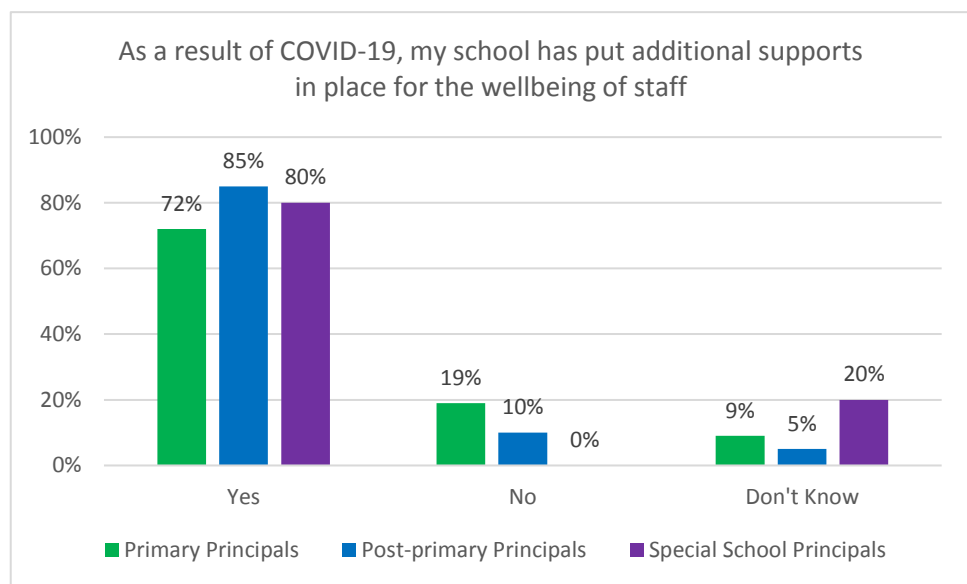


Most pupils/students confirmed that they knew where to turn for help if they required assistance. Most post-primary and special school students confirmed that there was someone in their school to whom they could speak if they were worried about anything.

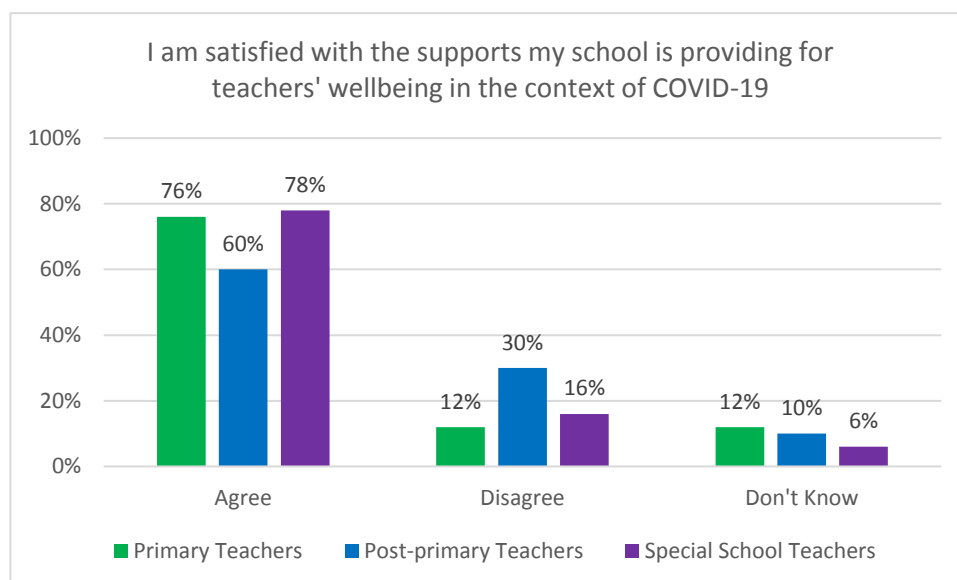


#### 4.2.3 Supports for staff wellbeing

From the advisory sessions with principals, the Inspectorate is aware that many schools have availed of the resources that have been specially prepared for school staffs by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) for use during COVID-19. Principals who responded to the survey indicated that a majority of primary schools and most post-primary schools and special schools had put additional supports in place for the wellbeing of staff.

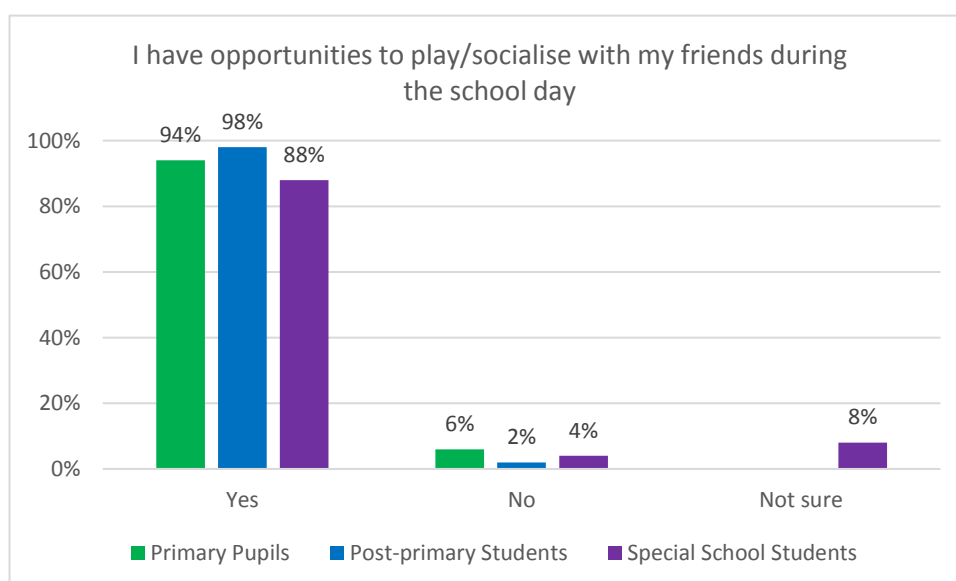


The majority of teachers were satisfied with the levels of supports their schools had in place to provide for teachers' wellbeing in the context of COVID-19.



#### 4.2.4 Opportunities for learners to socialise

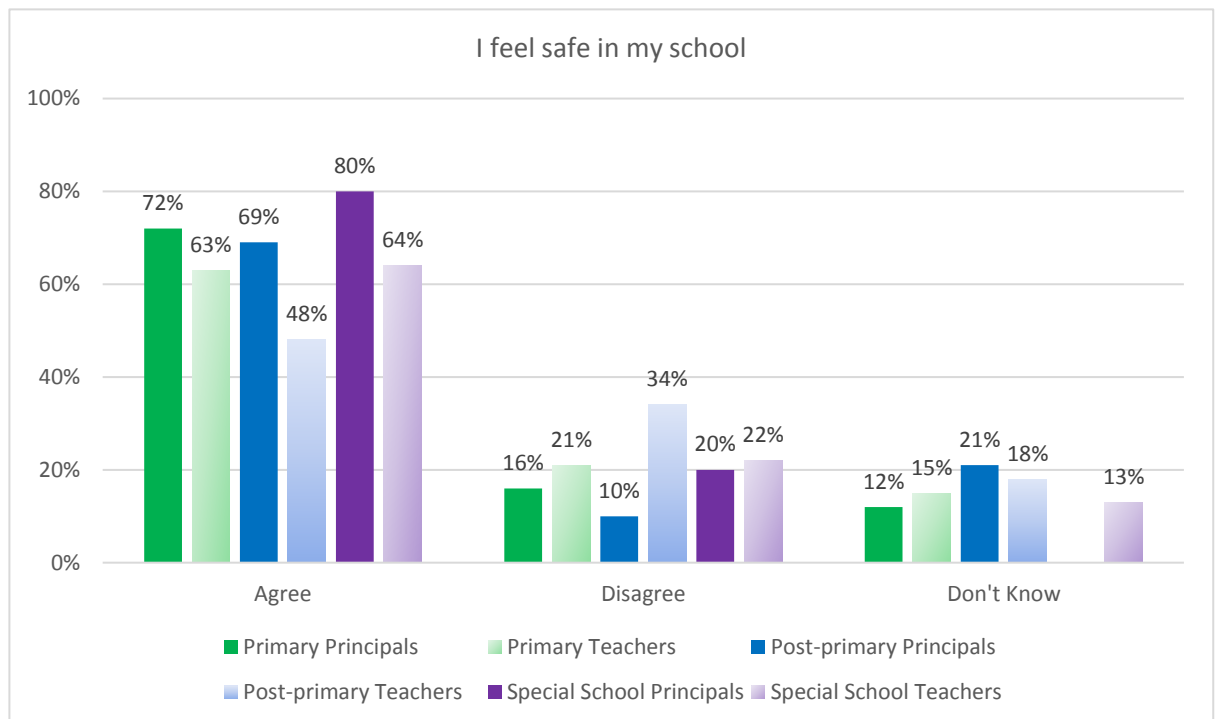
Following the prolonged closure of schools, parents, teachers and learners themselves agreed that one of the main advantages of the reopening of schools was the opportunity for children to meet with and to socialise with their friends again. The vast majority of learners reported that since they returned to school in September, they had opportunities to play/socialise with their friends during the school day.





#### 4.2.5 Schools as safe working environments

As a result of the implementation of all the COVID-19 measure in schools, the majority of principals and teachers indicated that they felt safe in school. However, the responses also indicated that less than half of post-primary teachers who responded felt safe in school with some levels of disagreement and uncertainty about safety across all school sectors.

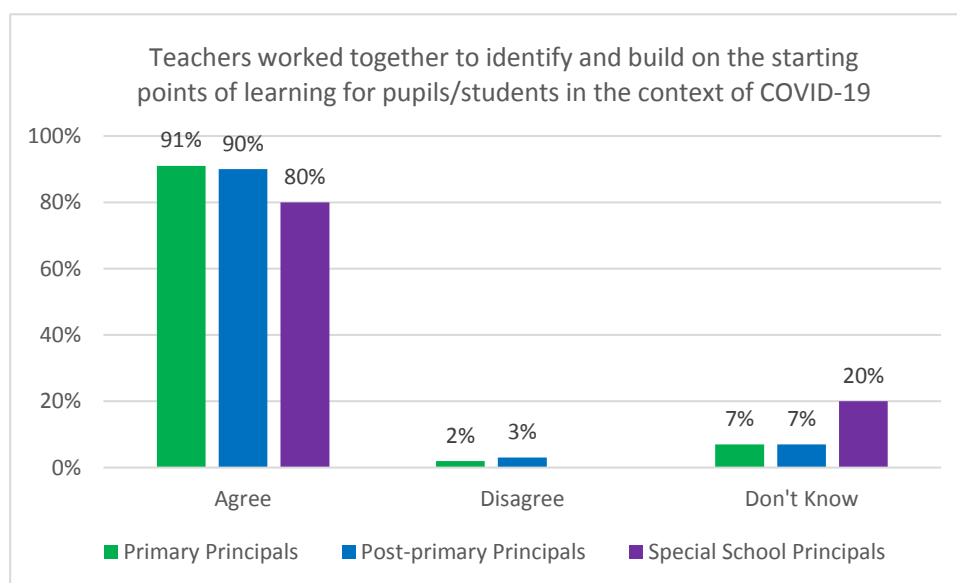


## 4.3 Teaching and Learning

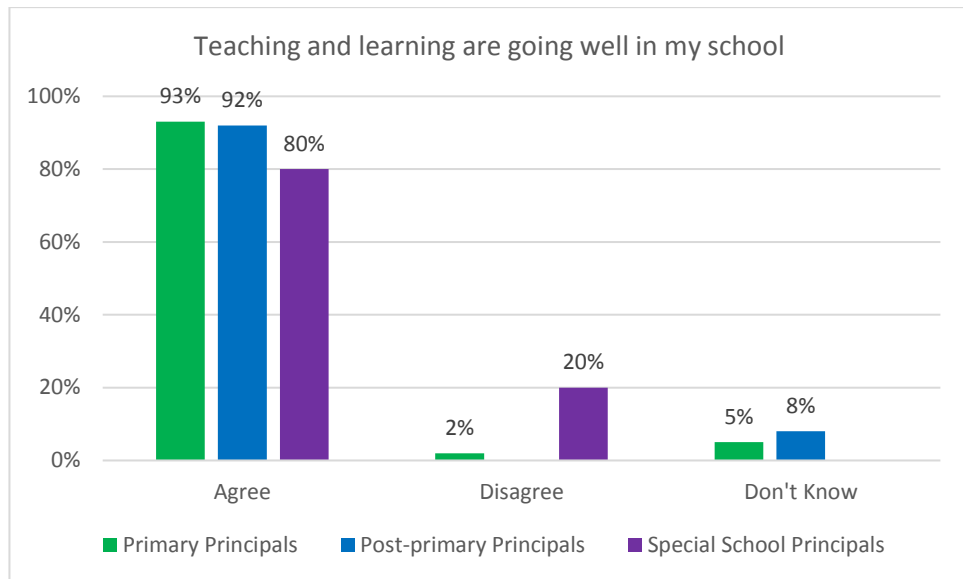
The survey findings indicate that teaching and learning went very successfully when schools reopened, and teachers were happy with how their work was going in classrooms and lessons. As a result of the changes necessary in schools due to COVID-19, teachers had to adapt and change the ways in which they operated in classrooms. Of particular note in this regard were the positive findings on the availability and use of digital technologies in schools. Teachers and parents were satisfied that learning was going well. Most primary pupils and special school students and the majority of post-primary students were enjoying their learning experiences and were satisfied with how their learning was going.

### 4.3.1 Overall Teaching and Learning

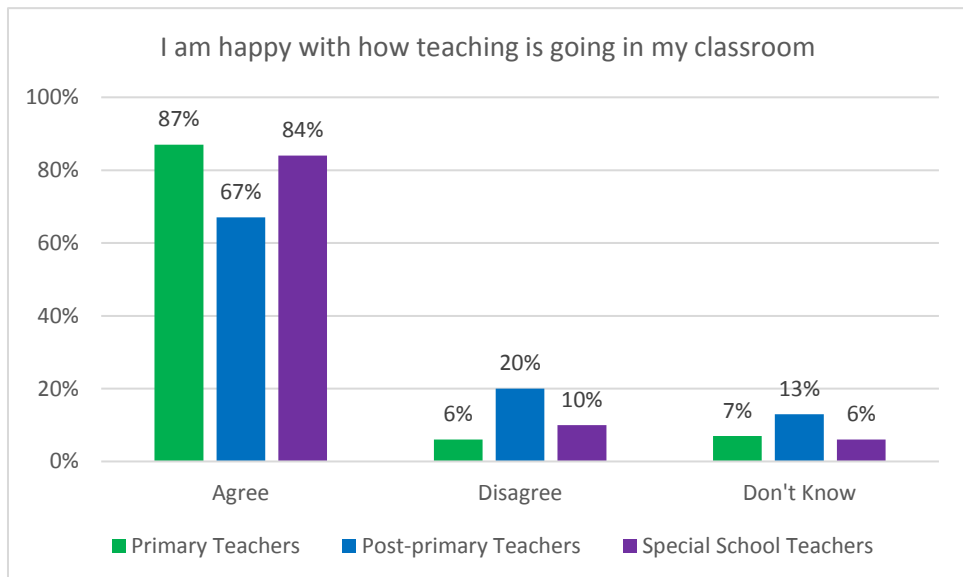
When schools reopened in September 2020, teachers were alert to where their pupils/students were at in terms of their learning. Principals reported that teachers worked together to identify and build on these starting points of learning for pupils and students in the context of COVID-19.



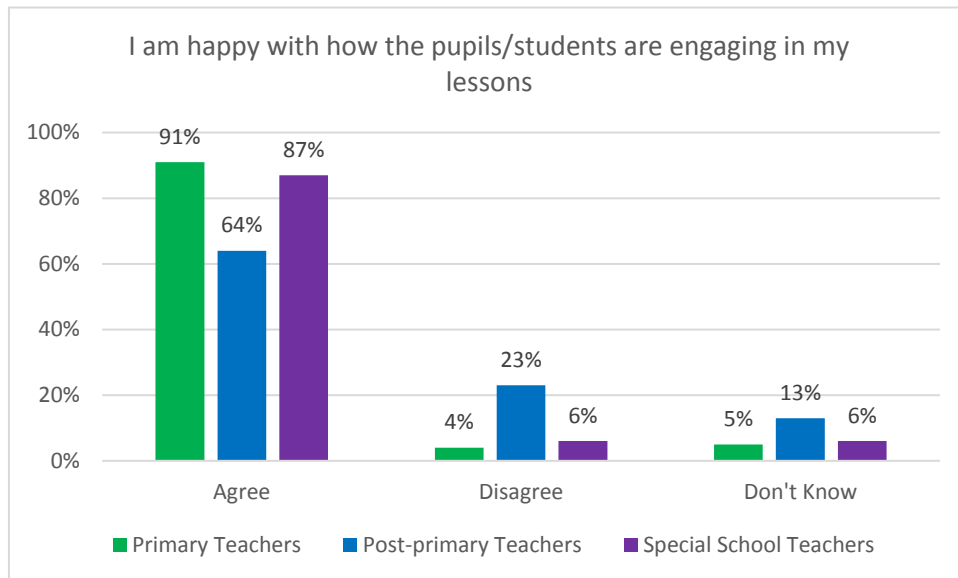
As a result, almost all primary and post-primary principals and most special school principals indicated that teaching and learning were going well in their schools.



Most primary and special school teachers and the majority of post-primary teachers were happy with how teaching was going in their classrooms and lessons.

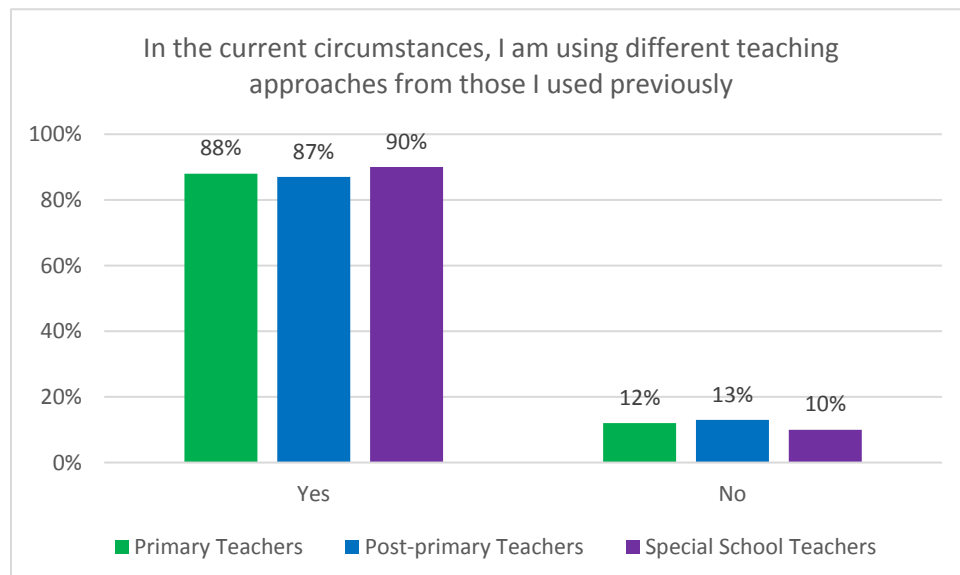


Furthermore, a significant majority of primary and special school teachers were happy about the levels of engagement of pupils and students in their lessons.

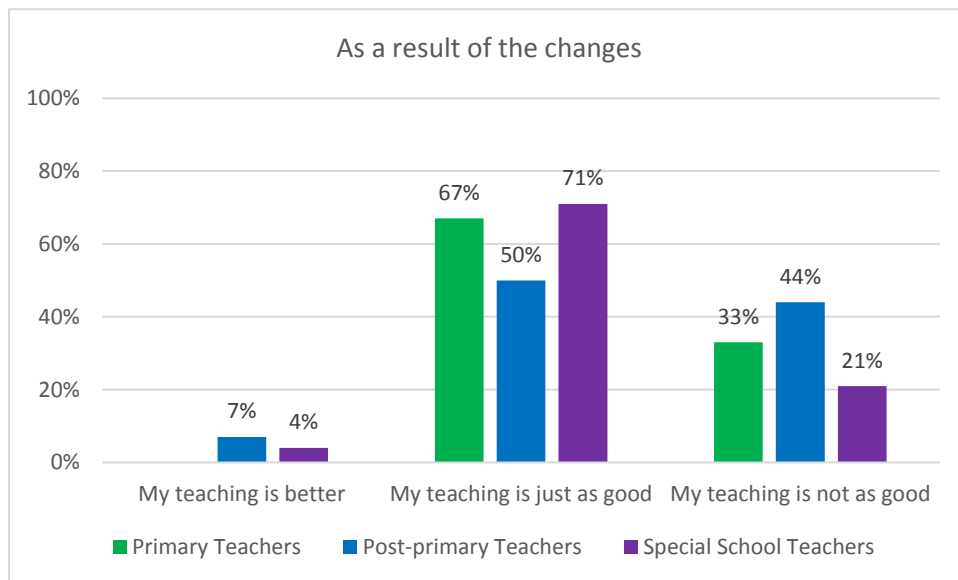


#### 4.3.2 Teaching approaches

The requirement to observe social distancing imposes direct constraints on schools and classrooms and, as a consequence, many teachers had to change aspects of how they teach. Most teachers indicated that they were using different teaching approaches from ones they used previously.

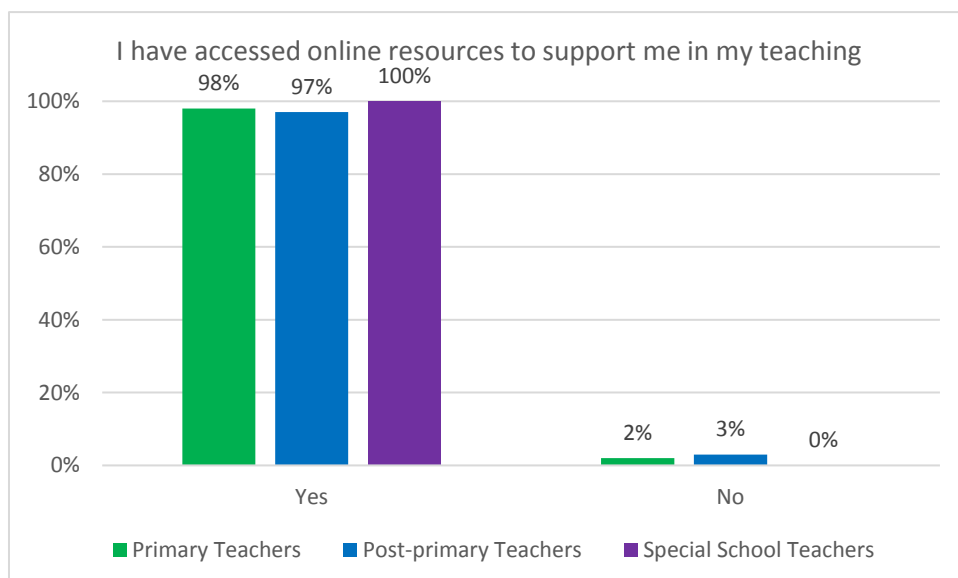


The majority of teachers felt confident that this did not impact adversely on the quality of their teaching. There were some, however, who felt that their teaching was not as good as a result of the changes.



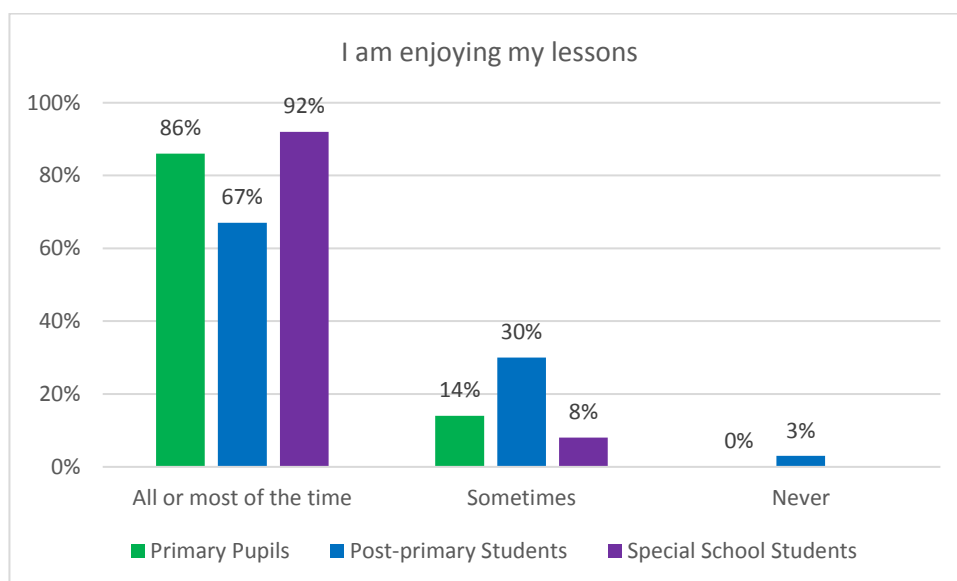
#### 4.3.3 Supports for Teaching

Almost all teachers in each sector indicated that they had accessed online resources to support their teaching.

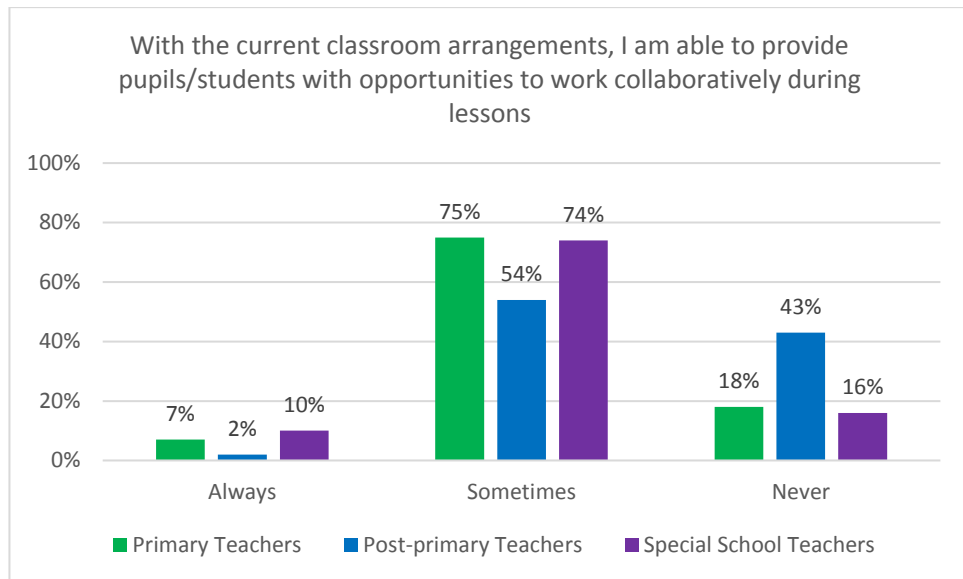


#### 4.3.4 Learning experiences

Most learners in primary and special schools and the majority of students in post-primary schools indicated that they were enjoying their lessons ‘all’ or ‘most’ of the time.

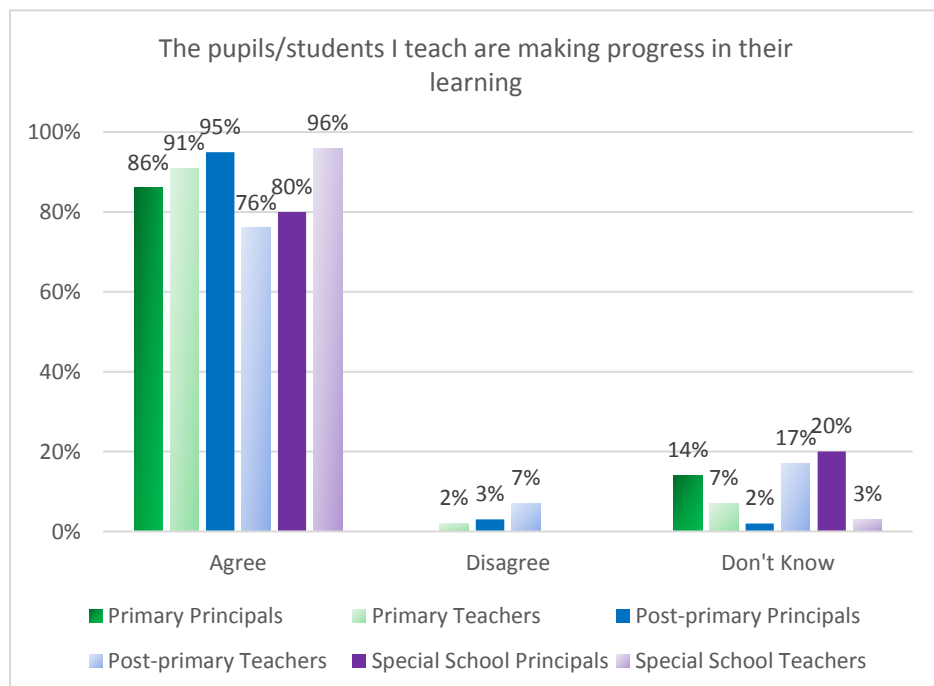


Curriculum guidance at primary level and programme guidance at post-primary level suggest that planned learning experiences should provide opportunities for social interaction and collaboration between pupils/students. Most primary teachers and special school teachers agreed that the classroom arrangements following re-opening allowed them to provide learners with opportunities to work collaboratively during lessons. While more than half of post-primary teachers indicated that they were able to continue to provide opportunities for their students to work collaboratively during lessons, a significant minority indicated that they could not provide such opportunities.

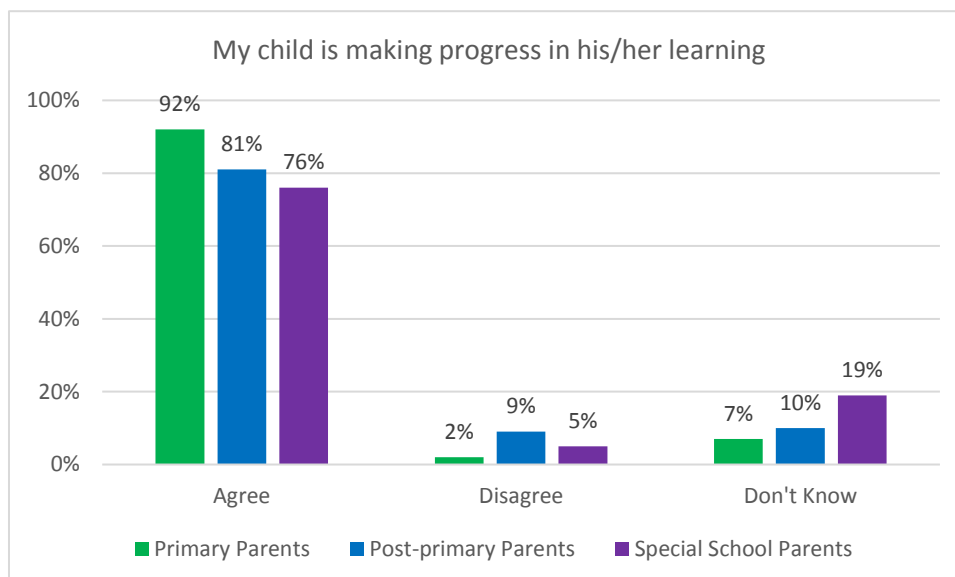


#### 4.3.5 Learner outcomes

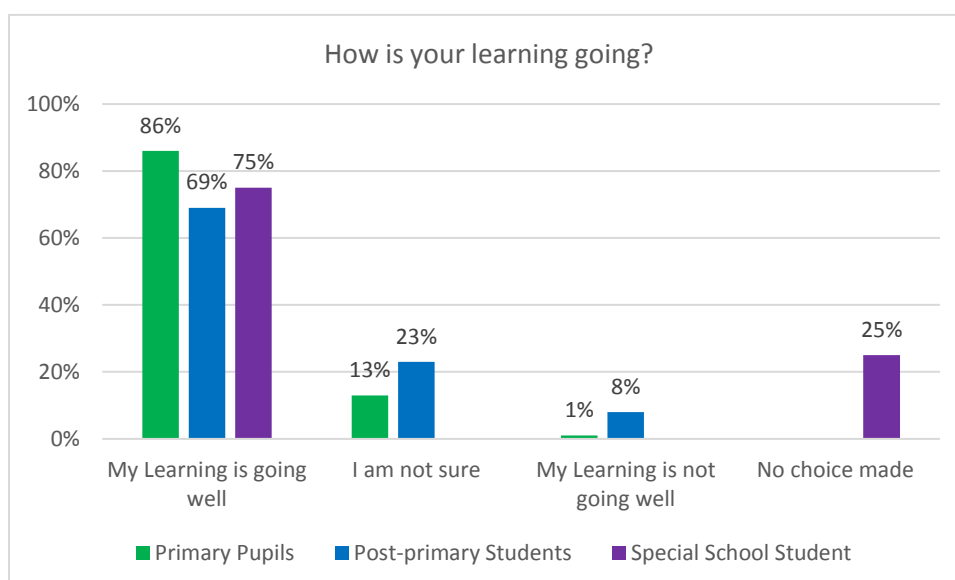
Overall, principals, teachers, parents and learners agreed that learning was progressing well. Most principals who responded indicated that the learners in their schools were making progress in their learning. Almost all teachers at primary level and in special schools, and three-quarters of teachers at post-primary level agreed that the learners in their schools were making progress in their learning.



This was further substantiated by parents. Most parents of children at post-primary level and almost all parents at primary level agreed that their children were making progress in their learning.



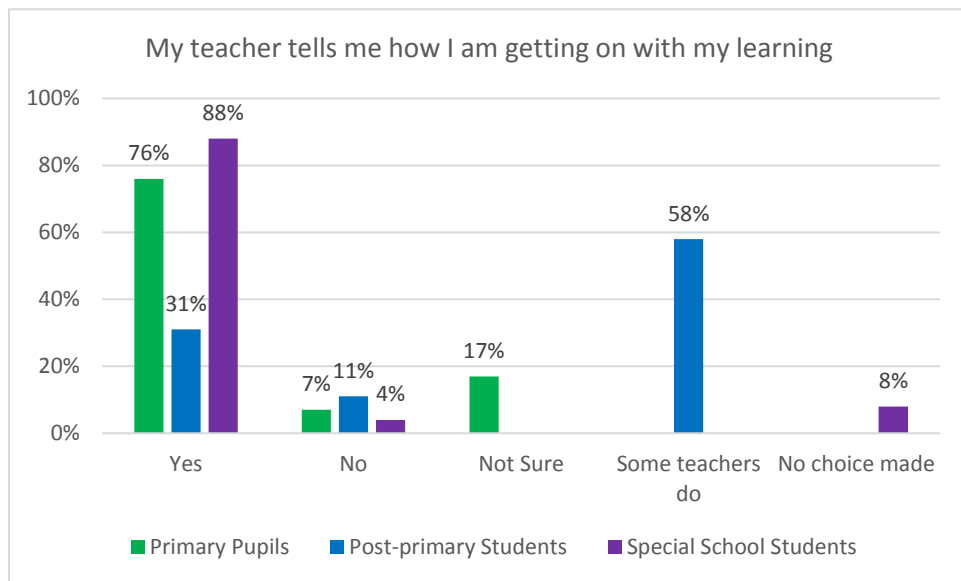
Learners, too, agreed that they were getting on well with their learning, with most primary pupils, three-quarters of special school students and the majority of post-primary students in agreement. Just over one-fifth of post-primary learners indicated that they were unsure how they were getting on with their learning. When the cohort of students preparing for State examinations in 2021 was examined, it was found that one-fifth of sixth-year students felt that their learning was not going well while a further quarter were unsure about how their learning was going.





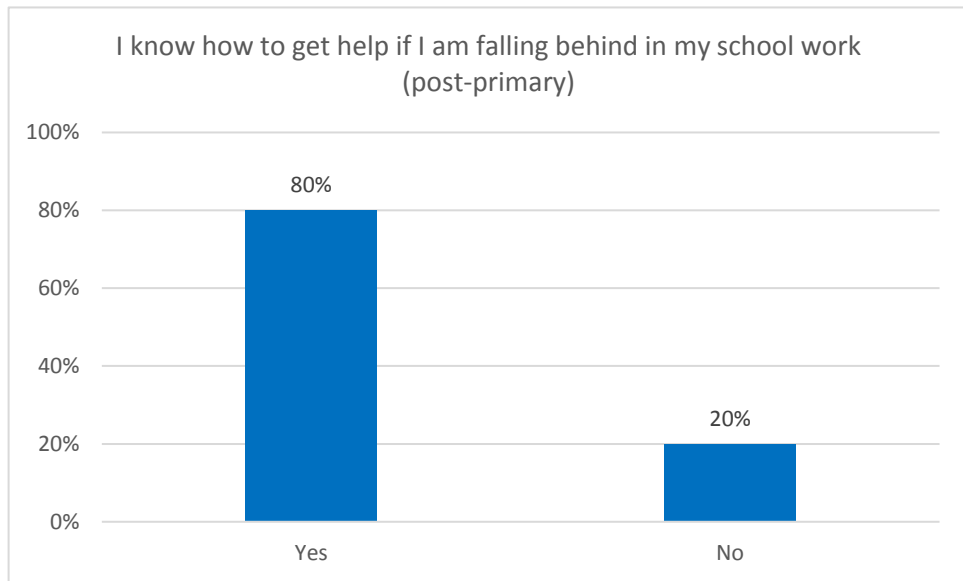
#### 4.3.6 Feedback on Learning

It is important that learners receive supportive, constructive and timely feedback from their teachers on how their learning is progressing. Three-quarters of pupils in primary schools agreed that their teachers were letting them know how they were getting on with their learning. Most students in special schools indicated that their teachers were giving them feedback on how they were getting on with their learning.



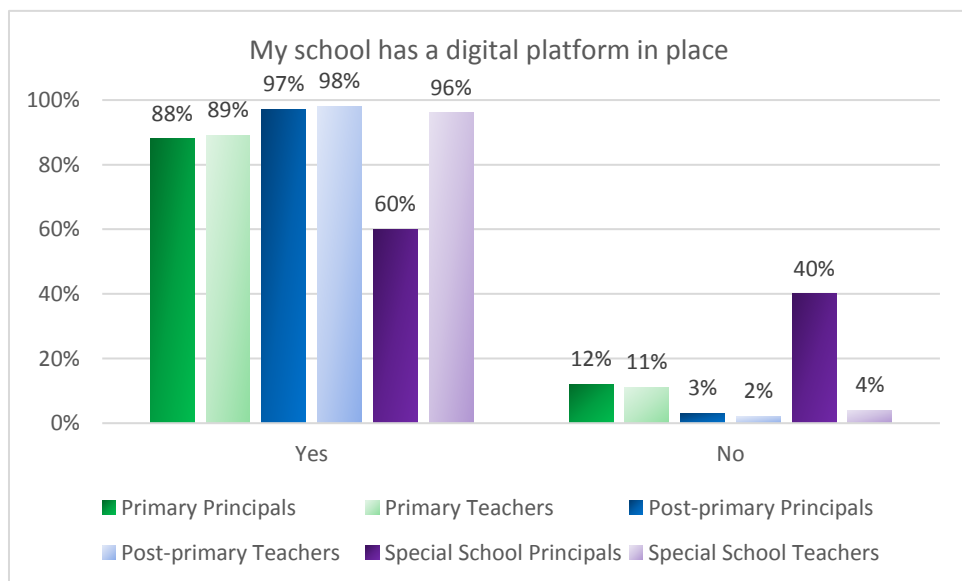
#### 4.3.7 Supports for Learners

The survey findings strongly suggest that schools were providing a great deal of supports to students to help with their learning needs. In post-primary schools, most students agreed that they could obtain assistance if they considered that they were falling behind with their learning.



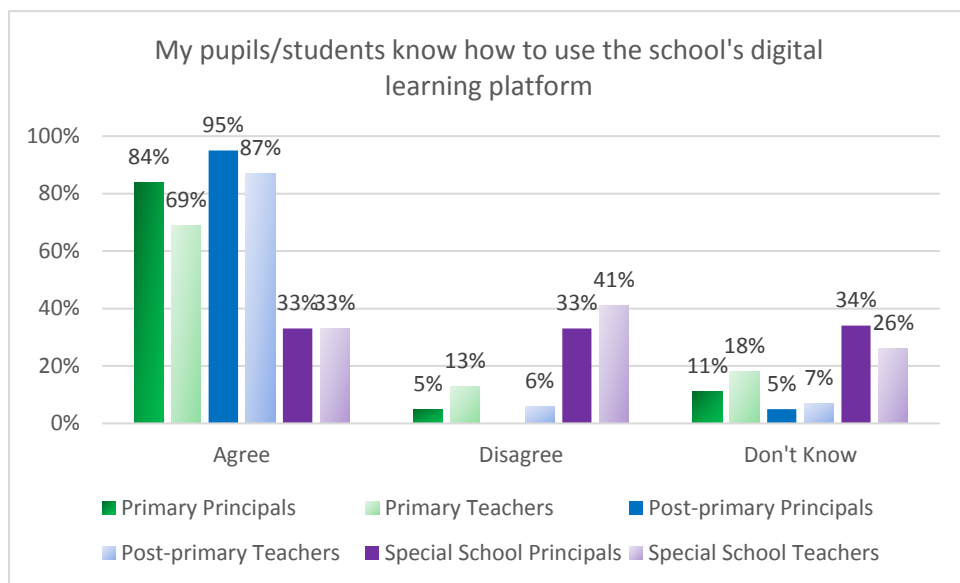
#### 4.3.8 Availability and use of digital technologies

The surveys indicated very positive findings with regard to the availability and use of digital technologies in schools. Almost all principals and teachers indicated that their schools had a digital learning platform in place to support teaching and learning.

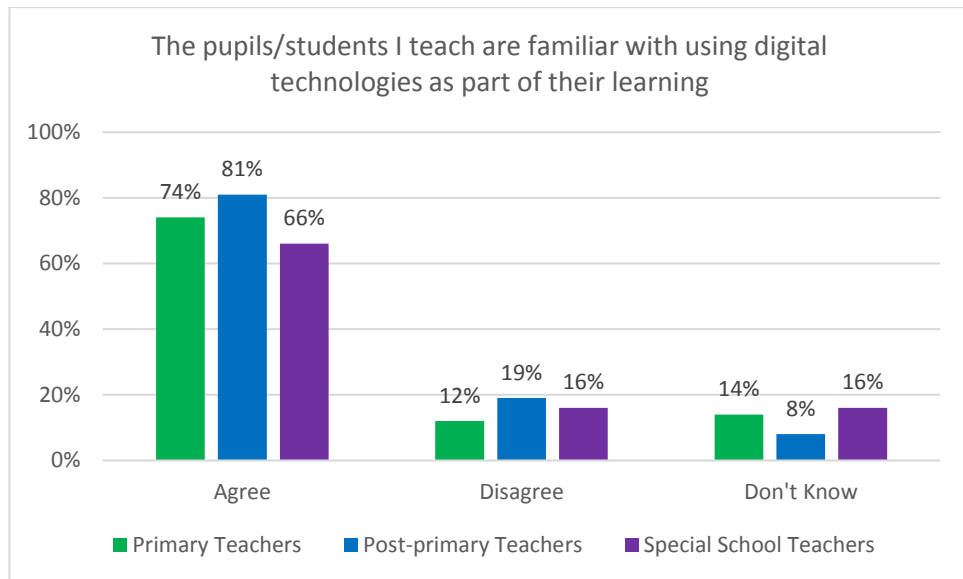


Principals and teachers strongly agreed that there was widespread knowledge across the sectors of how to use the schools' digital platforms.

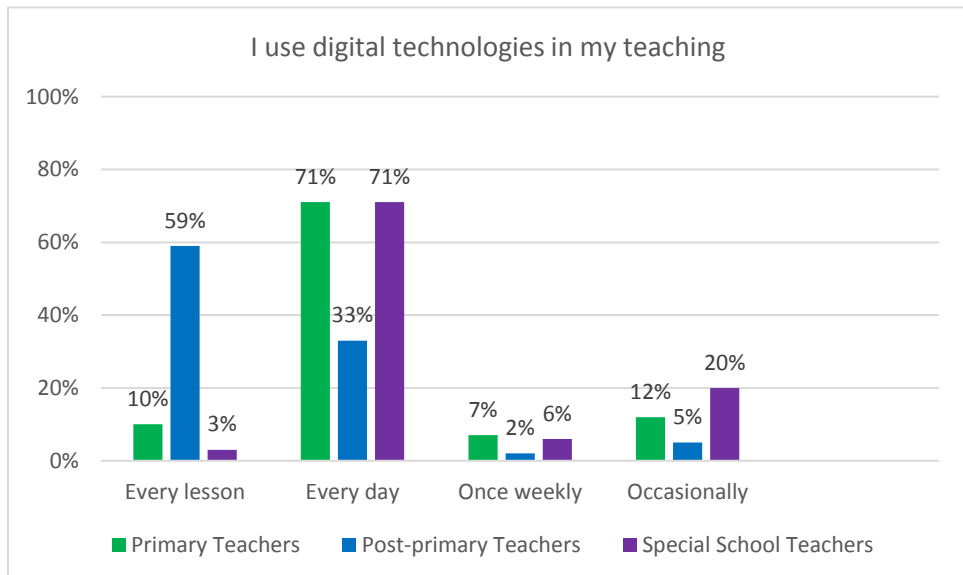
Primary and post-primary principals and teachers agreed that their pupils/students knew how to use the schools' digital platforms. However, there was a higher level of disagreement about this among principals and teachers in special schools.



The majority of primary teachers and most post-primary teachers agreed that learners in their class were familiar with using digital technologies as part of their learning.

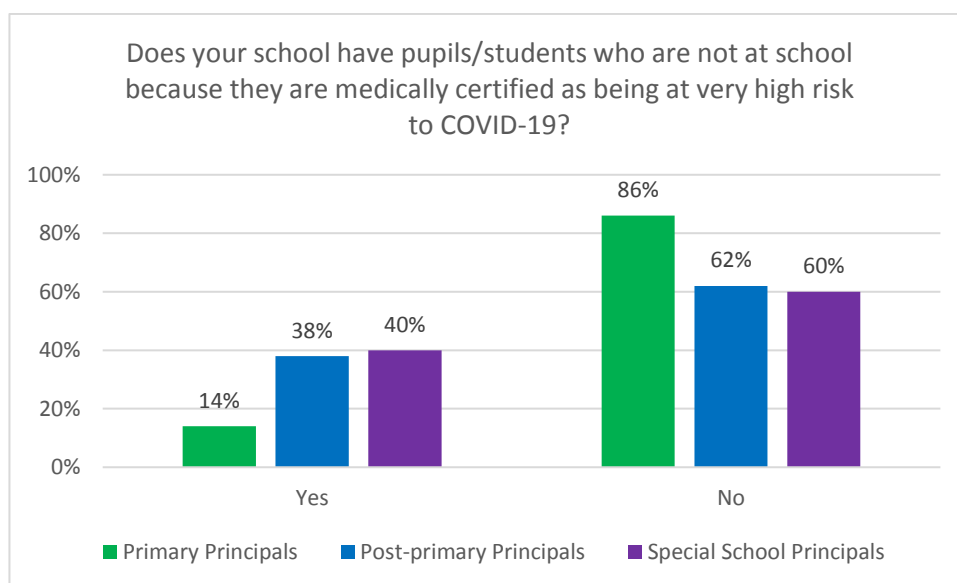


Teachers across all sectors indicated that they were using digital technologies regularly in their teaching. Three-quarters of teachers in special schools indicated that they were using digital technologies in every lesson or every day. Most primary teachers and almost all post-primary teachers agreed that they used digital technologies either in every lesson or every day.



#### 4.3.9 Arrangements for learners at very high risk

Some students were unable to return to school because they were medically certified as being at very high risk from contracting COVID-19. A small number of principals of primary schools reported that they had some pupils who could not return for this reason. The number was much higher at post-primary level where almost two-fifths of post-primary principals reported that they had students who were not at school because they were medically certified as being very vulnerable to COVID-19.



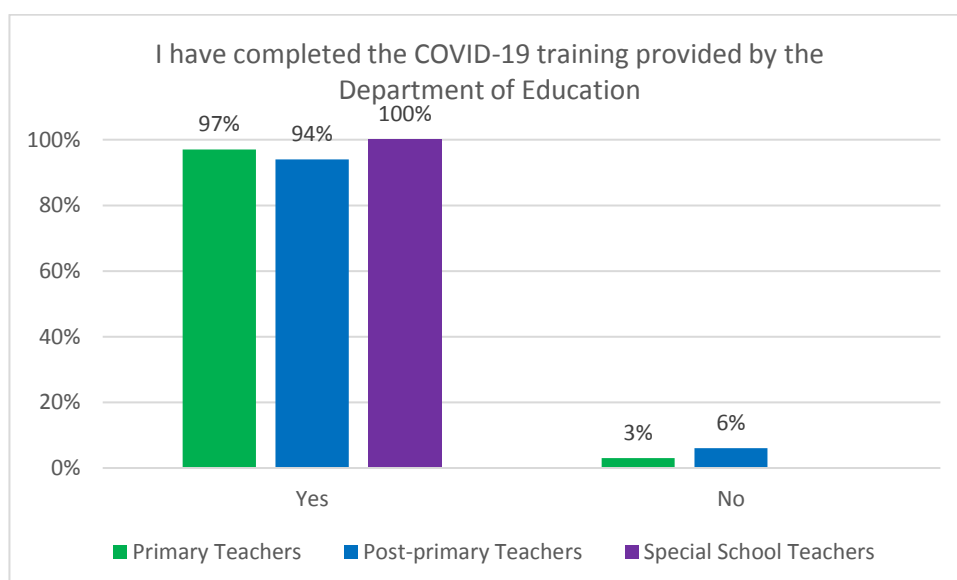
Supports for this cohort of pupils/students are outlined in documents produced by the Department of Education, and all primary principals and almost all post-primary principals with very high risk students agreed that they had measures in place to ensure that these students could continue their learning. At primary level, principals reported that this support was mainly provided by class teachers and, at post-primary level, it was mainly provided by subject teachers.

## 4.4 Implementation of COVID-19 measures

The safe and sustainable operation of schools is a national priority and schools are required to adopt practices to minimise the risk of COVID-19 for staff, learners and the wider community. Responses to the surveys showed that in the September-October 2020 period, schools had adopted almost all the required practices and regulations. There was widespread cooperation among teachers, pupils/students and parents with schools' arrangements regarding COVID-19. Principals and teachers attended training courses provided by the Department of Education and were aware of the necessary measures they should take to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in their schools.

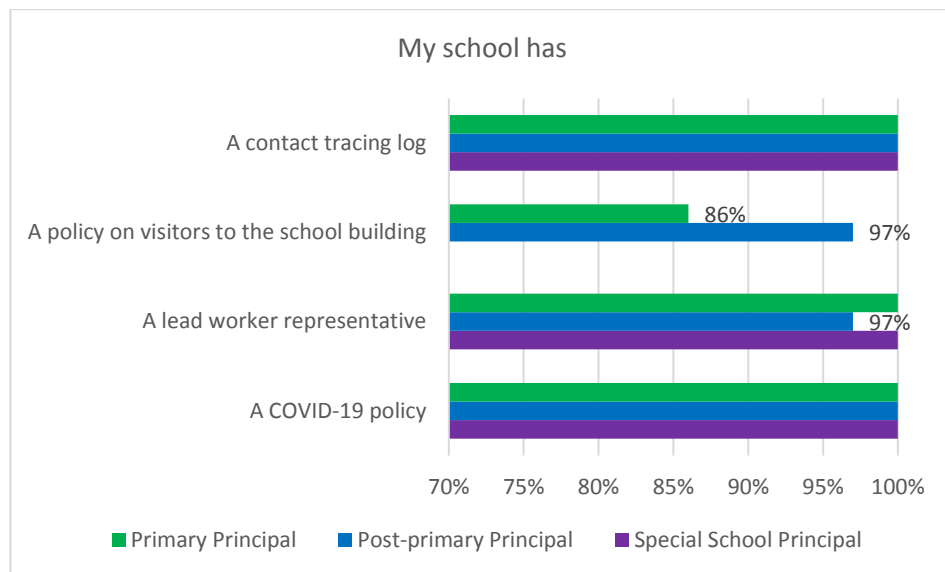
### 4.4.1 Training

Almost all teachers in all schools indicated that they had undertaken COVID-19 training provided by the Department of Education.

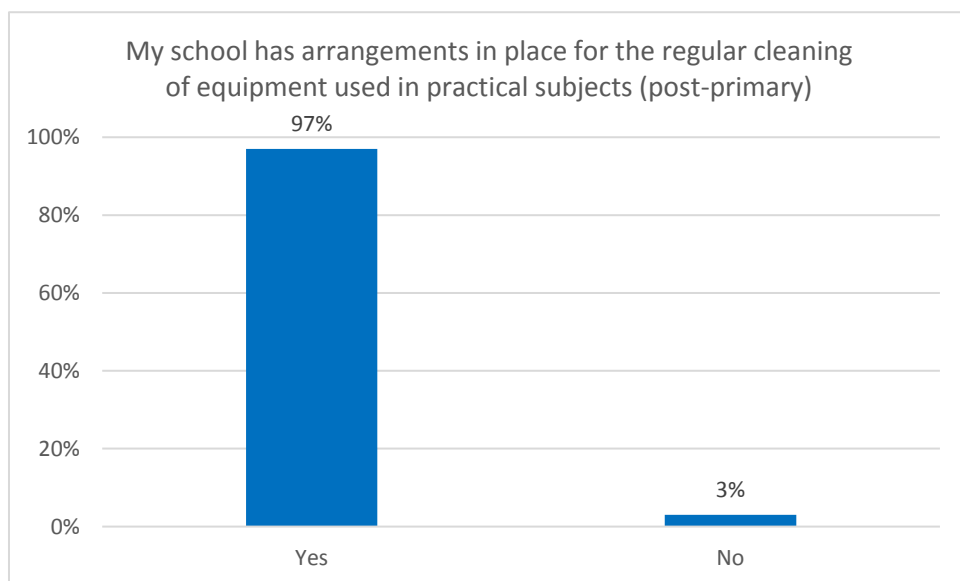


### 4.4.2 Policies and procedures

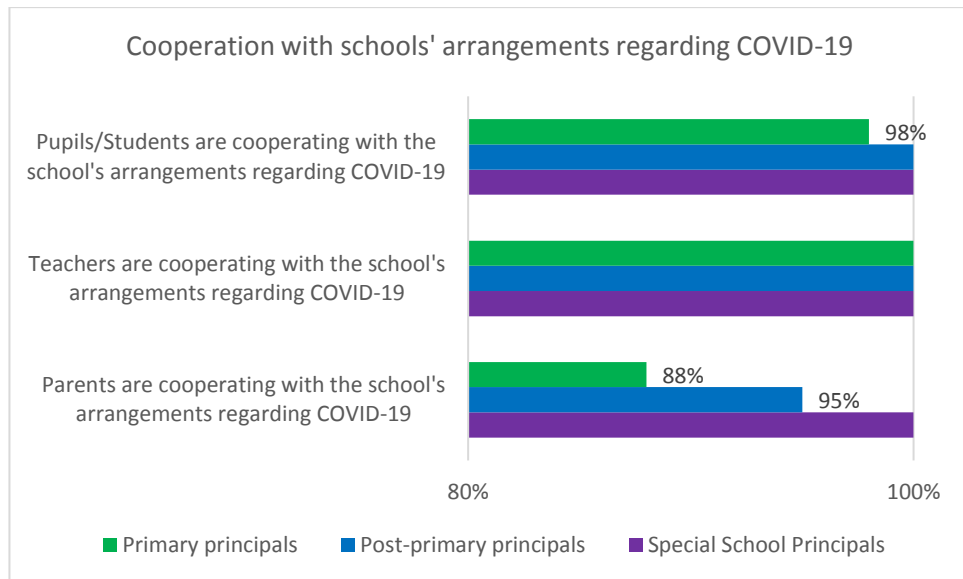
The surveys indicated that there was, during the re-opening phase, consistent implementation in schools of policies and procedures to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 among staff and pupils/students. All primary school principals and teachers and all post-primary principals and almost all post-primary teachers reported that their schools had a COVID-19 policy and that their school had appointed a lead worker representative. All principals reported that they maintained a contact tracing log. Most primary principals, almost all post-primary principals and the majority of special school principals reported that their school had a policy on visitors to the school building.



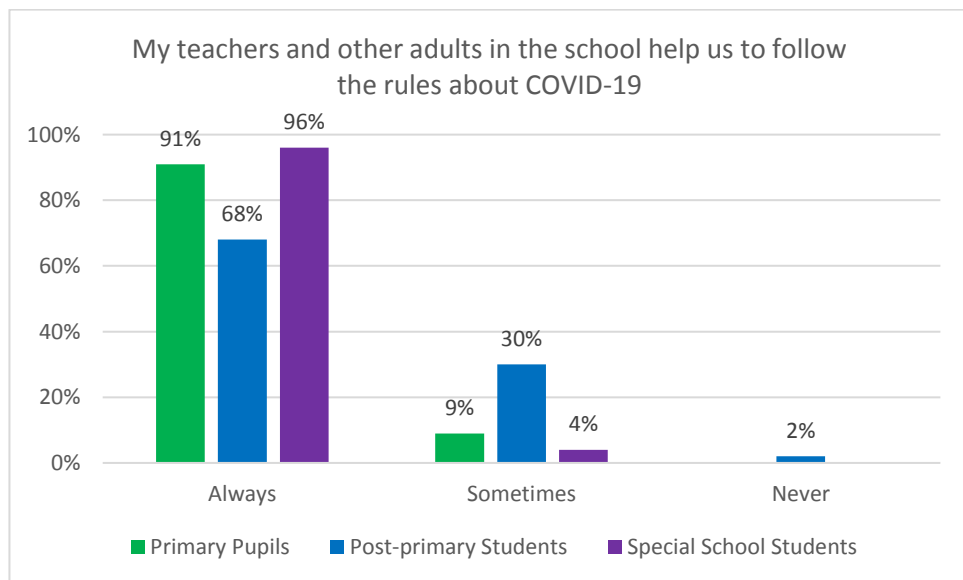
In post-primary schools, almost all principals reported that their school had arrangements in place for the regular cleaning of equipment used in practical subjects.



Principals agreed that there was widespread cooperation with the schools' arrangements regarding COVID-19 among pupils and students, teachers and parents.

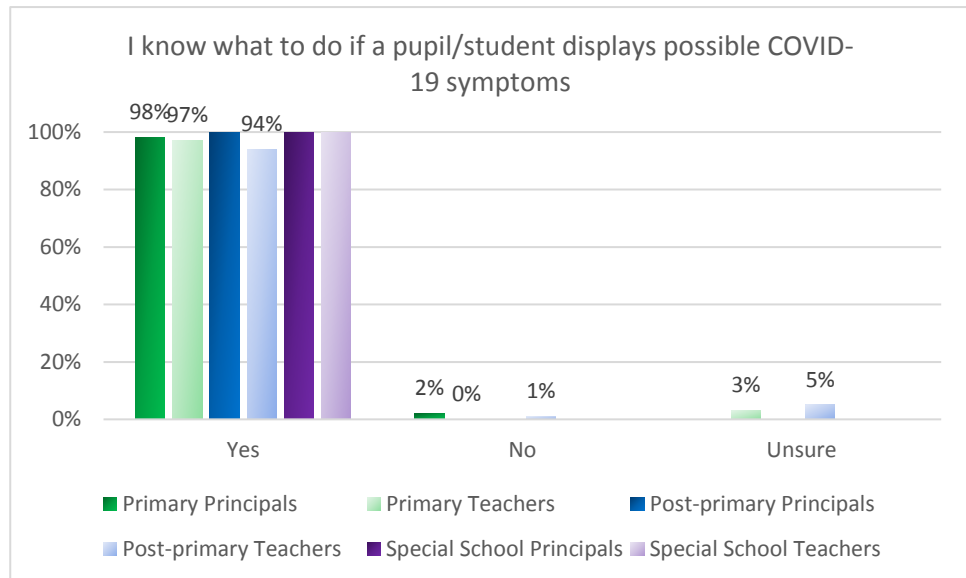


Almost all learners agreed that their teachers and other adults in school helped them to follow the school rules regarding the prevention of the spread of COVID-19.

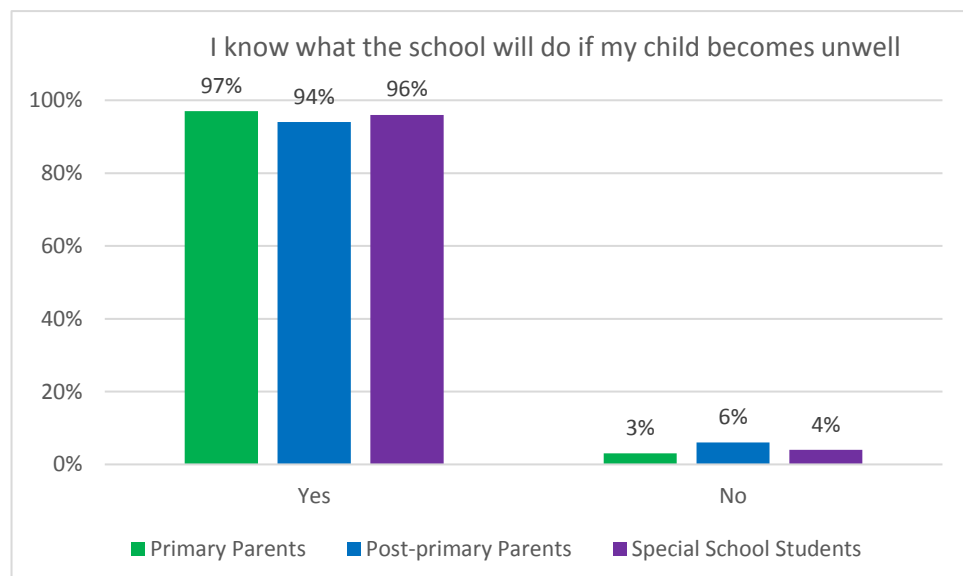




Almost all principals and teachers knew what measures to take if a pupil/student in their school displayed possible COVID-19 symptoms.

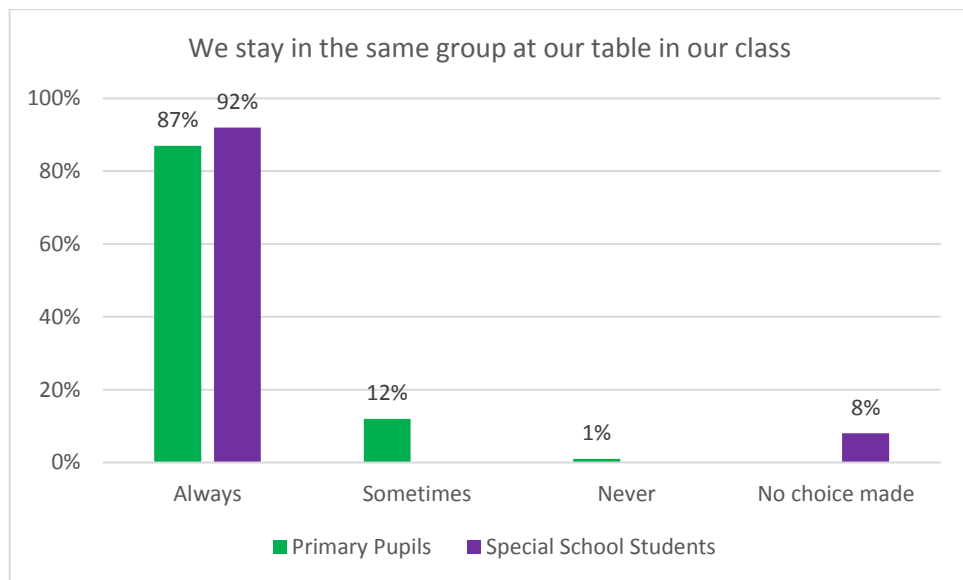


Almost all parents were confident that the school would know what to do if their child became unwell.

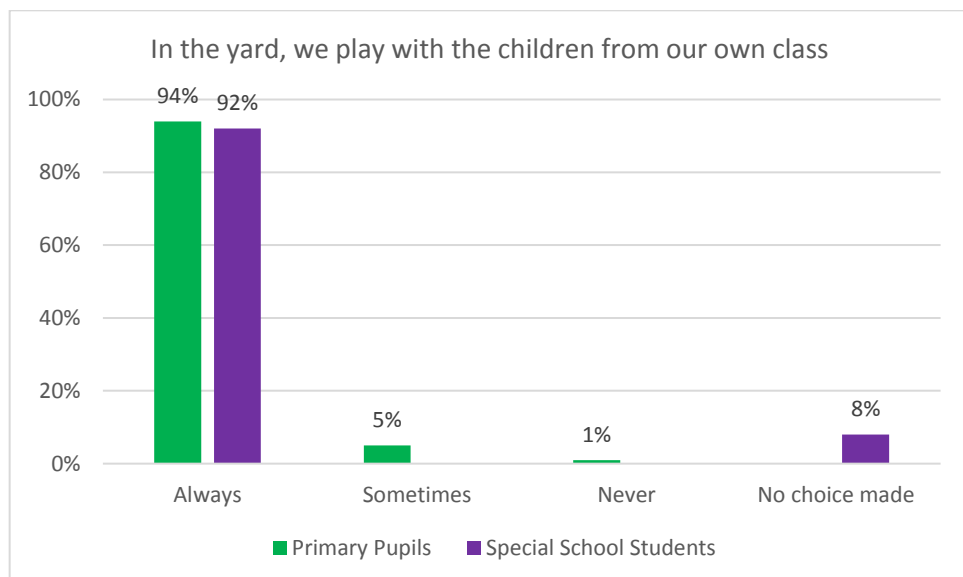


Primary and special schools were advised to create class bubbles which would allow classes to stay apart from other classes as much as possible as well as smaller discrete

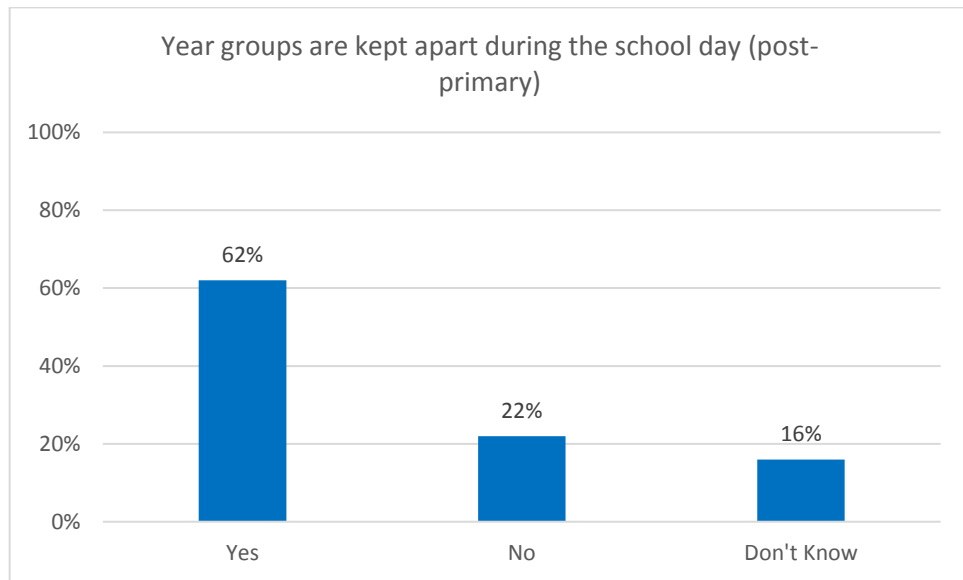
groups within classrooms. In line with this, most primary school pupils and special school students who responded to the survey agreed that they always stayed in the same group at their table in the classroom.



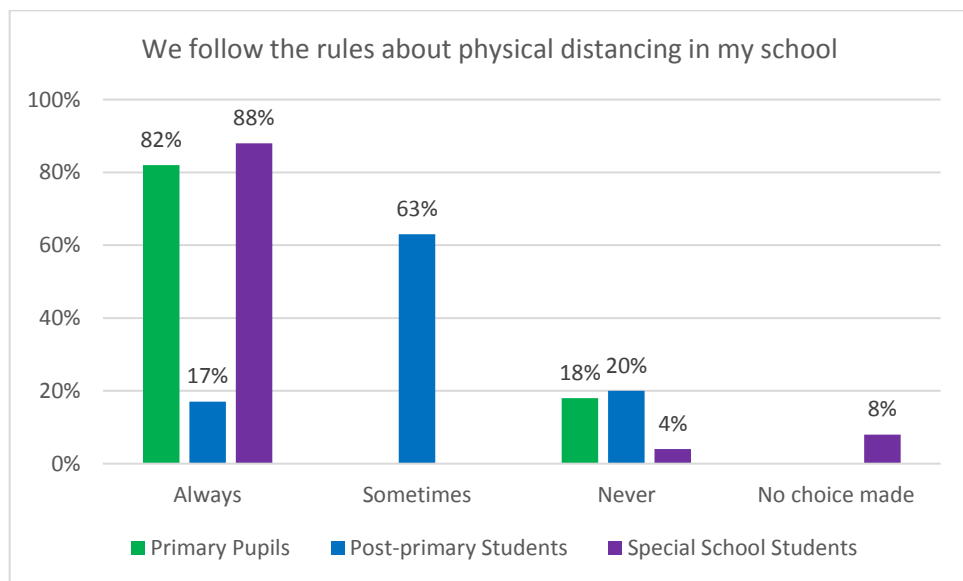
Primary pupils and students from special schools also agreed that they played with children from their own classroom in the yard.



The majority of post-primary students agreed that year groups were kept apart during the school day.

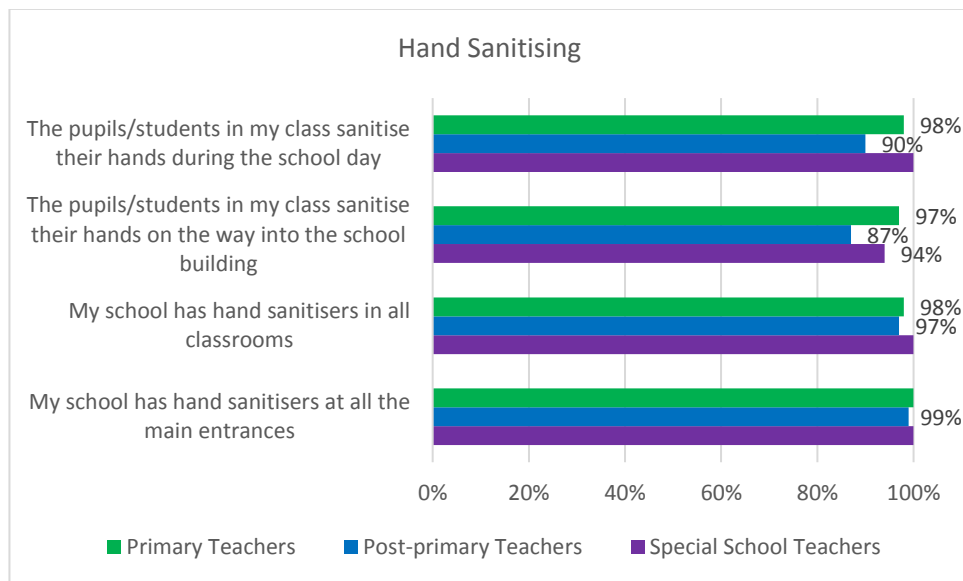


There was overall agreement between pupils/students that most people in their school generally followed the school rules about preventing the spread of COVID-19 and observed social distancing. Adherence to social distancing appeared to be more habitual among primary school pupils and students in special schools.

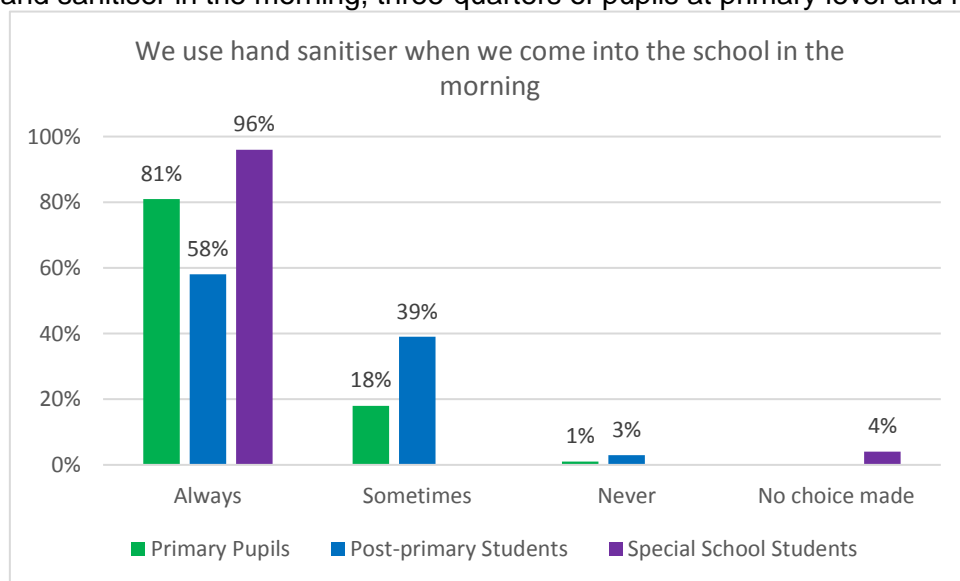


### 4.4.3 Hand sanitising

All teachers agreed that their school had hand sanitisers at the main entrance and almost all agreed that hand sanitisers were available in classrooms. Almost all teachers in primary and most teachers in post-primary schools indicated that the learners in their class sanitised their hands on the way into the school building and sanitised their hands regularly during the school day.



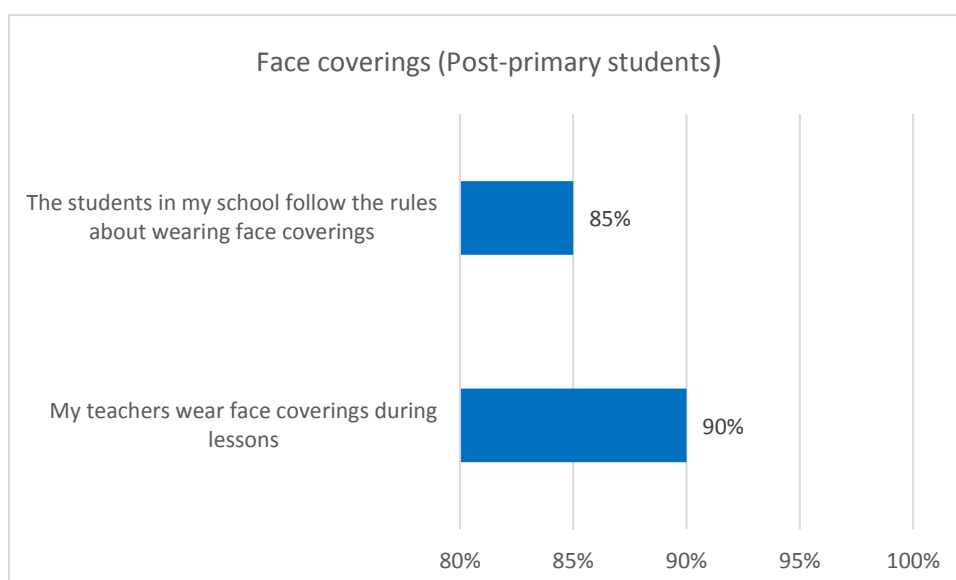
This was further confirmed by learners. At primary level, the majority of pupils agreed that pupils in their classroom always used hand sanitiser when they came into the school building while more than half of all post-primary students agreed. In addition to using hand sanitiser in the morning, three-quarters of pupils at primary level and more



than half of all post-primary students agreed that they always used hand sanitiser during the day.

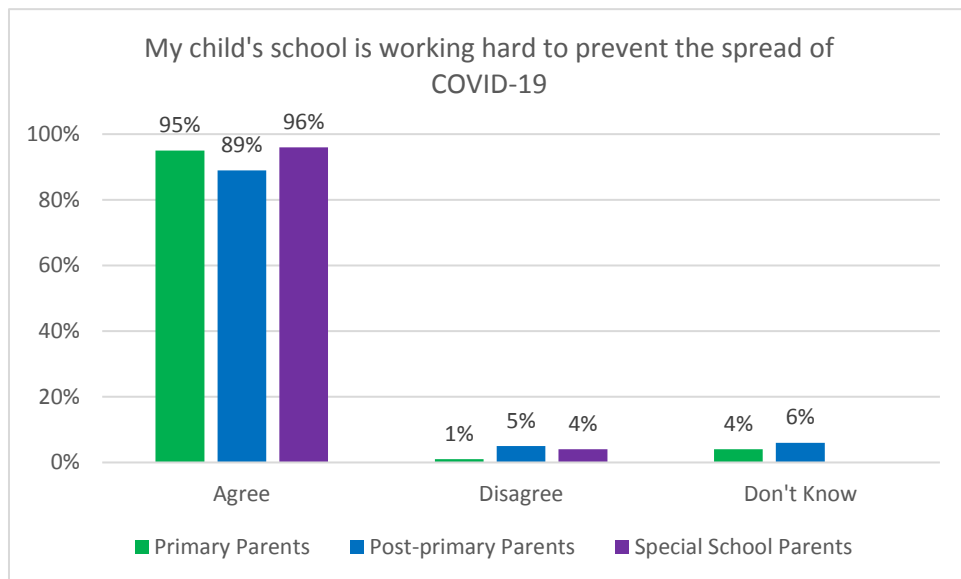
#### 4.4.4 Face coverings

At post-primary level where the wearing of face coverings is mandatory, all post-primary students indicated that they knew the rules regarding the wearing of face coverings, and almost all agreed that students in their school generally kept the rules regarding the wearing of face coverings. All post-primary parents agreed that their child was required by the school to wear a face covering while in school and most post-primary teachers reported that students followed the rules about wearing face coverings. Most students at post-primary level agreed that their teachers wore face coverings during lessons.

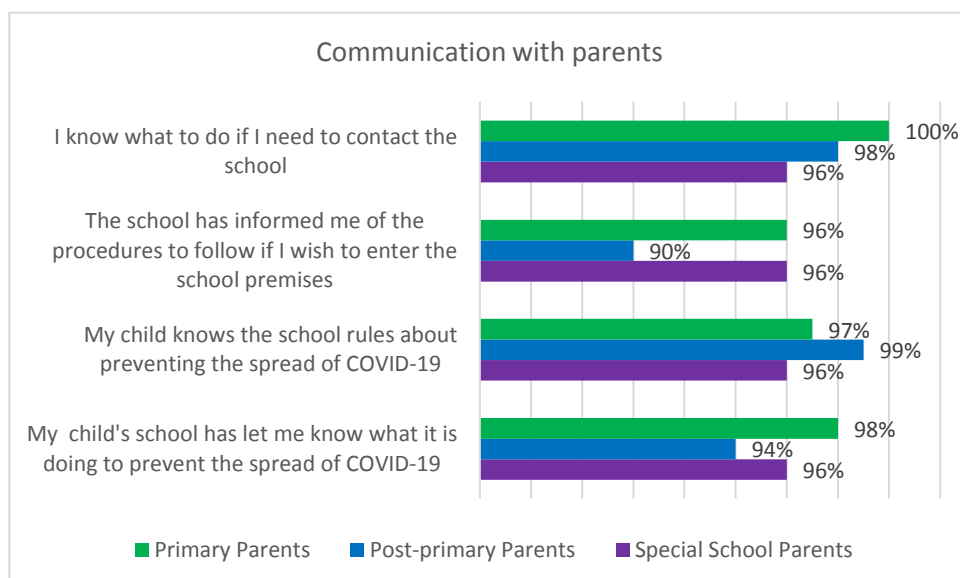


#### 4.4.5 Communication with parents

Almost all primary school parents and most post-primary parents agreed that their child's school was working hard to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

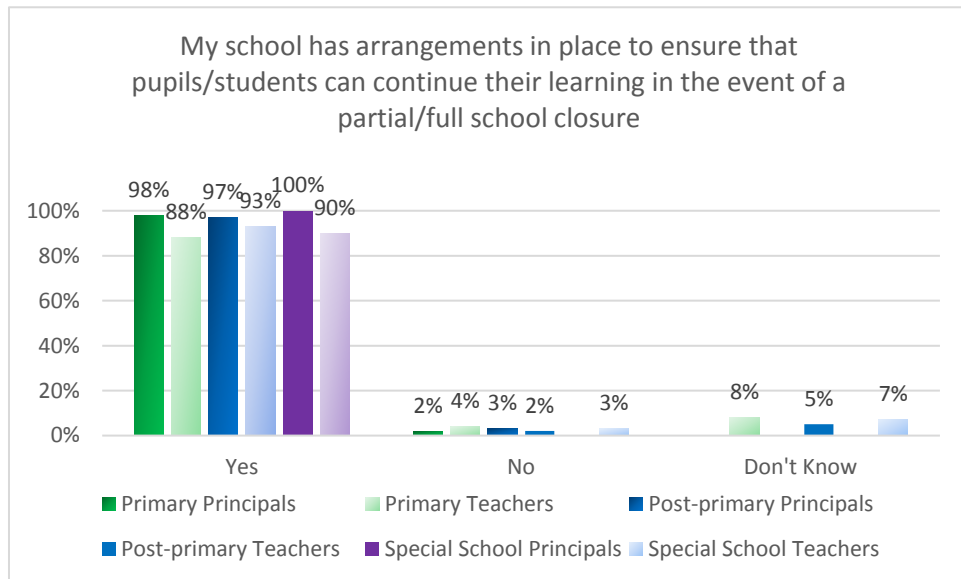


There was evidence of highly effective communication between schools and parents with regard to COVID-19 protocols. Parents were keenly aware of the measures their child’s school had taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Almost all parents agreed that their child knew the school rules about preventing the spread of COVID-19 and that they had been informed by their child’s school of the procedures to follow if they wished to visit the school premises and of the measures to follow if they needed to contact the school.



#### 4.4.6 Arrangements in the event of full or partial school closure

Almost all primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools agreed that they had arrangements in place to ensure that pupils and students could continue their learning in the event of a partial or full school closure.



## 5. Findings and conclusions

### 5.1 Main findings

#### 5.5.1 Experience of school

The return to school in September 2020 was successful and was a very positive experience for many pupils/students in primary, post-primary and special schools. Children, parents, principals and teachers were overwhelmingly in agreement in their survey responses that the reopening of schools was successful, and that pupils and students settled well into school. Children who were transitioning into new schools at junior infant and first year level appear to have made those transitions very successfully. Principals and teachers reported that their schools were running effectively and that they were coping well in their respective roles. School personnel accessed the documentation made available by the Department of Education to prepare for the reopening of schools. Between one-third and one-half of principals indicated that they experienced difficulties accessing substitute cover for absent teachers.

#### 5.5.2 Wellbeing

The importance of schools prioritising activities to support the wellbeing of pupils and students was emphasised in all of the guidance documents made available to schools in the preparation for the reopening in September. The evidence from this survey suggests that considerable success was achieved in this regard and that schools went to great lengths to put additional supports in place for the wellbeing of learners and teachers. Parents and teaching staff expressed their satisfaction with the wellbeing supports that were in place. Parents and pupils/students were aware of the supports that were available if they were worried about anything. Pupils/students were overwhelmingly positive about the fact that they had opportunities to play/socialise with their friends during the school day. As a result of the implementation of all the COVID-19 measures in schools, the majority of principals and teachers indicated that they felt safe in school. However, some teachers who responded expressed disagreement and uncertainty about feeling safe in their schools.

#### 5.5.3 Teaching and Learning

The survey findings indicate that teaching and learning went very successfully when schools reopened and teachers were happy with how their work was going in classrooms and lessons. 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. As a result of the changes necessary in schools due to COVID-19, teachers had to adapt and change the ways in which they operated in classrooms.



Teachers and parents were satisfied that pupils/students were engaging well in lessons and that learning was going well. Pupils/students were enjoying their learning experiences and were satisfied with how their learning was going. Schools were providing a great deal of support to pupils/students to help with their learning needs. In post-primary schools, most students agreed that they could obtain assistance if they considered that they were falling behind with their learning. Almost all teachers in each sector indicated that they had accessed online resources to support their teaching.

The surveys indicated very positive findings with regard to the availability and use of digital technologies in schools. Almost all principals agreed 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. Some pupils/students were unable to return to school because they were medically certified as being at very high risk. All primary principals and almost all post-primary principals with very high risk pupils/students agreed that they had measures in place to ensure that these pupils/students could continue their learning.

#### **5.5.4 Implementation of COVID-19 measures**

The safe and sustainable operation of schools is a national priority and schools, upon re-opening, were required to adopt practices to minimise the risk of COVID-19 for staff, learners and the wider community. Responses to the surveys show that schools generally adopted the required practices and regulations. Findings indicate that there was widespread cooperation among teachers, pupils/students and parents with schools' arrangements regarding COVID-19. Principals and teachers attended training courses provided by the Department of Education and were aware of the necessary measures they should take to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in their schools. The communication of these measures to pupils/students and parents by schools was highly effective. Almost all post-primary schools and most primary schools agreed that they had arrangements in place to ensure that pupils and students could continue their learning in the event of a partial or full school closure.

## **5.2 Main conclusions**

- The surveys show that finding substitute teachers was a challenge for principals.
- There is a need to ensure that all staff remain up-to-date with the relevant range of Department of Education resources to support the safe operation of schools and the effective mediation of the curriculum in a pandemic context.
- It is important that feedback be given to pupils/students on their work whether in a face-to-face or in a remote learning context and that parents be included, as appropriate, at intervals in that feedback process.
- There is a need for all to be vigilant in relation to the wellbeing of staff/learners, especially post-primary students in light of the survey findings.