

HAPPEN RETURN TO SCHOOL STUDY INITIAL REPORT AUGUST 2020



HEADLINE FINDINGS

School staff feel children need to be back in school for their education and social development but do have serious concerns.

- There is anxiety about the effect of returning on their own health, especially if staff were previously in the shielded group.
- There are concerns about pupil wellbeing and how-to best support individual children, especially those disengaged from learning.
- Concerns also exist over teacher wellbeing from worries and anxiety over virus transmission, potential staff shortages due to illness/self-isolation and managing getting to work with limited breakfast club/after school or childcare options for their children.
- Teachers commented on the benefits of having smaller class sizes which, in July, enabled teachers to support individual children better.
- It was felt that investing in more staff would enable smaller class sizes, improve pupil wellbeing and learning experience and enhance staff wellbeing.

OUR SURVEY

The HAPPEN Return to School study is a qualitative study based on school staff responses to the “HAPPEN Return to School Survey”, which was completed by 211 primary school staff (including headteachers, teachers, teaching assistants and support staff) across Wales in July 2020. Results are being analysed using a thematic approach. Due to the timing and rapid response required before school return, this report has been produced to relay initial findings with regards to school staff views' on returning to school.

A full publication will follow.

INITIAL FINDINGS

Children Need To Be In School

There was a feeling by many of a need for pupils to return to school as it was felt that some children were showing decline in education and social skills;

“They have come back to school tired. They have found it difficult to concentrate. Some are not used to following rules at home and so following instructions and rules in school will be difficult and therefore disruptive behaviour will follow.” (Teacher)

“Professionally, I believe the children need to be back in school to catch up on learning and for social development skills. (Teacher)

“It is a necessity to ensure these children do not fall behind, both educationally and emotionally/socially.” (Teacher)



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INITIAL FINDINGS

Concerns Over Pupil and Staff Health and Wellbeing

A large majority of health and wellbeing concerns expressed by school staff were regarding the health implications of virus transmission. Specific worries were expressed by those shielding, vulnerable or living/interacting with vulnerable people and lack of good scientific evidence on infection risks;

"After being in the shielding group I am worried about contracting the virus in work"(Teaching assistant)

"The uncertainty regarding the R rate and general poor test, track & protect performance. Lack of confidence in the data we are given."(Learning support teacher)

Whilst worries of virus transmission to children explicitly were raised by a few school staff, the majority of transmission concerns were over children passing on the virus to adults. Concerns over pupils' health and wellbeing were discussed primarily in relation to indirect effects of the virus, such as the impact of lockdown on childrens' emotional health and the challenges supporting this on return to school. This was discussed in terms of variation and inequalities in home learning experience;

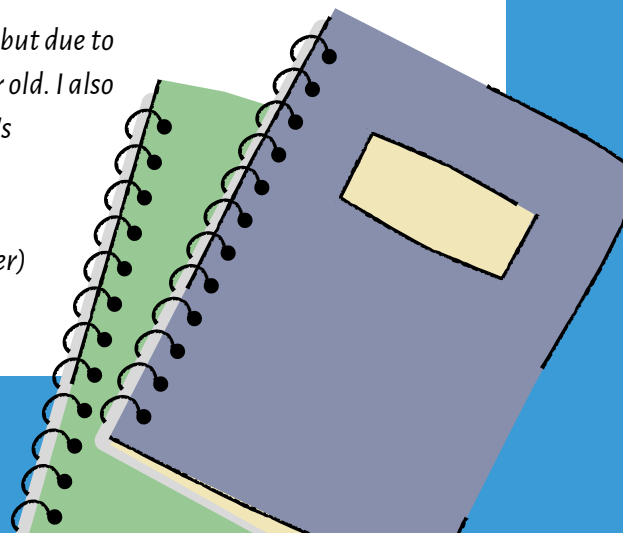
"The ability to support pupils emotionally as well as forwarding their education. I feel we may be picking up the pieces in terms of the pupils who have not been engaging and have not returned for pre-summer check ins." (Teacher);

Staff also emphasised concerns over the mental health and wellbeing of school staff. The challenges of balancing work, family life and childcare commitments was remarked upon by many, particularly where breakfast and after school clubs were not functioning as normal and schools were staggering start and finish times creating childcare issues. Headteachers especially were concerned over staff sickness and problems with staff shortages and budgets when the common cold is circulating or staff have to self-isolate.

Staff were also concerned about their ability to collaborate with each other as a result of social distancing;

"I have 3 children, 2 of whom would normally be cared for grandparents but due to health they won't be able to and I can't afford the childcare for my 2 year old. I also have to factor in school pick ups. My school finishes at 3.20, my children's school finishes at 3" (Teacher)

"Staff self-isolating and cost implications to school budget" (Headteacher)



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INITIAL FINDINGS

Challenges Supporting Children To Progress With Learning

Teachers felt that there was huge variation in terms of the impact of lockdown on children. Whilst the positive impacts for some children were commented on by teachers, including more 1:1 time with family members and development of life skills that they ordinarily wouldn't be able to provide in school, many staff were concerned about a lack of learning progression during the lockdown period for some children. Worries were expressed over the huge variation in learning needs on return to school and the ability to support specific children to progress with learning again;

"...there are going to be huge gaps academically which need to be addressed asap" (Teacher)

"The ability gap will have grown considerably which will make whole class teaching very hard." (Teacher)

School staff expressed concerns over staffing; "making sure we have enough staff to educate the children who have fallen behind in learning and their social learning" (Teaching Assistant). Others highlighted a lack of time within the classroom setting to dedicate to those pupils who they feel have been disadvantaged in their learning by lockdown. Class sizes were brought up relating to both the increased risk of transmission but also teaching practice in general. Many school staff commented on the benefits of smaller class sizes during the phased return to school in terms of a positive impact on their learning and social skills. The Covid-19 situation forced the need for smaller class sizes and many reflected on the positives of this, the difficulties associated with immediately returning to full classes but also the opportunities for a long-term change in education delivery;

"I understand that we have to get the economy going but if the WG [Welsh Government] wants children to 'catch up' they need to understand the positive impact of being in smaller groups. Due to budget constraints we have had large classes to keep jobs - now is the time to INVEST in learning - class sizes no greater than 20. This will have a massive impact on pupil learning." (Headteacher)

"The children have thrived in smaller groups. We have seen quieter pupils come out of their shells as they have not been 'drowned out' by the more enthusiastic. They have also had more individual support. We have seen a number of pupils learning more due to being in a smaller group." (Headteacher)



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INITIAL FINDINGS

Wider Teaching Challenges

It was felt by school staff that resuming normal school routine would be a challenge for some. Concerns were raised over ensuring effective running of the school day and maintaining new practices including cleaning and hygiene whilst delivering the curriculum. The enhanced cleaning and hygiene practices that schools need to adopt on return was also remarked upon as a concern of school staff in terms of the expectations, time taken and support. Teachers were concerned that cleaning time will be time taken away from supporting children with learning;

“Maintaining good hand hygiene with a full class of 30 will be very difficult to monitor and very time consuming” (Teacher)

Another challenge relayed by some school staff was the ability to teach effectively at a social distance. This was felt to be a particular concern for those teaching Foundation Phase pupils. For some class moves, school staff highlighted the lack of transition and the difficulty in supporting children with this next phase of school;

“Transition from nursery to reception. How to help children who find the process difficult. Social distancing with children who are distressed , especially as I am currently shielding” (Teacher)

“As a vulnerable member of staff I fear going back with a full class and spending the day trying to distance myself. How can I teach properly like that?”(Teacher)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RETURN AND POTENTIAL FUTURE LOCKDOWN

Greater Support To Address The Wellbeing Needs Of Pupils and Staff

School staff specifically commented on the need for greater provision in meeting the health and wellbeing needs of both pupils and school staff. When asked the question what professional development and support they needed for the return, "supporting learner health and wellbeing" was the most frequent response. As with investing in getting people to eat out, it was suggested investment should be made to help support children in school;

“Support in regards to mental health and Wellbeing, possibly reduced class sizes, extra support for pastoral care and to help catch up.” (Teacher)

“Government funding the expressive arts, health and wellbeing etc” (Teacher)

“Maybe designated staff in each school to help with wellbeing” (Teacher)

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RETURN AND POTENTIAL FUTURE LOCKDOWN

Greater Support To Address The Wellbeing Needs Of Pupils and Staff

The need to prioritise their health and wellbeing before assessment of attainment was brought up by some staff.

*"Less pressure about assessments and attainments and more focus on the children and their needs and feelings."
(Teaching assistant).*

Maintaining and promoting good health and wellbeing during a future potential lockdown was also highlighted with some suggesting regular phone calls to children and parents to discuss pupil wellbeing. A number of staff suggested that this should be prioritised immediately;

"more wellbeing phonecalls to children and parents" (Reception teacher).

"wellbeing checks from the start, more interaction with children from the start" (Year 1 teacher).

The need to be more proactive in addressing teacher wellbeing was also raised, alongside the need for staff to support one another's wellbeing at this time.

"WG [Welsh Government] need to address teacher anxiety. We need to know that our health s also a priority."(Headteacher)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RETURN AND POTENTIAL FUTURE LOCKDOWN

Clear Guidance And Communication At All Levels

A key recommendation coming out from school staff was the need for clear guidance, communication and preparation time in relation to not only the virus situation but also in relation to teaching and any future lockdown. Guidance with regards to parental expectations were discussed by some staff, in that it should be clear to parents what should be expected of staff but also clear to parents what staff expect of them;

"Local Authority informing parents about what is reasonable to expect of staff so that schools aren't picked off individually and compared; further training for staff re remote learning and a National (or at least LA) consistent standard of what should be expected."(Headteacher)

"clear communications between government, local authorities and schools" (Reception teacher).

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Clear Guidance And Communication At All Levels

With regards to suggestions for a future potential lockdown, primary school staff highlighted the importance of building rapport with parents, with some recommending more direct communication between teachers and parents and emphasised that communication with parents should be an ongoing process. The need for better communication over the scientific evidence, as well as the need for more regular virus testing to guide this return was raised. Some staff called for greater transparency over statistics and evidence and less mixed messages;

"A reliable Test, track & protect and totally transparent statistics" (Learning Support Teacher)

"Clear medical advice on pupils ability to spread the virus. Both the pros and cons about fully reopening...wants an'all approach with a full disclosure of the reasons for this" (Teacher)

IN SUMMARY...

While school staff were positive about pupils returning, having smaller groups was seen as a benefit not only to the current situation with virus transmission but also to individual learning. Investing in staff would enable; smaller classes or groups, support of individual children who have fallen behind and good pupil and staff wellbeing. Finally, there needs to be better communication at all levels with clear understanding of expectations, in any future lockdowns.

Todd C, Marchant E. James M. Brophy S (August 2020) Return to School Study. Initial Report.

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