

Playing Catch-Up

Introduction

The [latest attainment figures](#) published by the Scottish Government should surprise no-one. The Covid pandemic has had a huge impact on so many aspects of life, including education. Schools were shut to protect lives, and teachers, parents and pupils tried admirably to find new ways of learning.

However, hybrid and online learning are simply not the same as regular in-person contact with a qualified teacher. The resulting decline across the board of the percentage of pupils reaching the expected level of achievement highlights this.

The ability of pupils to access devices, data and private space to work from home, along with the capacity of parents to support that learning, has varied hugely.

Education Scotland undertook little, if any, work to address these imbalances, either during lockdowns or after school returned. Therefore, while deeply disappointing, it is also not surprising to see the widening of the attainment gap.

- The gap between the proportion of P1, P4 and P7 pupils from the most and least deprived areas who achieved their expected level in literacy has increased from 20.7 percentage points in 2018/19 to 24.7 percentage points in 2020/21.
- For numeracy, the gap increased from 16.8 percentage points to 21.4 percentage points.
- For both primary literacy and numeracy the sizes of the gaps in 2020/21 were larger than at any previous point since comparable data was first made available in 2016/17.
- No data for secondary school pupils and special school pupils were collected in 2020/21 and data was not collected for any pupils in 2019/20, so we don't yet know the scale of decline in S1-S3.

These statistics clearly demonstrate that there has been a decline in education. We have to make up for that decline in educational attainment.

The Scottish Government has committed to recruiting an additional 3,500 teachers across this parliamentary term. However, there are 2,630 early learning and childcare centres, 2,001 primary schools, 357 secondary schools and 111 special schools in Scotland.¹ Even if the early years centres are not included, there are 2,469 school settings. As a result, 3,500 additional teachers, while welcome, works out at just under 1.5 additional teachers per school. This alone cannot and will not reverse the worrying trends outlined above.

The emergence of the Omicron variant is also a sharp reminder that the pandemic remains a threat and it is clear that the impact of isolation and restrictions will be felt in schools for some time.

¹ [Summary statistics for schools in Scotland : 14 December 2021 \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

Lost education needs to be recovered. As a result, the Commission on School Reform is reiterating its call for catch-up education in Scotland to be delivered as a priority.²

Education Recovery Plan

The evidence is now emerging to confirm the Commission's consistent warnings over the past two years that the pandemic has had a disastrous impact on education and that urgent action is needed to support the learning of young people currently going through the system. The Commission is deeply concerned that the impact has been greatest on disadvantaged learners and that the attainment gap has significantly widened. Some of our suggested actions are for government but others can be determined at school level.

Urgent Action

- A flexible system of additional support for all pupils to put in place to enable educational recovery as quickly as possible. This could involve additional time in school, homework clubs, Saturday clubs and so forth.
- Tutor support should be planned, funded nationally and be made available as a matter of urgency to all young people based on the existing free school meals eligibility criteria.
- Urgent steps require to be taken to ensure that learning at home and/or blended learning are far more effectively supported going forward, with the free availability of far more devices and broadband connections for families who cannot afford to pay for such equipment.

Medium Term

- The mechanisms and resources developed should be used to give additional support to those requiring it in the course of their normal schooling.

Longer Term

- Independent research to be commissioned to track and evaluate the scale and impact of lost learning in Scotland and when appropriate, the level of recovered learning as a result of interventions.

² The CSR Challenge Paper of February 2021 '[Catching up the educational losses from Covid-19](#)' highlighted a number of the issues around inequality during the pandemic and why education recovery is so vital.