



Star

STAYING CONNECTED: REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED IN SUMMER TERM 2020

A toolkit to support leaders
as they reopen schools



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Contributors

Star Academies has produced this review to support the sector in planning for the full reopening of schools in September.

We are grateful to the following organisations who have contributed their ideas, experience and insights.

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Ark Schools	Future Academies
Birmingham City Council	Harris Federation
Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council	Inspiration Academy Trust
Blackpool Council	Leeds Diocese Multi Academy Trust
Cabot Learning Federation	Ormiston Academies Trust
City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council	Outwood Grange Academies Trust
David Ross Education Trust	Unity Schools Partnership
Delta Academies Trust	
Diocese of Ely Multi Academy Trust	
Dixons Academies Trust	

Supplementary documents

- Academies Enterprise Trust September reopening case study
- Ark September reopening case study
- Blackpool Council September reopening case study
- Blackburn-with-Darwen September reopening case study
- Bradford MDC September reopening case study
- Diocese of Ely September reopening case study
- Furness Academy Trust September reopening case study
- Harris Federation Trust September reopening case study
- Inspiration Academies Trust September reopening case study
- Unity Schools Partnership September reopening case study (primary)
- Unity Schools Partnership September reopening case study (secondary)

Introduction

Summer term 2020 will be remembered as a turning point in our education system, a time when the rites of passage typically associated with the final months of the academic year were torn asunder. The familiar cycle of examinations, sports days, celebrations and preparations for moving on has been reimagined. Pupils who left school suddenly on 20th March have their own stories to tell. Listening to them will be a cornerstone of any recovery plan. Leaders and teachers, suddenly required to do many things differently, have assimilated volumes of guidance at record pace.

Lockdown has galvanized reflection on an intense scale: Who are we? How has our collective history shaped us? What does a future hold that is characterised by increasing online default for so much human connectivity? COVID-19 held a mirror to society, reflected starkly the inequalities masked by school uniforms and required us to focus on the transformative power of education. We need to nurture resilient, creative, solution-focused minds. We need to equip our young people with the technology, skills and motivation to learn remotely. We need to maintain the connections that make our communities strong.

In June 2020, we surveyed the trusts and local authorities who contributed to *Checks and Balances: Responding to COVID-19* to find out how they had overcome the barriers they faced during schools' partial reopening phase. Reflection on lessons learned is mutually supportive and essential to growth. Several of these partners have contributed case studies to aid the sector in preparation for full reopening in September 2020. Thank you to all contributors for your generosity of spirit and positive culture.

Survey methodology

During April 2020, researchers had interviewed representatives from a range of multi-academy trusts and local authorities about their preparations for the partial reopening of schools. This research culminated in the report *Checks and Balances: Responding to COVID-19* and associated toolkit to support school leaders.

In the period 22nd-30th June, researchers interviewed the same partners to discuss the barriers and enablers to the implementation of their plans. A semi-structured approach was used once again. Partners' feedback on themes including pupils' attendance and their engagement with remote learning is captured in the survey outcomes. Partners provided their thoughts about how learning from lockdown would shape their planning towards full reopening of schools September 2020.

Survey outcomes

Key barriers to the implementation of reopening plans identified by Trusts and local authorities

Limited school attendance

Pupils' attendance in school has been variable. Attendance at the time the survey was undertaken (week commencing June 22nd) was typically between 40 - 90% within the target groups across the trusts participating in the survey. The reasons for lower attendance varied from area to area and school to school.

The main barrier to full attendance of target groups was cited as being parental anxiety over the safety of schools and the associated risks of transmitting COVID-19 amongst children and other family members. Attendance had improved gradually since schools first opened more widely, as parents had reportedly been reassured about the safety measures that leaders had put in place.

Attendance by different groups of pupils was inconsistent across trusts. In some areas, attendance was lowest within the most disadvantaged communities, but in other areas the attendance of disadvantaged pupils was relatively high. Pupils' attendance has tended to be lower within BAME communities. Partners attributed this to scientific reports about the additional vulnerability to infection within BAME groups. Parents were particularly concerned about the risks of transmission to older family members, where children live in multi-generational households. In most primary schools, attendance has been higher amongst older pupils; the lowest attendance has been within the Early Years. Attendance typically has been good amongst the Year 10 and Year 12 pupils.

The size of schools and classrooms has had an impact on the number of pupils that schools can accommodate at one time. Some smaller schools developed rota systems in order to maintain social distancing, while reaching as many pupils as possible.

Other aspects that have had a negative impact on pupils' attendance in school are outlined below.

- Employment patterns within the local area have had a significant impact. Attendance has often been lower where parents are at home because they are furloughed or because employment is seasonal. Parents who need to leave the house to attend work have been more likely to send their children back to school.
- In some areas, especially where the R rate is comparatively high and health is poor generally, the prevalence of families with members who have underlying problems and are shielding has been a barrier to attendance.
- The perception that attendance is optional has resulted in sporadic attendance by some pupils, linked to weather and other factors.
- Local authority and public health guidance have had an impact on the timing of school openings and the confidence of parents regarding the risks of transmission of the virus within the local area.
- The target year groups for return to primary schools have not been perceived as the most helpful by parents. Many schools have extended the offer to Year 5 pupils, where accommodation allows.
- Parents' perception of the usefulness of a return to school at this stage of the year has had an influence. In some areas, particularly where remote teaching is proving successful, parents have not felt the benefits to be great enough to outweigh risks.
- In some areas there has been active dissuasion from return to school by lobbyists concerned about pupils' and staff's safety.

Pupils' engagement with remote learning

The main barriers to pupils' full engagement in remote learning have been limited access to IT equipment and connectivity difficulties encountered by families. For some families this has been due to a lack of a suitable device to access the curriculum resources and remote lessons that have been provided by schools. The government's scheme for the provision of laptops was welcomed by the sector but had not rolled out to all schools at the time of the survey and so problems of engagement persisted. A number of partners had provided laptops from their own resources where they were able to do so.

The quality of remote learning has been variable from school to school and this is an area all trusts are keen to improve upon, using the most successful practice and developing learning across all schools. All participating trusts intend to develop remote learning further to make the best use of expertise across schools to ensure curriculum continuity in the likely event of future self-isolation for groups of pupils.

Family health and wellbeing

Concerns about pupils' health and wellbeing have been ongoing throughout the lockdown. The system to provide supermarket vouchers to families where children are entitled to free school meals has not always worked successfully. Leaders report that some families have experienced difficulties accessing their entitlement and this has exacerbated food poverty.

Organisational strengths that enabled Trusts and local authorities to continue their work and adapt national guidance/mandates within local settings

Trust and school leaders have focused on finding solutions to the difficulties and barriers outlined above. Leaders have taken account of national guidance and worked creatively with schools' staff to adapt teaching and learning to pupils' needs during the lockdown. Attendance in school has improved as parents have seen the effective measures that are in place to minimise risks of infection and transmission. Schools have adapted and improved the quality of remote learning over time, based on experience and feedback from parents and pupils.

Strong strategic leadership

The existence of strong strategic leadership and a dedicated central team of experts within multi-academy trusts (MATs) has been a key organisational strength during school partial closures and wider reopening. Centralised leaders and teams have ensured the flow of information and consistency of approach across all schools within the Trust. The fact that central staff have been able to plan in advance has taken some of the burden from school leaders and staff. The ways in which centralised teams and leaders have promoted effective practice are outlined below.

- The rapid summation and dissemination of the most important messages and guidance from the government and the DfE, taking account of local contexts, has been key to all partners' response.
- Effective information management within key teams, to all staff in schools has been pivotal in ensuring consistency in approach to minimising risk, effective planning for reopening and quality remote learning for pupils.
- Detailed planning to minimise risk and ensure a consistent approach to social distancing, hygiene arrangements and PPE has been a key factor in successful reopening. Trusts have provided detailed risk assessments and audit templates that can be adapted by schools.
- Supporting schools in the creation of new ways of curriculum planning, teaching and learning. Trust central teams have had a key role in ensuring schools have the infrastructure, software and applications to support the delivery of effective virtual learning. They have supported school leaders in planning the curriculum and adapting teaching resources for home learning.
- Conducting policy and curriculum reviews has been undertaken centrally by some partners. The centralised approach to planning for pupils' return to school and adapting policy, has enabled school staff to focus on delivery.
- Central teams have provided and supported training for school leaders and staff. They have ensured staff are well equipped and have the skills to deliver remote learning. They

have further ensured that staff are fully aware of policy updates, risk assessments, safeguarding requirements, and are trained in promoting pupils' mental health.

Local authority information management and engagement with schools in the area

Attendance at school has been highest where local authorities have productive and sustained communication with **all** schools in the local area. The consistent messaging to parents from local authorities and MATs has been a key factor in helping pupils back to school.

Local authorities have been the main sources of information about the early years, alternative provision and the local SEND offer. They have been key in maintaining the quality of learning in alternative provision. Some local authorities have supported transition between Year 6 and Year 7, for example by developing a transition project.

The quality of remote learning

Remote learning has improved, as leaders and teachers have developed more effective systems to support pupils and parents in accessing quality lessons and resources. A robust digital structure, good quality resources and frequent contact with parents and pupils has engendered higher levels of engagement. Learning has been successful where schools have been able to ensure all pupils have the necessary IT equipment to access resources and are using a common IT platform to deliver learning. This has enabled pupils to have access to specialist and expert teaching across the trust. Where pupils have not been able to access online learning, school staff have gone to great lengths to provide pupils with textbooks and workbooks.

Strong relationships with families

Leaders' clear communication with parents has been an important factor in reassuring and supporting parents during the lockdown and in returning their children to school. Teachers' regular contact and support to parents has been a key factor in ensuring pupils' engagement with home learning.

Flexibility and responsiveness to context

Trusts have adopted a flexible approach to the wider reopening of schools across the country, depending on the local context and the accommodation available within each school. Some primary schools have extended their offer to other year groups in addition to Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6, vulnerable pupils and children of key workers. Allowing siblings of pupils in the target year groups to attend has improved attendance.

Secondary schools have adopted different models regarding in school contact according to their context. Some are actively prioritising those Year 10 and Year 12 pupils who have not engaged with online learning. Other schools have invited pupils in on a rota basis so that all pupils have contact with their teachers at least one day each week. Trusts are making links between the information they have about individual pupils' learning at home with the advice and guidance they receive when they attend school.

Effective transition arrangements

Support for pupils' transition into and out of schools has been conducted online in the main and is a focus for the Year 6 pupils who have returned to school. Leaders have provided pupils with virtual tours of their school and online 'meet the teachers' sessions. Many schools are planning induction days in September for children joining the early years, Year 7 pupils and other pupils (who are new to the school), before all pupils return.

Supporting vulnerable children

Trust and local authorities have been most successful in supporting vulnerable and at-risk children, where they have in-depth local knowledge and determination to support the families in need. This is most notable where Trust and LA leaders believe they have a valuable civic leadership role. School leaders and teachers have taken forward the agenda to support the health and wellbeing of their pupils for example, by delivering food to those families experiencing food poverty. They have visited homes where pupils have not engaged with home learning and where families are known to be vulnerable or children are at risk.

Maintaining a sense of community in the remote world

Aside from providing pupils with a remote curriculum, partners have used considerable creativity to provide pupils with engaging challenges that they can complete at home, some of which are team challenges and house competitions involving collaboration with peers. Regular pastoral calls have helped to maintain pupils' sense of connection with a family that cares. Similarly, virtual social interactions, quizzes, mindfulness training and similar events focused on staff wellbeing have helped to maintain positive cultures.

Lessons learned from COVID-19 for organisations and the sector as a whole

The impact of poverty and widening gaps

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the impact of endemic poverty on children's learning, health and wellbeing. The most disadvantaged communities have been hardest hit by the pandemic. Children within disadvantaged communities are more likely to have relatives who have been ill or died during school closures. Access to quality learning resources is less equal in homes than it is in school. Pupils are more likely to experience difficulties accessing remote learning and may not have a suitable place to complete schoolwork at home. Trust and school leaders are looking for ways to narrow the gaps in learning and support pupils' health and wellbeing. They are adapting the curriculum and putting additional support in place to promote pupils' physical, emotional and mental health.

The need for curriculum review

Trust and school leaders have identified the need to assess pupils' learning fully on return to school and adapt their curriculum planning. For some pupils, the focus will be on a catch-up curriculum, in order to bring them up to the standards expected for their age and narrow the gaps between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils. Leaders are also mindful that some pupils will have continued to learn, with effective support from their parents and carers, and the ability to engage with good quality remote learning. The challenge is to enable identified pupils to catch up while providing a stimulating, broad curriculum for all pupils. Leaders are also reviewing their school's curriculum to address inequalities and promote social justice.

Positive impact of the increased use of technology

The increased use of technology to conduct meetings, deliver remote learning and facilitate partnership working has been highly positive. Leaders are keen to continue to use technology to promote the more efficient use of time, the sharing of expertise and quality home learning. In addition to home learning, online interactions have proved successful for a range of purposes, including governors' meetings, MAT-wide staff training and induction, CAMHS consultations and statutory assessment processes.

The importance of ensuring consistent quality in remote learning across schools

Leaders are aware that there has been too much variability in the content and quality of remote learning across the whole sector. This too, will widen gaps between pupils, cementing the impact of disadvantage. In some schools, pupils have been given a full daily timetable of lessons delivered remotely by teachers within the trust. In other schools, pupils have been provided with online resources, which they can access each week and work through with parents or independently depending on their age and abilities. Some schools have focused on consolidating learning that took place before the schools closed rather than introducing completely new concepts. Others have introduced some new learning in line with curriculum plans.

Ensuring all schools have access to support and share the most effective practice

Pupils in stand-alone schools that do not yet have access to remote learning platforms and do not benefit from being able to use specialist input from other schools are particularly at risk of falling behind their peers where remote learning is more available and effective. Trust leaders are keen to support schools where there is little external support from elsewhere.

The importance of local partnerships

The importance of effective local partnership working has been reinforced as schools have planned for reopening. Strong relationships between public health, the local authority and all schools within areas have supported effective working. School reopening has been most successful where there has been consistency of message from partners within localities.

Importance of crisis management plans

Leaders have now built up robust crisis management plans that need to be developed and retained for the future.

The main challenges that are likely to persist in September

Curriculum planning and implementation

The main challenge facing schools is in addressing pupils' knowledge and skills gaps while maintaining an interesting curriculum that engages all pupils.

The challenges include:

- Assessing pupils' knowledge and experiences during home learning. Some pupils will have continued to learn effectively at home, acquiring new learning and consolidating prior knowledge and skills. Other pupils may have limited learning and may even have regressed if they have not been able to practise their skills and use their prior knowledge.
- Addressing and narrowing gaps in learning, while ensuring that all pupils have stimulating activities and are able to deepen their learning. For pupils who have followed the school curriculum for remote learning at home, repetition of topics could potentially be demotivating.
- Creating a curriculum that enables pupils who need to catch up, to learn more in less time. This entails identifying the key building blocks in knowledge and skills and developing them in the most productive way.
- In secondary schools, maintaining subject integrity and equipping pupils for examinations in less time than usual.
- In primary schools, providing a curriculum that is motivating and develops pupils' skills, broadens their horizons and supports their all-round development as well as addressing gaps in literacy and numeracy.

- Sustaining and developing what has worked well in remote learning throughout the lockdown. For example, trusts have used the expertise of specialist teachers to provide quality online lessons and support to pupils in schools where they have not been able to recruit specialists. Many trusts have developed excellent online teaching resources and banks of virtual lessons, that they will continue to develop for future use.

Preparing pupils for examinations in 2021

Leaders impressed the urgent need to know what the exam system will be, from examining boards. Pupils will not be able to complete the syllabus in the same depth as in previous years.

Mental health and wellbeing

Leaders have put a range of measures in place to support staff and pupils' mental health and wellbeing when they return to school. They are keen that any action taken serves to support individuals and does not amplify staff's and pupils' anxieties by over emphasising possible problems.

For staff, the main challenges are in ensuring they are fully aware of and feel confident with the procedures to minimise risks of infection when all pupils return to school. For staff who have suffered illness themselves or within the family, leaders have offered support for their emotional wellbeing, including access to confidential counselling.

Leaders have detailed plans to support pupils' mental health and wellbeing when they return to school. Leaders are aware that, while most pupils will be keen to get back to school to see their friends, there will be some who need support to reconnect and socialise with their peers productively in an atmosphere that requires some social distancing. During the lockdown, leaders have provided school staff with additional training in dealing with trauma, in mindfulness and in promoting mental health and wellbeing within the taught curriculum. Leaders have adapted the PSHE and RSE curriculum to include issues related to COVID-19. They are working with external agencies to provide additional counselling and support to individual pupils.

Taking care of general health

An outbreak of COVID-19 in the winter months is potentially catastrophic because of the likelihood of it coinciding with seasonal colds and flu. Some leaders spoke of the need to encourage staff, pupils and families to receive the flu vaccine available in the autumn and to act upon the advice of public health experts to take a daily dose of vitamin D. Measures to safeguard general health will be particularly important when schools recommence in September.

Maintaining protective measures

Leaders and school staff are aware that maintaining protective measures as schools reopen to all pupils will be challenging. They have put signage and reminders around their schools regarding distancing and hygiene. They have invested in additional handwashing facilities and resources for personal use by each pupil to avoid sharing resources. Leaders are supportive of the use of face masks if the government mandates it. Some leaders say they will need to supply the masks used by pupils in school because of the association of face coverings with gang membership in the area.

Some leaders mentioned that if face coverings/masks are mandated in schools, it would be more practicable for teaching staff to wear visors instead. This would negate some of the issues created by masks reducing facial communication.

The challenge of maintaining bubbles, whether with a year group base in secondary schools, or a class base in primary schools, will be crucial to maintaining a safe environment. This imperative, along with the rigorous implementation of DfE / Public Health guidance on the nine protective measures, will require leaders to substantially rethink their school organisation plans.

Ensuring clarity of message

Ensuring clarity of message from the DfE was mentioned by many leaders. They understand that in a rapidly changing context, information needs to change and adapt to new evidence. However, some of the changes were difficult to find within lengthy documents. Some partners suggested that it would be helpful for DfE to publish a summary of changes as they occur, with reference to the relevant publications.

Maintaining accurate data on staff availability

Senior leaders are conscious of the need to manage staffing capacity during a period when self-isolation may be a significant issue. It will be necessary to update staffing audits and review risk assessments on a regular basis to ensure that the wellbeing and availability of all staff is thoroughly considered.