

Written evidence submitted by Voice the Union

Voice the Union for Education Professionals

**OFFICIAL RESPONSE TO
THE EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE CALL FOR EVIDENCE ON
“THE IMPACT OF COVID-19
ON EDUCATION AND CHILDREN’S SERVICES”**

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1. Voice is the union for education professionals. We are an independent trade union. Working tirelessly to represent all those working across the education sector, including schools and colleges, early years and childcare, we ensure that our members have the support, guidance and representation of a strong and approachable union.
2. In response to the call for evidence, Voice surveyed our membership and received more than 850 full responses to our questions about the impact that Covid-19 has had on education and children's services.
3. These responses came from across the UK, including Scotland (8% of respondents), Wales (4%) and Northern Ireland (1%), and from across the profession with 44% of respondents working in Primary and 29% working in Secondary schools, 7% working in special education or with children with SNED, and 12% in early years and childcare settings.

Critical Workers

4. The views of respondents were very typical of Voice members who take a very considered and moderate view of events and always strive to put their pupils first. Therefore, it came as no surprise to note that there was no clear view on whether the implementation of the critical workers' policy was clear on how it would affect their workplace.
5. Six percent of respondents were unsure but the other 94% was equally split between those who felt the implementation was clear on how it would impact the workplace, and those who felt it was not.

The Early Years

6. However, opinions were clearer about the impact that the closure of the early years sector has had on children's early development by a factor of 2:1. 36% of respondents felt that there had been a detrimental impact, with 12% feeling the impact had been significant. This was against just 3% feeling that there had not been a significant impact.
7. Respondents noted that "Young children need routine and consistency. These children are at the most informative stage of their development and learn about the world around them, how to socialise and be part of a larger group, how to sit and listen, how to interact, how to vocalise through play and interaction with other children, they need to be stimulated and entertained and this does not always happen at home"

8. Some respondents reflected on the difficulties that learners and their families would have to overcome without their direct intervention. “We have young children learning to speak/understand the English language and often parents struggling to speak in English too.”
9. “Parents often need support themselves and we are not able to identify this and provide it at the current time.” “Some of our children have no safe access to the outside environment in their homes and social interaction and art of negotiations that play supports.”
10. “We want to help our children to prepare for the change ahead of them. For some the staff at nursery are their constant people who they feel safe with.”
11. Many children will rapidly adjust to the changes thrown at them, but a significant number will struggle to settle back into childcare after lockdown. “They will also need to rebuild confidence as they will be wary that their world may be turned upside down at any moment.”
12. “Although there is time for children to catch up - children do after the summer holidays for instance with many not doing anything at all at home during that time, if this goes on for much longer then there could be a detrimental impact on children’s’ education. Children with pre-existing developmental problems such as speech and language delay may be further behind. That said I have heard of children at our school learning to ride bikes, tell the time, cook, garden and have amazing, quality, fun family time which for some is a real luxury.”

Formal Examinations & Calculated Grades

13. The decision to cancel formal examinations was taken very early on in the pandemic and has provided strong reassurance to teachers and examination centres as well as to the students themselves that they will receive a grade which accurately reflects their hard work.
14. The fact that the decision was taken to cancel exams was overwhelmingly supported by Voice members with 84% of respondents in favour of the decision commenting that it was an eminently practical decision that is “the only way that is fair”.
15. “Keeping the exams would have been unfair to those who had not yet completed the curriculum and need support with revision. It would have been unfair to all pupils and not afforded any certainty. Teachers have always been the best judge of how a pupil is progressing, so asking them to grade is very sensible.”
16. And almost three-quarters of respondents (73%) believe that a calculated grade based on teacher assessment is the best way for grades to be awarded, this is around 10% fewer than those agreeing that it was appropriate to cancel exams but still a significant majority.

17. Since teachers continually monitor and assess their students, they are already aware of their students' levels and capacity. "They had almost completed their GCSE courses and the teachers had done assessments, so they knew what grades the children were attaining."
18. "There are a myriad of ways this could have been done and all of them would have winners and losers (including if formal exams had been continued), the system adopted can be applied uniformly and provide results consistent with previous years' performance."
19. Some respondents noted that "whilst difficult this first time it should be the norm every year as it is a fair way of measuring a student's aptitude and school career based on an educated opinion of a teacher backed up with plentiful evidence."
20. There were frequent comments that "we need to trust the professional (teachers) to give the grades." "Since our school's lifeblood is data, and the students have been tested to destruction, I am confident that the grades I predict for my year 11 students are both accurate and robust. It is ironic that so much trust will be placed in teacher's professional judgement over the examination results, when our professionalism has been steadily eroded by successive governments over many years."

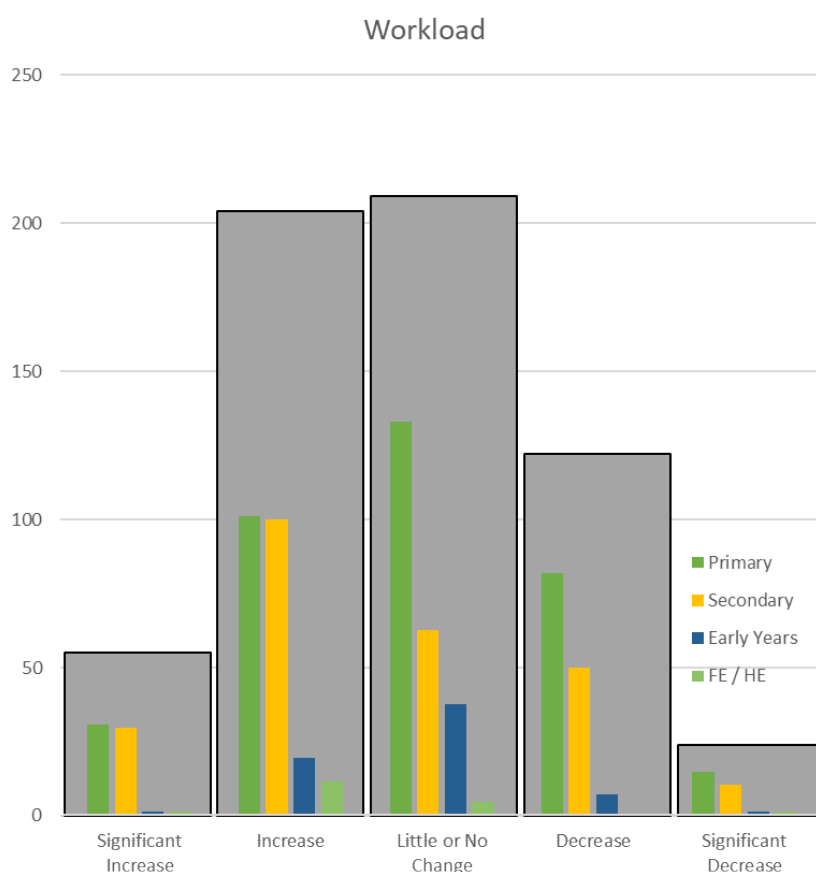
Remote Learning

21. We asked respondents to consider the support, guidance and direction given from management and senior leaders in their workplace particularly around the issue of remote learning and the issues they encountered.
22. It was noted that, "Remote learning was never tested and has been implemented in haste. Some children, with good broadband, access to their own laptop and supportive parents may continue as though lockdown did not occur."
23. For many it has meant technical issues, having to upgrade broadband and buy new equipment for themselves just to be able to work from home. And comments about the digital infrastructure in rural areas - in particular digital provision in the "South West is so poor (download speed 3.5Mbps & upload speed 0.5Mbps) that it is impossible to link into virtual lessons and complete work. Furthermore, some places struggle to get mobile coverage - 4G or even 5G are a distant dream - which also hampers communication."
24. There are also potential safeguarding concerns. "Our school has been massively pushing use of zoom, letting pupils see into my house and communicate with me without another member staff there."

25. Despite these complications and the associated learning curve, less than 9% of respondents were unhappy with the situation in their workplace with almost 70% content with the direction they received from their employers which is very encouraging to hear.
26. We also wanted to know how confident members felt with regards to implementing remote learning. As was to be expected there was a wide range of responses but the overwhelming majority (58%) were confident or very confident against 11% lacking confidence.

Workload

27. This expectation to introduce remote learning, to support learners working at home as well as continuing to provide teaching for this in school and mental health support for the whole school has caused a dramatic initial increase in workload across the sector and whilst there has been some fallback from that early surge, it is clear from the graph below that respondents have seen an increase in their workload.



28. Not only has there been an increase in the workload, but the type of work has changed dramatically requiring, as previously noted, a massive upskilling of the workforce to recognise new ways of working, new technology and online learning platforms and even new ways of communicating with pupils, students and their parent and carers.

29. For some there has been a significant increase in planning. "I plan four remote lessons per day, each lesson is differentiated for 3 different ability groups including a group of non-verbal students. Some children in my class are not accessing the online platform so I am now producing packs of work for them to be delivered to their homes. Again, this is differentiated across 3 widely differing ability groups."
30. I feel I am "reinventing the wheel and it's not round!"
31. And there have been big changes to ways of working. "It is if anything, more intense during the school day as I feel the need to respond immediately. Between the hours of 9 and 3, I feel very stressed and sometimes frustrated. However, I find it has reduced my workload significantly over the weekend."
32. "My workload has had to be spread over a much longer day to make allowances for the different working patterns of parents, students, colleagues and essential shopping time restrictions. I also had to very quickly learn new systems and procedures."
33. School leaders have been essential to management of parental expectations and the impact this has on teacher workload. "Anxious parents and daily remote teaching, feedback and assessment plus reworking the curriculum completely for remote teaching has meant that I have worked 7 days a week since closure. Plus being in school for key worker children as well has made it close to unmanageable
34. One notable area of workload reduction has been in the amount of time dedicated to disciplinary action against pupils. Even in schools where pupils have been required to send in work, it is almost impossible to provide any sanctions if that does not happen.

Other Points to Note

35. Key to the success of remote learning and home working has been parental engagement and involvement. Many comments noted how regular communication and feedback was the only way of providing any meaningful learning activities.
36. Furthermore, parents who have engaged with their children have been able to enrich their learning with a range of practical and household skills in both the home and garden which will undoubtedly provide real benefits to those children in the years to come.
37. However, it is not a picture which is uniform across the country. There has been much comment from politicians and from the media about vulnerable children. Despite sterling efforts from schools, early years settings and local authority services some children will have made little attempt to engage with learning at this time for a number of reasons and it is clear that additional financial support must be given to schools to support and develop these learners when schools fully reopen.

38. Evidence from The Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics – found that school closures in response to the coronavirus pandemic have opened up a "chasm" between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. In the future this simple statement could impact everything in education from achievement and performance data, through staff appraisals to behaviour management and pupil well-being and the government will need to very seriously consider this.

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