Written evidence submitted by Institute of School Business Leadership

Institute of School Business Leadership submission to the Education Select Committee – call for evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

The Institute of School Business Leadership is able to offer a unique perspective on government measures to repurpose schools during the lockdown and more recently to reopen schools to some year groups.

The implementation of the critical workers policy, including how consistently the definition of 'critical' work is being applied across the country and how schools are supported to remain open for children of critical workers

We would like to offer the following observation on the first question in this call for evidence: the initial thinking based on using a hub model for community provision for critical workers' and vulnerable children perhaps delayed schools' response and caused confusion across the sector.

The informal determination of key/critical worker definitions at school level omitted a number of workforces such as prison officers, undertakers and refuse collectors.

The arbitrary triage of "critical workers" by schools and trusts and second guessing about household circumstances by school leaders has also led to inconsistency.

Children of critical workers attended schools during lockdown because their parent(s) had to be at work. This meant they lost out on home learning facilitated by parents in favour of an inconsistent level of provision in schools.

We have concerns about the number of schools able to put significant mental health provision in place to support the children of critical workers during the closure period.

There has been a conflation of two very separate categories – vulnerable and critical workers.

Additionally, inconsistent terms/language have led to confusion – this call for evidence talks of "critical workers" when the language at the start of lockdown (and even before) was about "key workers".

Coming out of lockdown, the language of "critical workers" has diminished. Those who are needed to work now are those "who can't work at home" – and the status of key workers has been obscured by the number of "normal" workers ready to return.

Schools were not supported to remain open – they were in fact left on their own to devise strategies. Some (general) guidance on this from the outset would have been helpful.

In the instance of the last-minute expansion of the free school meals scheme at the start of the Easter break, the tardy policy decision pulled school leaders from the business of providing care for critical workers' children to focus on the administration related to provision of free meals.

In the immediate aftermath of the PM's announcement to close schools, managing expectations was made very difficult. School leaders were afraid to indicate their intentions on the way into lockdown. There was a vacuum created by the ambiguity in the initial guidance and confusion over plans to repurpose schools.

The three COVID-19-related exceptional funding categories – cleaning, premises and FSM – stopped short of meeting other cost pressures, including loss of ancillary/trading income, funding PPE and meeting costs associated to increased supply cost resulting from staff absence.

Selecting teachers to staff the repurposing of schools has also presented challenges for some leaders, particularly where anxiety amongst teachers remained high and PPE was in short supply. Some schools resorted to using support staff in lieu of qualified teachers.

Little consideration during this early phase of the lockdown was given to the welfare and mental health of school and trust staff.

Other issues that have been left to schools' own devices include but are not limited to premises management, classroom reconfiguration, safeguarding and security.

Liability and accountability has been a consistent concern for school leaders throughout this pandemic.

The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people

This question is beyond the scope of ISBL's expertise.

The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to:

- **Children's early development**
- **The early years funded entitlement and the childcare market**

The issues stated for other settings are equally applicable to early years.

The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment

There is clearly the potential for significant impact on the continuity of a child's education. At this stage, it's difficult to assess the full implications of a term and a half's lost instruction.

Whilst the cancellation of exams and the awarding of qualifications based on prior attainment resolves an immediate problem – allowing children to progress to the next phase of their education – what we don't yet know is the impact it will have on their ability to grasp complex concepts and engage in learning material beyond their current year group or phase.

There may also be a broader concern raised by society at large if there is a perception that children during this period have been unfairly awarded qualifications.

Managing parents' expectations could also be challenging. Where pupils are awarded grades that meet or exceed initial expectations, this is less likely to be a problem. However, where

parents and pupils believed a hard "final push" might result in a set of more favourable results, schools should be ready for strong representations and appeals from the parent community.

Support for pupils and families during closures, including:

- **The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning**

In line with comments earlier in this submission, the speed and volume of ever-evolving guidance have made it difficult for pupils and their families to understand what to expect from education providers. Schools across the country enjoy very different levels of IT infrastructure and connectivity. Additionally, many schools do not have sufficient resources to provide every pupil and indeed teacher with a remote device. Whilst the Government has taken steps to address this, mobilising the procurement and delivery of technology equipment has resulted in a ten-week lag since the lockdown began. Furthermore, even if devices are made available, we should not assume that every child in the country has a safe place to learn. Their home environment may not be at all conducive to engaging in remote learning. Furthermore, there needs to be more clarity and consistency in the language used here. Remote learning, distance learning and online learning can all mean quite different approaches to knowledge acquisition. Simply putting resources online and expecting all students to access them in the same way is unrealistic and unfair. Even with access to the right technology, many young people will find this kind of learning challenging and many teachers (inexperienced in practising in this way/format) will also undoubtedly struggle. This is not a simple fix and should not be badged as such.

- **Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education**

Linked to the comments in the statement above, a child's home environment may not always be the healthiest or safest place for them to inhabit. For many, schools represent a safe haven and a break from the turbulence of home life. Beyond the challenges of isolation required during the pandemic, many children will not only be absent from friends, caring teachers and a welcoming school community, they may also be dealing with the mental anguish caused by a family environment in chaos. As this pandemic continues, we should think very carefully about measures to support these most vulnerable children. There will be wider mental health issues associated with rising levels of unemployment as we emerge from this phase of lockdown and the government furlough scheme inevitably draws to a gradual close. Again, this is likely to affect a significant number of young people but will almost certainly have a disproportionate impact on those communities at the margins of society/in the poorest areas.

- **The effect on apprenticeships and other workplace-based education courses**

Unable to comment.

The financial implications of closures for providers (including higher education and independent training providers), pupils and families

Closure will have an impact on any trading/ancillary income, for example the hire of facilities, traded services or the sharing of expertise. Families themselves may find that if their child is

not in a key worker/critical worker category, they are forced to remain at home to provide childcare and thus risk their employment or sources of revenue.

Parents may also have invested in enrichment activity such as school trips or music lessons and will expect to be refunded if these activities can no longer take place.

The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)

There is mounting evidence (Education Endowment Foundation) that the longer the pandemic continues, the bigger the impact on disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils. During this period, the attainment gap is believed to have grown significantly. As we emerge from this crisis, it is important we pay particular attention to the loss of learning suffered by this group.

The free school meal national scheme was designed to ensure disadvantaged pupils did not go without an important meal (perhaps the only substantial meal they have each day). A combination of system failures and confused communications created an administrative bottleneck and put at risk some families' access to this critical service. Whilst many schools established workarounds, the potential consequences for some of the sector's most vulnerable children could have been disastrous. In order to avoid a repeat, the Government might consider earlier and deeper consultation with front-line practitioners, who are generally well-equipped to find robust solutions to these kinds of problems.

What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency

The most important thing to take away from this most challenging situation will be the lessons learned and the lived experiences. As the weeks have gone on, we have become more agile and better able to make evidence-based decisions using business continuity and risk management techniques that we have learned from each other and adapted to our context. As with any self-improving model, we will need to reflect on what went well and what created the greatest challenges and develop risk mitigation and disaster recovery strategies that ensure we are better prepared for future national or indeed regional crises.

We should also be prepared for the mental health ripple effect of the pandemic. After all, this is a significant and very traumatic event that will have touched us all. The evidence from other countries that experienced the virus earlier than we did here in the UK suggests that higher levels of post-traumatic stress are likely to be evident across general society. Children in other countries are starting to show symptoms of anxiety months after the initial outbreak.

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