

Impact of Lockdown school closures on groups of pupils
Briefing for Education Minister Meeting with WCVA and Third Sector
Representatives

On 19th March 2020, schools in Wales were subject to closure in order to flatten the epidemic curve and ensure the safety of teachers and pupils and their families in a pandemic. This closure is widely agreed to have adverse impacts on almost all children in terms of learning and mental health. However, the closure of schools has had differential impact on different groups of students and it will be very important that action is taken to mitigate exacerbation of existing equity gaps in education. In this briefing we focus on the impact on students from low-income families, those living in poverty, and on BAME pupils, particularly in relation to digital exclusion, support for parents, quality of distance learning and mental health.

The sector would like to recognise the work done by schools, teachers, and the wider youth work sector to support young people during a challenging, and unprecedented time.

Sutton Trust Research

In April 2020, [Sutton Trust](#) surveyed 2,500 parents, pupils and teachers about the impact of school closures, measure that impact vis a vis socioeconomic status. Their findings support the on-the-ground evidence found by Wales' third sector groups. The research clearly showed widening gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils. Key findings:

- Pupils in middle class homes were more likely (30%) to have live or recorded lesson than those in working class homes (16%).
- Children in middle class homes (44%) were more likely to spend more than four hours a day learning than those in working class homes (33%).
- Private schools had more resources for personalised support such as regular messaging and phone calls.

- Parents with university degrees were more likely to feel confident in supporting children's learning than those with GCSEs or A levels.
- Private schools and state schools in affluent areas were more likely to already have online platforms to liaise with pupils and receive work from pupils (so they were from the get-go better prepared for lockdown).
- In most deprived schools 15% of teachers worried that over 1/3 of their pupils will not have access to devices and Wi-Fi for home learning. 2% of teachers in the most affluent state schools worried the same.

Digital Exclusion

The steps taken by Welsh Government to provide IT equipment for disadvantaged learners through local authorities was welcome, but feedback from our network indicates that the experience of distribution was variable.

Lack of access to laptops and Wi-Fi remained a serious, intractable problem throughout the whole of lockdown, despite the funding given by Welsh Government to local authorities to resolve this issue. Scores of pupils went weeks or months with no access to online learning materials. Welsh Government funds were very slow to trickle down to schools and when schools began to distribute devices many families were left out. Third sectors workers often acted as advocates requesting devices or Wi-Fi access from schools on behalf of pupils. In many cases this advocacy worked and in some it didn't. Numerous third sector organisations also filled this gap by locating funding to purchase laptops and/or dongles for children who needed them. Small community groups and churches also filled this gap.

Children in Wales report further issues around digital exclusion include the pressure on shared equipment in many households – e.g. adults and children sharing one piece of equipment for work, learning and leisure

In EYST's experience, BAME families found it particularly difficult to procure devices and Wi-Fi through schools. Refugee and asylum-seeking families face the greatest challenges in the digital divide and it is of note that Wi-Fi is not included in the accommodation provided to people seeking asylum.

As schools have reopened, many schools have asked for devices back. This is confusing as the funds released by Welsh Government were additional funds. Welsh Government should provide guidance that devices are meant to stay in pupil's homes to complete term time homework and access distance learning during isolation or lockdown periods and Build Back Better.

Digital access should be considered a fundamental right for pupils to properly access their education. Laptops and access to Wi-Fi must be ensured for all pupils and must be provided to those pupils who need it. This must be planned for as swathes of pupils continue to be subject to distance learning during isolation orders from schools and from lockdown orders.

The Welsh Centre for International Affairs (WCIA) has also noted related issues around digital access. Primarily they are concerned that devices alone are not sufficient to ensure digital inclusion. Electricity and heating costs especially in winter are major factors in exclusion. Secondly, they have experienced inflexibility of schools (usually set by Councils) in allowing voluntary sector providers to use various software in delivery (especially Zoom). WCIA has written to Carmarthenshire County Council on this matter but are also getting reports from teachers, learners and providers that this is causing unnecessary barriers to learning and participation and varies across Wales.

Youth work organisations have noted it has been difficult of young people to access the additional IT and digital support, and the need is much greater than the resources available. For example, one member reported that 4,000+ young people in the Cardiff area had barriers to online education due to IT and digital barriers.

Quality and Type of Distance Learning

Anecdotally, the quality, amount of type of materials provided by schools for online learning has varied tremendously. There were concerns that pupils in private schools or in state schools in affluent areas were more likely to receive live lessons online, receive regular teacher feedback and contact or have access to private tutors. The experience of distance learning was variable, with some pupils experiencing high-quality input

from schools several hours a day, whereas many experienced far less than this

Youth work organisations reported that there were low number of YP attending school hubs during the first lockdown, this was exacerbated safeguarding fears over where they were. The initial of key worker status for youth workers (especially for those not) employed by a local authority. Key worker status meant more could be offered to the older age groups within the Hubs. CWVYS members have experienced an inconsistent pattern across schools and local authorities in reference to involving external orgs to support YP being on School premises

One young person in an EYST forum said, “Most families of Butetown have not been supported at all. They’ve just had a few crayons and a few books.” Children at an EYST online forum had a keen understanding that poverty and wealth impacts a child’s ability to progress learning during school closures, referencing the fact that wealthy families can hire tutors, but children in poor families will not have the same experience. One child said, “Inequalities are a big deal.”

Many third sector organisations such as Newport Yemeni Community Association and Women Connect first have stepped in to fill this void, offering online homework clubs, organising online tuition and also organising online “after school” clubs with diversionary activities. One woman at an EYST forum said, “Thank God for Women Connect First,” when referencing her daughter’s confidence level at returning to school.

SNAP Cymru has reported that some schools prevented 1:1 online sessions from TA support (even though this was specified for the child in their IEP), citing safeguarding concerns.

Support for parents

EYST and other organisations found strong consensus and frustration that not enough is being done to support pupils and parents with continuity of learning.

Support for parents who speak languages other than English or Welsh is a key need in order to ensure equity in education and continuity of learning for pupils, especially BAME pupils and pupils with parents born outside of the UK. Third sector organisations have heard numerous

stories about older siblings doing their best to support home learning of younger siblings and help younger siblings access online learning materials. There was broad concern in EYST forums (both with adult community members and young people) that parents who did not understand assigned work, would not be able to motivate children to complete the work or know when to ask (or how to ask) for additional support for their child.

There is also a key need for support for parents who lack digital skills and parents who lack confidence in their abilities to support their children's home learning. Also needed is support for parents who have to stop work at no notice to deliver home schooling. This presents particular challenges for those who can't work flexible hours or work from home. Schools inform parents that their child is self-isolating for 1-2 weeks but don't always signpost to schemes that support parents such as the discretionary assistance fund

Many organisations are also concerned that that learners in Welsh-medium schools who come from homes where the language is not Welsh have lost or are in danger of losing their Welsh language oral skills.

Poverty and Free School Meals

The steps taken around free school meals were welcomed, as is the announcement that holiday meals will be provided for eFSM learners through to Easter 2021. Our network hopes that steps are taken to ensure that this arrangement becomes permanent.

Learners in Wales face a changing economic situation, the reduction in Universal Credit and Tax Credit support next April, the growing child poverty – food crisis and the need for Welsh Government to help mitigate this crisis by increasing the eligibility for and extending the free school meals beyond the current criteria and likely disruptions to the food supply chain as experienced during the Spring.

Even before the pandemic, [28% of Welsh children were living in poverty](#), and more families will fall into poverty income as a result of the pandemic. Child poverty does have an impact on pupil equity and Welsh schools must do all they can to ensure that any broadening gaps in pupil performance and outcomes are mitigated.

The Resolution Foundation report that

The Welsh claimant count rose sharply between March and May (from 3.9 per cent, up to 7.8 per cent of working-age adults). The areas of Wales that have seen the highest increases in the claimant count as a proportion of working-age residents are Newport (3.6 percentage points), Rhondda Cynon Taff and Conwy (both 3.3 percentage points) (p.10)

The proposed £20-a-week reduction in Universal Credit and Tax Credit support next April could pull the rug from low income households at a time of almost-certainly elevated unemployment, and disproportionately hit households in Wales. 35 per cent of non-pensioner households in Wales are set to lose over £1,000 in 2021-22, unless there is a change in policy. Aside from Northern Ireland, Wales loses more than any other nation or region of England, with 300,000 households currently claiming either Working Tax Credits or Universal Credit in Wales. The worst hit Welsh constituencies include Swansea East (where 44 per cent of working-age households are set to see large income falls in April), the Vale of Clwyd (42 per cent), Torfaen (39 per cent), Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (38 per cent) Newport East (37 per cent) and Aberavon (37 per cent). So, this UK-wide policy decision will have a big impact on what happens to household incomes in Wales over the next six months.

CPAG Cost of Learning in Lockdown research found eligible parents valued receiving support towards the cost of replacing free school meals. Most families told [CPAG](#) they preferred to receive support through direct cash payments to their bank accounts, as this method allowed flexibility, dignity, safety and convenience - especially parcels which were not suitable for the family's dietary needs and worth considerably less than the £19.50 paid in cash to families in some other local authorities. Some local authorities [went ahead](#) with voucher schemes with this outcome. Of course, there still needs to be alternative provision for households who cannot use a bank account, such as some families seeking asylum.

During the pandemic, food aid organisations like Action in Caerau and Ely, Cardiff, found that most recipients of their food aid were working families who didn't qualify for help through the free school meal payments. There are 70,000 children in poverty who don't qualify for free school meals in Wales - typically in households that are in work but on very low pay. These low-paid working households are the most likely to have suffered income shocks as a result of the pandemic.

Mental Health

The mental health of BAME children has been particularly and disproportionately impacted during Covid. BAME children are more likely to live in overcrowded and intergenerational houses; more likely to live in deprived areas; less likely to live in houses with gardens; and less likely to have access to nearby green space, all which can impact adversely on mental health. BAME children are more likely to have been personally affected with close family member being seriously ill or dying from Coronavirus. And BAME children have been impacted by the Black lives matter movement and images and news stories bringing the impact of racism in society to the forefront of public discourse.

We already know that BAME children are less likely to access school mental health services. There is anecdotal evidence that BAME children's access to CAMS is lacking and that BAME children's experiences via CAMS are not good.

GCSE and A level pupils were impacted by the uncertainty and stress over cancellation of exams and alternative assessments. Pupils in areas considered deprived were impacted by the proposal for computational modelling, which treated them as classes/amalgamations rather than individual pupils. These pupils went through emotional roller coasters before the decision to scrap the computational model. BAME pupils additionally worried about the impact of discrimination and unconscious bias in teacher assessments and predicted grades, a dynamic proven in numerous previous research studies.

Questions for the Minister:

- How will the Minister ensure that every child, particularly children in low income families have access to quality online/distance learning and access to appropriate devices and Wi-Fi to access that learning?

- Given the growing trend for increasing in-work poverty among parents, especially single mothers, will the Minister review of the eligibility threshold for free school meals to ensure no child in poverty is not able to claim free school meals?
- Will Welsh Government be offering guidance or other support to prepare for what has been described in England as “possible changes to their food supply chain” from 1 January 2021 so the effect on pupils in their care can be minimised, especially for those dependent upon free school meals?
- What tailored support is available for pupils from, BAME backgrounds whose mental health has deteriorated as a result of lockdown?
- How is the Minister evaluating the impact of school closure on groups of pupils – particularly looking any emerging or widening inequalities that may result from that closure?
- Will the Minister consider improved guidance to schools for getting voluntary youth work sector provision into schools to support learners during lockdown / closures, as part of a ‘team’ approach to support?