Coronavirus and schools

By Nerys Roberts, Shadi Danechi

25 June 2021

1 Background on school closures and re-openings
2 Schooling in the current summer 2021 term
3 Educational and other impacts of pandemic
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## Contents

1  Background on school closures and re-openings 6

1.1  March 2021 reopening (England) 6

1.2  History of school attendance restrictions since beginning of pandemic 6

Schooling during the early pandemic 6
The new school year – August/ September 2020 7
January 2021: mainstream schools in England close to most pupils 7

1.3  Spring 2021 school term in other parts of UK 7
Scotland 7
Wales 8
Northern Ireland 8

2  Schooling in the current summer 2021 term 10

2.1  Testing of school students 10
Secondary pupils: asymptomatic testing 10
Positive LFD tests should be confirmed by PCR 10
Regular asymptomatic testing for pupils is voluntary 10

2.2  COVID funding for schools and pupils (England) 11

2.3  Level of education recovery funding 12
Reaction to additional funding 12

2.4  Infection rates (England) 13

2.5  Current school attendance data for England 14

3  Educational and other impacts of pandemic 17

3.1  Early pandemic survey data on home learning 17

3.2  2021 analyses of pandemic impacts on pupils 18
3.3 Further reading on impacts of pandemic on learning and wellbeing

UK evidence 20
International evidence 21
Summary

Coverage of this briefing
This briefing paper looks at the COVID-19 pandemic and schools. It largely focuses on England. It provides information on the winter 2020-spring 2021 school attendance restrictions (for most children), and the period since the wider reopening from 8 March 2021. It covers attendance rates, pupil coronavirus testing, operational issues for schools, and education recovery. Secondary exams including GCSEs, A Levels and equivalents are covered in a separate briefing paper, Coronavirus: GCSEs, A Levels and equivalents in 2021.

This is a fast-moving issue and this briefing should be read as correct at the time of publication.

Timeline of recent events (England)
- **8 March 2021**: most pupils begin returning to face-to-face provision. Some secondary pupils had a phased return, to allow for asymptomatic screening using lateral flow devices (LFDs).
- **From 17 May 2021**: secondary pupils no longer required to wear face coverings in classrooms.
- **2 June 2021**: Department for Education announces an additional £1.4bn of education recovery funding, taking total recovery funding to over £3bn over four academic years (including 2020-21).

Impact on education, development and wellbeing
Early in the pandemic, survey evidence indicated wide disparities in young people’s home learning experiences during school closures and periods of self-isolation; there have been particular concerns about the impacts on disadvantaged children.

School funding and additional costs relating to the pandemic
The Department for Education (DfE) has made some additional funding available for free school meals, exceptional cleaning costs, catch-up funding and tutoring, laptops and digital devices, teacher training, and supply staff costs. However, concerns remain that some schools are struggling to meet pandemic-related costs, and about whether total education recovery funding announced to date is sufficient. There are also debates about how recovery funding should be spent.
1 Background on school closures and re-openings

1.1 March 2021 reopening (England)

On 22 February 2021, the Prime Minister announced that all pupils in England could return from 8 March 2021. To summarise the arrangements:

- All primary pupils could return from Monday 8 March.
- Secondary pupils also began to return from this date, but schools had “discretion on how to test students over [the week commencing 8 March] to enable their return to the classroom”.
- Secondary pupils, college students, and school and college staff across all phases, are recommended to take twice-weekly asymptomatic lateral flow device (LFD) tests – more on which in section 2.1 below.\(^1\)

Further details on operational considerations for schools in England are set out in the Department for Education’s guidance for mainstream schools and specialist settings.

1.2 History of school attendance restrictions since beginning of pandemic

Schooling during the early pandemic

Schools in all parts of the UK were closed to most children by the start of the week commencing Monday 23 March 2020. In England, schools remained open where necessary for the children of critical workers, and vulnerable children including: those with a social worker; looked-after children; and those with an education, health and care (EHC) plan because they have complex special educational needs. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also put similar arrangements in place for the children of critical workers, and vulnerable pupils.

In England, some other pupils in a limited number of priority year groups were encouraged to return later in the summer 2020 term. Information on

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\(^1\) Department for Education/ Department for Health and Social Care press release, ‘Mass testing for secondary pupils as all schools and colleges fully reopen from 8 March’, 22 February 2021.
Coronavirus and schools

attendance rates in England during this period can be found in the annexe applied along with this briefing paper.

The new school year – August/ September 2020

Schools remained closed to most pupils until the beginning of the autumn 2020 term – September in England and Wales, and August in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Schools in all four nations opened with the expectation of full attendance for the new 2020/21 school year.

January 2021: mainstream schools in England close to most pupils

During an address to the nation on 4 January 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that primary schools, secondary schools, and colleges in England would move to remote learning for most pupils, until after February half-term, subject to review. Vulnerable pupils and critical workers’ children could continue to attend face-to-face provision, and the DfE subsequently indicated that special schools and alternative provision would remain open.2

Mr Johnson also said that the Government recognised that it was “not possible or fair for all exams to go ahead this summer as normal”.3 It was subsequently reported in the press that vocational/ technical exams (such as BTECs) planned for the next few weeks could still go ahead.4

On 27 January, Mr Johnson made a further statement in the Commons, in which he said that it wouldn’t be possible to start re-opening schools to more pupils straight after the February half term, but that the Government hoped this could happen from 8 March.5

1.3

Spring 2021 school term in other parts of UK

Scotland

Before Christmas, the Scottish Government announced that schools would not offer on-site provision to most pupils until at least 18 January 2021. Schools would be open to vulnerable and key worker children from the beginning of term, and would provide online learning for other pupils from 11 January.6

2 Department for Education Twitter post, 4 January 2021.
3 Prime Minister’s address to the nation: 4 January 2021
4 See e.g., ‘BTEC and other vocational exams to go ahead this week despite national lockdown, DfE confirms’, in Schools Week, 4 January 2021.
5 HC Deb 27 January 2021, Vol. 688, c386.
On Monday 4 January 2021, whilst outlining further lockdown measures for Scotland, First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said that Scotland’s schools would stay closed to most pupils until 1 February 2021, with a review on 18 January. The change would apply to all pupils, except vulnerable children, and children of key workers, and to “nursery schools, as well as primary and secondary schools”. These school measures would also apply across Scotland, and not just to Scotland’s Level 4 (mainland) areas.7

On Tuesday 16 February, the Scottish Government announced that more pupils would be able to attend full-time from 22 February, including those in early years settings, and primary year groups 1-3. Small numbers of secondary pupils in years S4 to S6 and who needed to complete practical work in order to receive Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) certificates would also return. She said that, all being well, more announcements would follow on 2 March, but that she didn’t envisage “any further return to school before 15 March”. 8

Remaining primary-aged pupils returned to schools from 15 March 2021, and all pupils (except those shielding) returned from 12 April 2021, depending on area.

**Wales**

The Welsh Government announced in early February that a phased return would begin as planned from 22 February. Children in the foundation phase (aged around 3 to 7) would return first. Small numbers of vocational students would also return to colleges.9

Remaining primary-aged children were able to return to the classroom from 15 March 2021, along with secondary pupils in exam years. There was some additional flexibility for schools in relation to pupils in year 10 and 12, and those in years 7 to 9 could attend ‘check-ins’ with teachers. All pupils were able to return to the classroom following the Easter holidays.

**Northern Ireland**

In Northern Ireland, most primary and secondary school pupils were taught remotely following the Christmas school holidays. Additionally, transfer tests (for admission to Northern Ireland’s selective grammar schools) did not go ahead.10

Pupils in pre-school, nursery and primary years 1 to 3 returned to school on 8 March 2021. From 22 March 2021, older primary and secondary pupils in years

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12 to 14 returned to schools. After the Easter holidays, all year groups returned to face-to-face lessons full-time.
2 Schooling in the current summer 2021 term

2.1 Testing of school students

Secondary pupils: asymptomatic testing
All secondary-age pupils in England are eligible for twice-weekly home testing using lateral flow devices (LFDs). Members of their households can also access these tests. There is no asymptomatic screening programme for pupils of primary school age.

Surge testing is also in place in some areas with relatively high and/or rapidly rising COVID case numbers.

Positive LFD tests should be confirmed by PCR
At the time of writing, if an LFD test returns a positive result, this should be confirmed by a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test. If the PCR test returns a negative result, and is taken within two days of the positive LFD test, the PCR result overrides the LFD result and the individual can return to school – unless they are otherwise required to self-isolate.11

During the period in early March 2021, when secondary-age pupils were offered 3 LFD tests on school sites, a positive result from a LFD device taken on a school site triggered automatic self-isolation of the pupil and their household members; there was no requirement for a confirmatory PCR test.12

Regular asymptomatic testing for pupils is voluntary
The DfE guidance to schools is clear that participation in asymptomatic testing is voluntary for secondary pupils.13

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12 As above.
13 As above.
2.2 COVID funding for schools and pupils (England)

The DfE has announced several coronavirus-related funding streams for schools and pupils, since the start of the pandemic. Schools also continue to receive their normal recurrent funding during periods when most pupils were unable to attend – i.e., in the summer 2020 term, and part of the spring 2021 term. Additional support includes:

- **Exceptional costs funding** for the period March to July 2020, including cleaning associated with COVID cases, some premises costs, and additional school food provided outside of the FSM voucher scheme.
- A **universal catch-up premium**, the National Tutoring Programme, 16-19 tuition fund, further financial support for summer schools and a recovery premium.\(^\text{14}\)
- Extra training and support for early years practitioners and school teachers.
- **Funding for digital devices and 4G routers**, for disadvantaged children unable to attend school because of closures or self-isolation requirements.
- **£40 million funding** for local authorities to support school transport in the autumn 2020 term.\(^\text{15}\)
- Funding for free school meals during the initial and spring 2021 lockdown, and for some holiday periods in 2020.
- A **COVID Winter Grant Scheme**, to be run by councils in England, providing support from December 2020 to April 2021. Councils could spend this on supporting families in need, including by providing food.
- An expanded **Holiday Activities and Food Programme** across England in the Easter, summer, and Christmas school holidays in 2021.
- The DfE **also confirmed** it is providing additional high need funding of £730 million in 2021-22, and says this will take the overall SEND budget to “more than £8 billion” in 2021-22.
- A **COVID workforce fund**, to cover the second half of the autumn 2020 term.\(^\text{16}\)

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\(^{16}\) Department for Education press release, ‘New funding to support schools and colleges during Covid pandemic’, 27 November 2020.
Further information on free school meals funding schemes during the spring 2021 lockdown, and during previous periods of restricted school opening, can be found in another Library briefing paper:

- **School meals and nutritional standards (England)**

### 2.3 Level of education recovery funding

In May 2021, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) published a [report on education recovery and resilience](https://www.epi.ac.uk/research/education-recovery-and-resilience). This called for a three-year package amounting to £13.5bn, to support a range of programmes including:

- Increasing the Pupil Premium (funding for disadvantaged children) and increasing the Early Years Pupil Premium, to the same rate as is paid for primary pupils.
- Extended schools and summer wellbeing programmes.
- A new Continuous Professional Development (CPD) fund for teachers.
- Funding to recruit mental health support workers in schools.
- More small group and one-to-one tuition through to 2023-24, and an extension of the 16-19 tuition fund until then, too.

On 2 June 2021, the Government said it would provide a further £1.4bn in education recovery funding, on top of the £1.7bn already announced – taking the total to more than £3bn over four academic years, including 2020-21. Of the £1.4bn announced on this date, £1bn would be spent on “up to 6 million, 15-hour tutoring courses for disadvantaged school children”, as well as the 16-19 tuition fund. Other funding would support early years provision, and teacher development.

**Reaction to additional funding**

On the same day the funding was announced, Sir Kevan Collins resigned as Education Recovery Commissioner for England. He said that while he welcomed the funding, he believed it to be insufficient, and that he did “not believe it is credible that a successful recovery can be achieved with a programme of support of this size”.

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18 [HC Deb 22 June 2021, Vol. 697, Col. 745](https://www.parliament.uk/corporate/library-service/our-work/research/parliamentary-debates/)
EPI said the money amounted to “a fraction of the level of funding required to reverse learning loss seen by pupils since March 2020”.\(^{20}\)

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) called Government action so far “well below par, in terms of its speed of response, the scope of its ambition and the depth of its pockets. Education recovery cannot be done on the cheap, but as things stand, that is exactly what the government is proposing.”\(^{21}\)

The Early Years Alliance said that it was encouraging to see a greater focus on, and more money for early years, than there had been in initial announcements. Additional training for early years practitioners was “particularly welcome since tight budgets leave many settings with little money to invest in upskilling the workforce.”. However, it went on to say that the alliance hoped for further investment in the sector, given existing evidence on the the importance of the early years in closing the attainment gap and missed opportunities for young children’s personal and social development.\(^{22}\)

### 2.4 Infection rates (England)

The latest report from Imperial College’s Department of Health and Social Care-commissioned REACT-1 coronavirus study for England was published on 17 June 2021. This reports data relating to swabs collected between 20 May and 7 June 2021. The report’s authors concluded that between the latest period (round 12) and the previous round (round 11, 15 April to 3 May 2021), national weighted prevalence had increased:

Our results from REACT-1 round 12 showed an exponential increase in prevalence during the period 20 May to 7 June 2021, with prevalence rising 50% compared with the previous round (15 April to 7 May 2021). We estimate a doubling time of 11 days and R robustly above one at 1.44. This period of rapid growth coincides with the Delta variant becoming the dominant variant in England.

We observed that growth was being driven by younger age groups, with five-fold higher rates of swab-positivity among younger children (ages 5 to 12 years) and young adults (18 to 24 years) compared with those aged 65 years and older, and 2.5-fold higher rates among those below 50 years compared with those 50 years and above. These age patterns suggest that recent expansion of the vaccine programme to those aged 18 years and above\(^ {14}\) should help

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\(^{20}\) Education Policy Institute, ‘EPI responds to the government’s new education recovery package’, 2 June 2021.

\(^{21}\) National Association of Head Teachers, ‘NAHT comments on education recovery plan’, 9 June 2021.

\(^{22}\) Early Years Alliance press release, ‘Alliance responds as DfE announces latest tranche of education recovery funding’, 1 June 2021.
Coronavirus and schools

substantially to reduce the overall growth of the epidemic. The observed patterns may reflect increased social interactions among children and young adults as schools remain open and lockdown eases, as well as high vaccine uptake among older people.  

Further detail about covid-19 infections can be found within the coronavirus in the UK dashboard, national COVID-19 surveillance reports and coronavirus infection survey statistics.

A Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology briefing looks at the existing evidence on the impacts of coronavirus in children.

2.5 Current school attendance data for England

The DfE has published estimates for the number of pupils in priority groups attending school since 23 March 2020. These have been based on figures that schools have provided to them through a daily survey. Absence data for Covid-19 related reasons is available on a weekly snapshot basis from 12 October until the end of the autumn term, and then from schools reopening on 8 March to the time of writing.

The published figures are estimates because they have been adjusted for non-responses using certain assumptions. Lower response rates from schools can make these estimates less accurate. There have been changes to the information schools have been asked to return, and also changes to how the resulting data has been reported, over time, which mean that care must be taken when looking at trends.

The latest attendance data is for 17 June 2021. These figures are not directly comparable with earlier dates (prior to 7 June 2021), because of issues around exam year pupils (yrs 11 to 13) who are no longer required at school:

- 89.7% of pupils were attending – this figure has been adjusted to exclude pupils in (exam) years 11 and 13 who aren’t required to attend. This is down from 92.4% a week prior, on 10 June 2021.
- The estimated attendance rate for primary schools was 93.0% on 17 June, down from 95.1% a week prior.
- At secondary, it was 84.9%, down from 88.7% a week prior.

Looking solely at absence that was related to coronavirus, for example, because a child was self-isolating or had tested positive for coronavirus themselves, the DfE estimates that on 17 June 2021:

• 3.3% of pupils were absent for this reason. This is up from 1.2% one week earlier.

Of those absent for reasons connected to COVID, the most common reason was isolating due to contact with a confirmed case within school. 2.3% of pupils were absent for this reason, up from 0.5% a week previously.

The DfE also publishes monthly local authority-level data on attendance rates. The latest data at LA level is for 27 May 2021 (and so may also have been impacted by the May half term).

Attendance rates varied between local authority areas. For example, 64.7% of pupils were attending in Bolton, Lancashire, whereas in Rutland, it was 96.0%. Local authority data is not adjusted for non-responses and so may not be representative.24

Attendance rates have generally exceeded the Autumn Term average since the 8 March 2021 reopening

Notes: All figures are estimates because they have been adjusted by the DfE for non-responses.

Source: Department for Education, Coronavirus (COVID-19): attendance in education and early years settings, 15 June 2021 (Table 18)

Historical attendance data for earlier periods is available in the Annexe to this briefing.

The House of Commons Library Insights Autumn Term 2020: how covid-19 affected England’s state-funded schools and Spring Term 2021: how covid-19

affected England’s state-funded schools provides attendance summaries and some local data for these periods.
3 Educational and other impacts of pandemic

3.1 Early pandemic survey data on home learning

During the early part of the pandemic, there were several surveys on home learning environments, and time spent on remote schooling. This pointed to marked differences in access to technology and engagement.

In early 2020, Ofcom’s Technology Tracker estimated that between 1.14 million and 1.78 million children under the age of 18 lived in households without access to a laptop, desktop or tablet in the UK.

Ofcom estimated that between 227,000 and 559,000 lived in households with no access to the internet at home, while a further 473,000 to 913,000 lived in households whose only access to the internet was via mobile.

These estimates are expressed as ranges because they are based on a survey. Estimates broken down by local area or school year group were not published.

The UCL Institute of Education analysed survey data about home schooling from a sample of UK households, in the last two weeks of April 2020. The results were then adjusted to provide UK wide estimates.

The survey found the average amount of schoolwork that pupils were doing in a day was low (two and a half hours). It also found large differences between pupils’ home learning experiences and access to technology when broken down by free school meal (FSM) status.25

Between 29 April and 12 May 2020, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) surveyed around 4,000 parents with children aged 4-15 about their home learning activities and resources. The results were then adjusted to provide national estimates.

The IFS survey found large differences between state and private school parents’ responses about the provision of online learning resources from schools. The results also showed large differences within the state sector when broken down by family deprivation levels.26

25 UCL Institute of Education, Schoolwork in lockdown: new evidence on the epidemic of educational poverty, p10
Teacher Tapp also carried out surveys of teachers in the early part of the pandemic. The results are then adjusted to provide national estimates.

Early in the pandemic, the survey found very large differences between teachers’ perceptions of state and private sector pupils’ home learning environments, and also the average amount of online learning time. It also found large differences between state-funded school pupils, on measures of hours spent learning and access to technology, depending on how deprived their school intake was. 27

3.2 2021 analyses of pandemic impacts on pupils

In June 2021, the Department for Education (DfE) published research looking at maths and reading performance among a sample of school children in England. 28 This compared performance on standardised tests at different points during and prior to the pandemic, and aimed to assess how much progress pupils had made compared to what would normally have been expected. The most recent data relates to the spring term 2021; for the majority of this term, most students weren’t able to attend in person.

The researchers note some of the difficulties inherent in undertaking this sort of analysis, including that the lengthy period of school closures stretching over two school years has meant that directly comparable data is not always available. They conclude that, depending on the method used, their estimates could be either under- or over-estimates of learning loss for primary school pupils (year groups 3-6). The sample size of this study for secondary school pupils was too small and so results for this group, as well as breakdowns by pupil characteristics will be provided in a subsequent report.

The researchers estimate:

- By the end of the spring term, primary-aged pupils had experienced a learning loss in reading equivalent to between 2.0 months and 2.3 months of progress depending on which of the two methods is used.
- In mathematics, primary-aged pupils experienced a much greater learning loss of between 3.1 months and 3.6 months, again depending on method used. 29

A separate report analysed data on learning loss in the first and second halves of the autumn 2020 term. This report suggested that, by the first half of the autumn term, “average learning losses were 3.7 months in maths for..."
pupils in primary school and 1.8 months in reading for pupils in primary school”.30

There were also regional differences, and differences based on pupil characteristics, when it came to the scale of learning loss. The authors say:

The analysis [of reading skills in the first half of the autumn 2020 term] suggests that school closures in relation to the pandemic have led to a widening of the disadvantage gap. Furthermore, pupils from EAL backgrounds in secondary, pupils in Yorkshire and the Humber, and pupils in the North East, experienced a learning loss of a similar scale – around half a month larger than other pupils.

The extent to which disadvantaged pupils lost learning, as a result of the first lockdown at least, appears to be at the lower end of some of the other published estimates of learning loss. That is not to downplay the effect that is seen in this analysis. It is still equivalent to undoing a third of the progress made in the last decade on closing the gap in primary schools, and given further school closures during 2020/21, it would seem likely that this gap could grow further.31

On maths skills by the first half of the autumn 2020 term, it concludes:

This analysis provides further evidence that school closures in relation to the pandemic have led to a widening of the disadvantage gap. The difference of a months’ progress lost relative to other pupils would be equivalent to two-thirds of the progress made over the past decade in closing the disadvantage gap in primary schools.32

Chapter 4 of the report goes on to discuss learning recovery during the second half of the autumn 2020 term.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has also published a summary of domestic and international research on the impact of the partial school closures. They conclude that research “shows a consistent pattern”, namely that:

- Pupils have made less academic progress compared with previous year groups.

30  As cited in Education Policy Institute website summary article, ‘EPI research for the Department for Education on pupil learning loss’.
32  Education Policy Institute and Renaissance Learning for the Department for Education, Understanding Progress in the 2020/21 Academic Year. Complete findings from the Autumn term, 2 June 2021, p32.
• There is a large attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils, which seems to have grown.\textsuperscript{33}

In May 2021, FTT Education Datalab also published results from analysis carried out jointly with Education Endowment Foundation and Teacher Tapp. This looked specifically at the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils in later primary education, and their peers.

Their research uses in-school assessments in reading and maths, taken in the autumn term 2019, as a baseline. The results of these were compared with those from tests taken in the summer and autumn terms of 2020. A summary of the research’s findings concludes:

The attainment gap at the end of Key Stage 2 already stood at \textit{around 0.50 effect size units} before the pandemic – the equivalent of six month’s progress – so disadvantaged pupils can ill afford to fall any further behind.

We found that the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils widened by the equivalent of one month in maths (0.07 effect size units) between Autumn 2019 and Autumn 2020. We didn’t find any change in the gap in reading.\textsuperscript{34}

3.3 Further reading on impacts of pandemic on learning and wellbeing

UK evidence

• Sutton Trust, \textit{Covid-19 impacts: school shutdown}, 20 April 2020
• Centre for Economic Performance, \textit{Covid-19 school shutdowns: What will they do to our children’s education?}, May 2020
• Education Endowment Foundation, \textit{Impact of school closures on the attainment gap}, June 2020
• Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, \textit{Home schooling during lockdown: inequalities in inputs and perceptions}, 5 June 2020
• YouGov, \textit{How are parents coping with home schooling?}, 8 June 2020
• UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies, \textit{Parental involvement in home schooling and developmental play during lockdown}, July 2020


\textsuperscript{34} FTT Education Datalab, \textit{‘Have disadvantaged pupils fallen further behind during the pandemic?’}, 7 May 2021. The full report is published by the Education Endowment Foundation.
• IFS, *Primary school closures created substantial inequality in time spent learning between pupils from poorer and better-off families*, 17 August 2020
• POST, *Covid-19 and the disadvantage gap*, 1 September 2020
• Education Policy Institute, *Education policy responses across the UK to the pandemic*, 9 October 2020.
• National Foundation for Educational Research, *How prepared were primary teachers and pupils in England for the shift to online learning? Insights from TIMSS 2019*, 8 December 2020
• Sutton Trust, *Learning in lockdown*, 21 January 2021
• Institute for Fiscal Studies, ‘The return to school and catch-up policies’, 7 March 2021.
• Education Policy Institute, *Analysis paper: preliminary research findings on education recovery*, 20 April 2021.
• FTT Education Datalab, ‘*Have disadvantaged pupils fallen further behind during the pandemic?*, 7 May 2021
• Education Policy Institute, *Education recovery and resilience in England*, 14 May 2021
• Education Policy Institute and Renaissance Learning for the Department for Education, *Understanding progress in the 2020 to 2021 academic year: complete findings from the autumn term: Understanding progress in the 2020 to 2021 academic year: initial findings from the spring term*, both 4 June 2021.

**International evidence**

• UNESCO *interactive map on global school closures*
• UNESCO *interactive map on school feeding and school meals* during the pandemic.
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