
Evolving approaches to blended learning in independent schools

July 2021

This report is also available in Welsh.



Introduction

This report focuses on how mainstream independent schools have evaluated and refined approaches to blended learning. It summarises the findings from engagement phone calls made to 10 independent mainstream schools between the latter part of April and the first half of May 2021. The report also draws on the evidence gathered following Estyn’s earlier programme of engagement calls and associated communications such as stakeholder meetings. This report is based on the information discussed during telephone conversations with the headteachers and senior leaders of the schools and focuses on the:

- monitoring processes used to reflect on their blended learning provision
- challenges they have faced
- changes they may have made.

The report includes cameos of emerging practice in developing, monitoring, and evaluating approaches to remote and blended learning.

The independent sector is diverse. There are 37 independent mainstream schools in Wales. These schools provide education for about 9,200 pupils ranging from nursery-age to 18 years old. This is around 2% of pupils in Wales. The schools vary greatly in size and are owned by either a single proprietor or a group.

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Background and initial challenges

In the foreword to his Annual Report 2019-2020, Meilyr Rowlands HMCI, (Estyn 2020, p.4) stated that, 'the last months of 2019-2020 academic year brought challenges to Welsh education the like of which we have not seen in generations. The challenges were many, complex and unexpected. The COVID-19 pandemic changed people's lives, had a huge impact on our economies and caused major disruption to education systems worldwide and in Wales.' The Chief Inspector's foreword and the report offer an account of how education and training providers across all phases and sectors coped with the initial lockdown period and how they strived to support learners through remote and blended learning opportunities.

Concepts underpinning online teaching and learning

The 'Education Endowment Foundation guide to supporting school planning: A tiered approach to 2021' (2020, p.6) published in December 2020, emphasised that 'the best available evidence indicates that great teaching is the most important lever schools have to improve outcomes for their pupils'. The report states that 'this was true before the COVID-19 pandemic and would continue to be so throughout this academic year'.

There is a good deal of writing and research about the different concepts underpinning online teaching and learning, including remote and blended learning. However, the main challenge, as with all teaching and learning, is to design the learning in such a way that learners can actively engage with the subject matter and the teacher can develop the learner's knowledge, understanding and skills through independent learning and interaction with peers. To achieve this, it is important that the teacher designs teaching and learning to take advantage of the technology but does not allow the technology to dictate the way in which the teacher engages the learner.

Defining blended learning

At its simplest, blended learning is a combination of asynchronous and synchronous learning.

Asynchronous learning - allows the learner to engage in depth with materials about the subject or areas of learning they are studying in their own time and at their own pace. In the best cases, it may contain a range of exercises, activities, videos, and podcasts that help the learner engage successfully with the materials.

Synchronous learning - refers to a group of learners working with their teacher for a stated period online. This may support teachers to check on the wellbeing of learners, to help learners resolve any difficulties in their learning and to informally assess learners' understanding of work.

On-site face-to-face teaching and learning - refers to whole group lessons or one-to-one support taking place in person on the school site. This form of teaching will continue to be the most important to all learners. This aspect of blended learning is key to helping learners understand both the key concepts of the work they will be tackling in the remote learning phases and the skills the learners will need to deploy to complete their learning successfully.

Blended learning - is particularly effective when remote and face-to-face teaching and learning are integrated, well-structured and learner focussed. Research suggests that a successful blended learning approach involves planning the school-based and remote learning provision alongside each other.

Key messages

The initial stages of the pandemic in March 2020 created a significant degree of uncertainty for staff and pupils in all independent schools. To counter these uncertainties, leaders attempted to provide clarity and reassurance. Many independent schools set out a vision and road map with the key objective being to promote high aspirations and maintain high standards of learning. In many cases, this approach included a full programme of online teaching and learning based on the normal school timetable with regular assessments to monitor the quality and effectiveness of learning.

Gradually, leaders recognised that it was critical to establish a sustainable programme rather than simply replicating a full timetable. In most schools, this programme evolved during the first lockdown and by the time of the second lockdown in the late autumn term, a pattern and strategy had been established.

Throughout the pandemic, leaders report that the process of reviewing and refining approaches to online teaching and learning has been critical in helping to identify aspects of teaching and learning that are successful as well as those areas that can be strengthened. Most schools refer to evolving aspects of provision that they will maintain or adapt in the future. Headteachers report that the last year has been a valuable 'opportunity to learn about ourselves' and to retain and build upon particular learning approaches, strategies and skills.

During the first lockdown many schools adapted timetables, refined the structure of lessons, and modified the content and scope of certain topics to align more suitably to online learning. A few schools did not offer synchronous streamed lessons, particularly for younger primary pupils, preferring to produce recorded lessons and provide tasks and suitable resources to support their learning.

Leaders note that teachers in primary classes have generally been cautious about streaming live synchronous lessons. They believe that, for younger pupils, it is necessary to achieve a suitable balance of synchronous and asynchronous learning partly to manage the extent of on-screen time. In such circumstances, leaders have generally continued to evolve their approach to online teaching and learning based on teachers' ongoing assessment of pupils' experiences and progress.

Leaders report that the early stages of lockdown presented significant challenges for many schools in ensuring all pupils and staff had access to sufficient and suitable devices and information and communications technology (ICT) resources to provide the necessary foundations for teaching and learning. Critically, since independent schools did not have access to the platforms and applications within Hwb, leaders had to determine which platforms offered the best functionality to meet the differing learning needs of pupils in each age group.

School leaders emphasise that the new approaches required a great deal of professional learning for staff. This has involved external provision including some degree of collaboration, for example with other independent association schools, but primarily the internal exchange of good practice. In most schools, leaders were aware of the wide range of staff digital competencies. While a few staff were able to adopt new concepts and approaches quickly, others required a greater degree of support.

During the pandemic, leaders believe that nearly all teachers have adapted their practice and pedagogy and have become familiar with a range of learning platforms. Many headteachers report that they feel that lockdown has enhanced aspects of teaching. For example, many staff have developed a range of new skills and competencies to teach remotely that will be extremely valuable in the medium and long term and which will become a commonplace aspect of pedagogical practice.

In many schools, quality assurance arrangements have continued throughout the pandemic, but leaders report that they have adapted and refined the nature and purpose of these activities. As a result of quality assurance activities, leaders report that there has been greater consistency in provision and that the structure and nature of blended learning has evolved. For example, they believe that there is less teacher input and increasing opportunities for pupils to work independently as well as a reduction in on-screen time by including alternative activities.

In many cases, headteachers report that staff are using a range of assessment tools to monitor the quality of pupils' online work. Leaders report that many teachers have incorporated a range of strategies into their online lessons to engage pupils and provide immediate feedback to support learning. These include 'low stakes' online chats, quizzes, plenary exit tickets, small group discussions in break-out rooms and peer assessment activities.

In many schools, leaders report that pupils in key stage 4 and the sixth form are generally confident about their progress during the pandemic. Leaders believe that these pupils have received effective support in the use of ICT and are perhaps more self-reliant than younger colleagues. Teachers indicate that most pupils have engaged enthusiastically and adopted a constructive attitude to their work. A minority of pupils prefer certain aspects of online learning since there are few distractions and they can focus fully on learning activities.

Leaders suggest that the situation has been more challenging for key stage 3 pupils and those in primary classes. Due to increased online activity, leaders point to younger children experiencing issues with their fine motor skills, handwriting and spelling although they report that many children have made strong progress with their reading skills since they have been encouraged and supported to read at home.

In most schools, teachers are currently focusing on monitoring performance, consolidating pupils' knowledge and understanding, and adapting schemes of work and lesson plans to address any emerging gaps in teaching and learning. In some areas, leaders report that pupils have only 'surface level knowledge' which needs to be reinforced to ensure an 'in-depth' understanding. In a few schools, literacy and numeracy leaders have identified key catch-up objectives and essential learning outcomes before the end of the school year.

Many schools recognised early on that it was unlikely public examinations would take place as normal this year. Nevertheless, leaders report that they consider schools have a responsibility to help pupils to prepare for the next stage of education. Leaders believe this includes some form of 'higher-stake exam' to help pupils to develop the necessary skills and confidence to take exams in the future. These schools have established policies and approaches that leaders believe replicate typical examination conditions, as far as possible, to help determine grades in each subject.

Generally headteachers report that pupils understand how the process of awarding GCSE and A level grades will be determined and believe many pupils are confident that they will achieve the grades that match their abilities and that they are well prepared for 'progression to the next stage of their education'.

Many leaders report that maintaining continuity of learning for overseas boarders presents significant challenges. This is particularly the case regarding quarantine requirements for pupils returning to the United Kingdom but also in providing accommodation and a programme of activities for those who have remained here throughout the year. Schools with overseas boarders have used a range of strategies, including adaptations to the school day and extension activities to support these pupils when they are required to quarantine.

Detailed findings and cameos

Initial stages of lockdown

The initial stages of the pandemic in March 2020 created a significant degree of uncertainty for staff and pupils in all independent schools. To counter these uncertainties, leaders attempted to provide clarity and reassurance. Many independent schools set out a vision and road map with the key objective being to promote high aspirations and maintain high standards of learning. In many cases, this approach included a full programme of online teaching and learning based on the normal school timetable with regular assessments to monitor the quality and effectiveness of learning. As part of this programme, staff provided weekly guidance and a bank of resources for pupils to support their learning. In addition, these schools created channels for pupils, parents and staff to provide feedback and access support. Leaders report that this approach helped establish clear expectations and has contributed significantly to successful continuity of learning.

In many schools, the emphasis in primary classes initially was on literacy and numeracy with most mornings dedicated to these areas of learning. The approach to online teaching varied between schools, with adaptations made to the timetable or the structure of lessons. The examples below show how two schools adapted their timetables.

At the start of lockdown, **Oakleigh House**, a primary school in Swansea was committed to providing pupils with a broad online educational experience to mirror the regular programme as closely as possible. Each morning the focus was on English and mathematics while in the afternoons there was an emphasis on project work based around the humanities, drama and the arts. This programme also included physical education and music as well as weekly personal, social and health education lessons, which generally involved live online discussions and associated written work. Staff also organised remote assemblies and class time to help recreate social experiences as far as possible.

At the **Cathedral School**, an all-age day school in Cardiff, while the full timetable for the day from 9.00-15.30 was retained, teachers adapted lesson plans to secure pupils' engagement and promote effective learning. Leaders report that they established clear expectations for all online lessons including a requirement that teachers provide a brief 10-minute introduction to set the context for learning, explain relevant principles and outline specific activities. This was followed by a 20-minute session where pupils worked independently offline and a final class plenary of 10 minutes to reinforce and consolidate learning. There was an expectation that all work would be submitted with teachers providing feedback. Leaders observed that this approach was extremely successful since pupils engaged well particularly during the 20-minute period of independent work. Leaders also noted that the quality of immediate feedback improved significantly with teachers able to monitor ongoing work and offer relevant advice and support.

Monitoring, evaluating and adapting online teaching and learning

Throughout the pandemic, leaders report that they have been reviewing and refining approaches to online teaching and learning. They emphasise that this process has been critical in helping to identify aspects of teaching and learning that are successful as well as those areas that can be strengthened. For example, during the first lockdown, many leaders realised that it was essential to establish a sustainable programme rather than simply replicating a full timetable.

Listening to pupils and providing opportunities for parents to offer feedback, raise concerns and seek guidance where necessary has been beneficial in contributing to parental support for their children and to their confidence in the school's work. It has also helped leaders to reflect on the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning and to refine approaches. In most schools, this programme evolved during the first lockdown and by the time of the second lockdown late in the autumn term, a pattern and strategy had been established.

In many schools, quality assurance arrangements have continued throughout the pandemic although leaders report that they have adapted and refined the nature and purpose of these activities. In a few schools, senior leaders decided not to 'sit in' on online synchronous lessons as they felt this might add pressure and create anxiety for staff in what has been a challenging period.

Elsewhere, leaders stress that the pandemic and evolving nature of learning has increased the importance of robust quality assurance, for example through a process of 'drop ins' and reviewing recorded lessons. These leaders indicate that follow-up support has been provided to staff where necessary.

In a few schools, most lessons have been recorded partly for quality assurance purposes. Where this has been the case, leaders have adopted a 'light-touch' and supportive approach since they realised that many staff had anxieties about their ICT competencies. The fact that some staff were also aware that some parents were participating in online classes added to their concerns.

During the autumn term, senior leaders at **Howell's School**, an all-age day school in Cardiff were able to undertake a lot of 'learning walks' to allow short observations of teaching and learning. These visits were essentially supportive and intended to help identify good practice that could be promoted more widely across the school. Due to the rapidly changing context during that period, these observations covered a range of hybrid sessions. As well as the teacher and pupils all being physically in school together, these included situations where teachers were in the classroom while pupils were online at home or alternatively when staff were isolating at home with pupils in their classrooms. In such circumstances, lesson observations contributed to the school's 'continuous conversation' regarding teaching and learning. Since most lessons were recorded, they provided helpful evidence of developing approaches and strategies but also assisted leaders to address any areas of concern about aspects of teaching and assessment.

To some extent, senior leaders have found it easier than previously to monitor aspects of teaching since they can either log in to live lessons for a short period or view recorded lessons and provide useful feedback. This has helped to reduce the element of intimidation some teachers feel due to the presence of a member of the leadership team in their classroom. A few headteachers indicate that several staff have re-recorded asynchronous lessons after reflecting personally on the quality.

As a result of quality assurance activities, leaders report that there has been greater consistency in provision and that the structure and nature of blended learning has evolved. For example, they believe that there is less teacher input and increasing opportunities for pupils to work independently as well as a reduction in on-screen time by including alternative activities. In one all-age school, following pupil surveys about aspects of teaching and learning during the first lockdown, teachers adapted lessons in the senior section to include between 20 and 25 minutes of synchronous explanation and guidance with the pupils then working independently on the associated tasks.

Evolving pedagogy – through the second lockdown

Most schools anticipated a second lockdown and prepared effectively for it, for example testing proposed strategies and procedures during the October firebreak.

During the first lockdown many schools adapted timetables, refined the structure of lessons, and modified the content and scope of certain topics to align more suitably to online learning. A few schools did not offer synchronous streamed lessons particularly for younger primary pupils preferring to produce recorded lessons and provide tasks and suitable resources to support learning. In the most recent lockdown, partly due to more foundation phase and key stage 2 pupils having access to a personal device and in response to parents' wishes, many schools moved immediately to online synchronous teaching. This was also because in a few schools, parents felt that their children had often completed their work quickly and had not been challenged or pushed sufficiently to produce work of a suitably high quality.

At Oakleigh House primary school, the headteacher notes that many parents supported the introduction of online synchronous learning since they believed it would help their children focus and concentrate more effectively on their work. In this school, there was a particular emphasis on developing reading skills using an online programme and library with pupils having individual one-to-one reading sessions of about 15 minutes with their teacher. Leaders report that one advantage of this approach was that the school was able to have regular contact with parents, for example to discuss their child's wellbeing and progress, and any support they might require.

Leaders at this school believe that shared digital whiteboards contributed to an improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, enabling teachers to upload resources and for pupils to access the work. As part of this process, staff have used specific platforms and tools that personalise learning content, questions and pathways for every child while enabling staff to gather valuable information about their pupils, for example through diagnostic assessments. Leaders report that this approach has helped children engage and allowed them to work independently

while also ensuring teachers are available to answer any questions pupils might have and provide necessary support. Similarly, staff and parents used a particular platform to support nursery pupils to create a record of the child's experiences, development and learning journey.

OneGlobal School, which has campuses in both Swansea and Newtown, operates a course management system that supports online teaching and learning across a family of schools in the United Kingdom. This platform supports a self-directed approach to learning where the pupil takes the initiative and responsibility for their own learning. Leaders report that the COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably accelerated the use of this approach. Learning is based around a particular assignment and combines teacher explanation, guidance, and support with opportunities for pupils to undertake research, working both independently and in collaboration with others. Leaders suggest that pupils are encouraged to think critically, analyse data and to evaluate situations intelligently.

Leaders believe this approach has evolved well, partly through a willingness to experiment. Nationally, central team subject leaders have produced bespoke courses together with resources and support materials, such as quizzes and key questions to engage pupils and generate interest.

Information and communication technology pedagogy

Leaders report that the early stages of lockdown presented significant challenges for many schools in ensuring all pupils and staff had access to sufficient and suitable devices and ICT resources to provide the necessary foundations for teaching and learning. Leaders had to determine which platforms offered the best functionality to meet the differing learning needs of pupils in each age group.

While access to suitable resources is essential, equally important is the extent to which staff, pupils and parents have the necessary competencies to make the most effective use of these resources. In most schools, leaders were aware of the wide range of staff digital competencies. While a few staff implemented new concepts and approaches quickly, others required a greater degree of support. School leaders emphasise that the implementation of new approaches required a great deal of professional learning for staff. This has involved external provision including some degree of collaboration, for example with other independent association schools, but primarily the internal exchange and promotion of good practice.

In the early stages of lockdown, many teachers were 'frantically learning' how to use a range of ICT platforms and applications. Generally, leaders tried to reduce staff anxieties by setting limited and reasonable expectations about how staff might be expected to use technology to support pupils' learning.

One school reduced double lessons from 75 to 60 minutes to provide a short gap for staff between each session and to reduce the amount of time pupils were spending on-screen. In many cases, leaders have reviewed feedback and marking expectations to help and encourage staff to be more creative in their pedagogy and in the nature of online learning activities.

During the pandemic, leaders believe that nearly all teachers have adapted their practice and pedagogy and have become familiar with a range of learning platforms. One headteacher describes the extent of staff support for each other and impact of this work as 'extraordinary' while other leaders refer to a 'sea change' in the use of ICT.

In many schools, the use of technology has evolved quickly, often due to the work of a teaching and learning team or ICT 'champions' offering 'emergency' training and a range of support and guidance for colleagues. This may include staff sharing recordings of successful lessons, producing webinars to promote good practice, and posting useful ideas and suggestions for colleagues to try. In one school, there has been an extensive programme of short 15-minute professional learning sessions, often before school as well as 'Tuesday Tech' sessions where staff offer guidance and suggestions and describe effective learning scenarios to colleagues. Another school holds weekly virtual staff meetings to share best practice and effective strategies for improving pupil engagement. In addition to relevant daily briefings, one school has devoted one afternoon each week to professional learning, largely related to digital competencies, skills and the use of specific platforms, applications, and resources.

A few leaders report that staff have moved beyond 'fear of technology' in developing pedagogy. Leaders refer to enhanced collaboration and sharing of resources as well as through creating opportunities for pupils to use technology more creatively. Many headteachers report that they feel that lockdown has enhanced aspects of teaching. For example, many staff have developed a range of new skills and competencies to teach remotely that will be extremely valuable in the medium and long term and which will become a commonplace aspect of their practice. Leaders refer to a range of initiatives and 'forward thinking' about ways in which schools can 'build on' and enhance some of the recent activities influenced by greater use of ICT. The headteacher in one school refers to a 'school without walls' implying that there is unlikely to be a case in the future where a school will be 'closed' due to snow since staff and pupils will revert to online learning immediately.

Westbourne School, an all-age day and boarding school in Penarth, in partnership with a sixth form college in Sydney appointed a new ICT director in January 2020 to oversee and improve the use of ICT across both providers. The principal describes this appointment as 'critical' in enhancing the school's ICT facilities and capacity and in preparing the school for the successful implementation of remote learning during the three months prior to lockdown. Following this appointment, the school improved its Wi-Fi access and provided all staff with new devices and training in their use. A key element of the training programme was to support the delivery of lessons remotely partly through establishing effective channels to promote good practice as well as demonstrations of scientific experiments in laboratories. Because of this work, the principal believes that the school was particularly well prepared for the lockdown.

Specific challenges in delivering areas of the curriculum using a blended approach

All schools have faced significant challenges in ensuring continuity of learning in practical subjects such as science and technology as well as in creative areas of the curriculum. A common solution to this problem has been to adapt schemes of work so that while pupils were working at home, they covered primarily theoretical aspects of the course and carried out practical experiments when they returned to school.

In many schools, a feature of COVID-19 protocols has been that pupils remain in bubbles, with younger secondary pupils commonly restricted to their own classroom or a specific zone within the school. This has inevitably reduced opportunities for these groups of pupils to use specialist rooms such as science laboratories or technology workshops. Headteachers refer to examples of creative timetabling to overcome these issues, such as rescheduling certain lessons to increase access to designated drama or ICT rooms. Similarly, schools have identified suitable break-out rooms to create extra space and facilitate pupil participation while one school hired the local village hall to increase opportunities for drama lessons.

Generally, leaders report that teachers have found it relatively easy to organise a few basic science experiments for younger pupils in key stage 3. Many teachers have used outdoor areas especially for physical education activities and, for example, to conduct key stage 3 physics experiments. In other cases, staff have recorded scientific experiments or produced video demonstrations in technology, art and physical education so that pupils can carry out the relevant activities when convenient for them.

In other areas of the curriculum, teachers have, for example, encouraged younger pupils to carry out a range of activities such as 'crepe making' at home or devised solutions such as delivering aspects of science through cookery classes. In such circumstances, staff have had to consider possible risks associated with the task. This has inevitably placed limitations on the range and nature of such tasks.

The principal of **Cardiff Sixth Form College** is aware that students generally achieve particularly high grades in practical aspects of the exam specification. While it has been necessary this year to place greater emphasis on theoretical aspects, the college was able to adopt strategies to facilitate practical experiments. All students have been paired with another student from their social bubble of six within the boarding community. This allowed them to wear visors rather than face coverings within the laboratory. The college recognised an opportunity to model a research-based approach that is common in universities with students operating in small teams to conduct their work. To facilitate this approach the college produced a rota with technicians available during the day and evenings to increase access to the laboratories.

A few schools have invested in new technology and resources to improve provision in practical subjects such as science, technology, and art.

Haberdashers' Monmouth Schools, which cater for day and boarding pupils aged 3 to 18 years, purchased high-definition visualisers that have enabled staff to record experiments or to demonstrate tasks and specific techniques. The schools installed cameras within the laboratories so that staff can move around filming experiments. In design technology, staff use green screen effects to demonstrate and explain specific procedures and skills with the videos being shared on 'YouTube'. Similarly, in art, staff have produced short video clips to demonstrate specific techniques.

Physical education staff have organised and conducted live virtual lessons that are primarily based on individual circuit training exercises to help improve pupils' personal fitness. Leaders believe that these approaches have added variety to learning, helped engage pupils successfully and contributed significantly to their progress.

Curriculum initiatives

During the last year, many schools have introduced a range of curriculum initiatives to engage pupils, support their personal development and wellbeing and help prepare them for future educational opportunities.

At **Christ College, Brecon**, a co-educational day and boarding school for pupils aged 7 to 18 years the academic programme has been complemented by a wide range of initiatives for pupils of all ages that were designed specifically to encourage active participation and promote pupils' wellbeing. These activities included:

- on-line creative arts workshops including masterclasses with musical theatre performers
- a Year 9 radio play bridging lockdown and the return to school
- photography workshops involving a professional photographer who had recently worked in Myanmar
- an ongoing weekly 'curriculum for life' programme of visiting speakers and careers information for pupils in Year 12 and Year 13
- a series of weekly fitness challenges with simultaneous sessions involving boarders live and other pupils participating remotely
- an online music competition.

The school has placed particular emphasis on maintaining a regular programme of games and activities to support pupils' health and wellbeing. Throughout the pandemic, all pupils have had two 'games sessions' each week. During the autumn term and more recently since the return to school, pupils have been able to participate outside within their class or group bubbles. The school has adapted the programme to focus on activities that meet necessary COVID-19 protocols.

St Clare's School in Porthcawl, an independent day school for boys and girls from age 2 to 18 years, established an *Inspiring Futures* programme for pupils in Year 11 and Year 13 during the second half of the summer term during the first lockdown. The headteacher reports that this programme provided an opportunity for these pupils to demonstrate the skills, knowledge and understanding to become successful candidates in the next stage of their learning journey whether that be in the sixth form, at university or in the world of work. The programme included webinars presented by experts in their fields. All pupils followed compulsory modules such as careers, communications and sixth-form subject tasters and were able to select from a range of optional modules including creative activities, leadership, emotional intelligence, and women in leadership. Pupils received 'micro credentials' recognising their engagement and participation in each of these modules and activities.

In the absence of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, the school promoted a *Home Olympics* initiative designed to inspire communities across this international family of schools. The programme included a range of progressive fitness and skills activities adapted for pupils aged 2 to 18. These activities, which can be performed at home, helped participants develop a range of attributes of physical fitness such as muscular endurance and strength, speed and stamina, stability and balance, cardiovascular endurance as well as ball skills and hand-eye coordination. To help encourage pupils to improve their performance, bronze, silver, and gold medals could be achieved in each activity by achieving a particular target.

Tracking progress and assessment

Assessing pupils' progress during lockdown while developing a range of evolving learning platforms and approaches has been a particular challenge for many schools. In many cases, headteachers report that staff are using a range of assessment tools to monitor the quality of pupils' online work. Leaders in a few schools report that they have continued to monitor pupils' progress closely throughout the pandemic, for example using the school grades process to compare pupils' progress and attainment to projected outcomes.

Leaders report that many teachers have incorporated a range of strategies into their online lessons both during lockdown and since returning to school to engage pupils and provide immediate feedback to support learning. These include 'low stakes' online chats, quizzes, plenary exit tickets, break-out rooms for small group discussion and peer assessment activities. Many schools have used online formative assessment tools that involve surveys and game-based responses to monitor learning and help pupils to gauge their own progress.

In September 2020, after the initial lockdown, many secondary schools carried out progress tests, for example in English and mathematics. Similarly, a few primary schools carried out formal benchmarked assessments of pupils' reading and writing abilities and their mathematical skills and concepts. Teachers were then able to put in place catch-up strategies and to mentor and support a few individual pupils where required.

Since returning to the classroom after Easter, as pupils are settling back into regular routines, most schools are adopting a gradual approach to introducing assessment. Teachers are focussing primarily on consolidation of learning. They are using ongoing formative assessment to evaluate progress identify gaps in learning that need to be addressed and to initiate support strategies to address these deficits.

Several schools are incorporating the Pupil Attitudes to Self and School Survey into their programme to help understand potential barriers to learning and identify where support may be needed. At **Rougemont School**, an all-age day school in Newport, leaders report that all primary pupils undertook this attitudinal assessment during the autumn term and just before Easter. Leaders then introduced and later modified the scope of a nurture group programme and adapted learning support provision by increasing the extent of in-class support to take account of the issues identified through the survey.

Evaluating the impact of blended learning on pupils' progress

In many schools, leaders report that older pupils in key stage 4 and the sixth form are generally confident about their progress during the pandemic. Leaders believe that these pupils have received effective support in the use of ICT and are perhaps more self-reliant than younger pupils. Teachers indicate that most pupils have engaged enthusiastically and adopted a constructive attitude to their work. A minority of pupils prefer certain aspects of online learning since there are few distractions and they can focus fully on learning activities.

In many secondary schools, leaders report that teachers have completed planned schemes of work and covered exam specifications fully. A few headteachers suggest pupils have covered more work than might be expected. These leaders suggest this is due to the strong school community spirit, efficiency of delivery, pupils' engagement, academic maturity and resilience, and fewer distractions such as clubs, sports and other activities.

Leaders suggest that the situation has been more challenging for key stage 3 pupils and those in primary classes. While a few pupils have made strong progress, others have made less than expected. Leaders believe this may be related to the nature of certain subjects, such as pupils having difficulty in grasping concepts in mathematics during online activities. Due to increased online activities, leaders also point to younger children experiencing issues with their fine motor skills, handwriting and spelling. While a few children have experienced some difficulties particularly in the development of their phonics, one headteacher identifies that progress has been good because presentations were recorded, and children were able to keep practising these skills. Where necessary, teachers are adapting aspects of the phonics programme and providing small group and one-to-one support online for these pupils.

Despite the challenges highlighted above, leaders report that many children have made strong progress with their reading skills since they have been encouraged and supported to read at home. In many schools, staff are trying to encourage pupils to do more online reading, for example using reading schemes. However, leaders believe that generally children prefer and make more progress with 'real books'.

Since returning to the classroom, teachers in many primary schools have noticed a deterioration in a few pupils' concentration levels and ability to focus on a particular task. To some extent, teachers attribute this to the additional opportunities for pupils to take frequent breaks and move around while working at home. The headteacher at one school believes it has taken about three weeks for pupils to return successfully to previous routines. To help pupils adjust, teachers at this school have tried to reduce the amount of online learning, with none in the first week back at school.

Since returning to the classroom after Easter, staff at **Oakleigh House** have placed particular emphasis on children's wellbeing by rebuilding friendships and relationships and re-establishing school routines, practices, and procedures. The headteacher explains that Year 6 pupils had missed out on a range of leadership and mentoring opportunities as well as many extended and 'exciting aspects of learning' including sporting activities and transition projects. To compensate for this, the school organised participation in online Eisteddfod and St David's day celebrations and has planned a programme of extension activities for these pupils.

This programme includes weekly 'make a memory' trips, whole school fun sports tournaments and an enterprise challenge. Year 6 pupils will also participate in an end of year leavers' concert, which will be recorded and shared with parents to watch whilst they enjoy an afternoon tea box, provided by the school's caterers.

A few children have really struggled with online learning and long periods away from school and forgotten how to interact with others. Leaders report that this has been noticeable in a change of character and has resulted in some socialisation issues. These concerns can include more frequent friendship issues among younger pupils who appear to have 'forgotten how to play together'. Now that pupils are back in the classroom, many schools have put in place a range of strategies to combat these issues such as activities to develop pupils' communication skills. For example, one school organised a 'playground games week' where Year 13 pupils acted as mentors and led these activities.

Identifying and addressing gaps in learning

In most schools, teachers are currently focusing on monitoring performance, consolidating pupils' knowledge and understanding, and adapting schemes of work and lesson plans to address any emerging gaps in teaching and learning.

Oakleigh House has adapted its programme since pupils returned to school after Easter to allocate additional time to science and other practical subjects. The headteacher explained that the amount of time for other areas such as humanities has been reduced since pupils received lots of opportunities to undertake research projects in this area of the curriculum during lockdown.

Staff in secondary schools recognise that while pupils have covered most topics on the syllabus, often the depth and extent of pupils' learning is 'fragile'. One headteacher reported that staff had not identified significant gaps in learning but are aware that, in some areas, pupils have only 'surface level knowledge' which needs to be reinforced to ensure an 'in-depth' understanding. For example, in some subjects

such as physics, staff are focusing on experiments that could not be carried out during the period of remote learning.

In many schools, teachers have identified a minority of pupils who have made less progress than might be expected. These deficits are most common in subjects such as mathematics and science where perhaps pupils have not grasped concepts fully or in modern foreign languages where pupils have had less opportunities to develop their oral skills. Leaders refer to a few Year 11 pupils who 'lost some momentum during the extended period of lockdown'. Teachers are supporting these pupils through various classroom consolidation approaches and individual 'face-to-face' support. Often pupils have suggested specific topics where they wanted further revision sessions or extra support. One headteacher emphasised that for the rest of the year the school's priority is to cover less content but to consolidate learning in terms of depth and quality.

In order to address some of the difficulties and learning deficits pupils have faced in practical aspects, leaders at **Howell's School** have programmed dedicated immersion days for Year 11 pupils in subjects such as art and technology since they have returned to school this term. The headteacher reports that this approach has helped to consolidate and reinforce pupils' learning. For pupils in the junior school, staff have provided additional physical education lessons where the focus is primarily on 'sharing games and activities' to help support pupils' re-integration and socialisation.

In a few schools, literacy and numeracy leaders have identified key catch-up objectives and essential learning outcomes before the end of the year. Staff have then refined schemes of work to ensure there are suitable opportunities to address these skill deficits.

At the **Cathedral School**, teachers identified deficits in pupils' extended writing, oracy and collaborative work. For example, there are weaknesses in extended writing since pupils have not been drafting and redrafting their work. The headteacher explained that a particular whole-school objective in this school for the rest of the year is to provide pupils with lots of opportunities for speaking and working together. There is an emphasis on project work to engage pupils and encourage them to work together and to discuss and present their ideas orally. To support this initiative, the headteacher reports that staff have received recent professional learning to help them implement agreed strategies.

Public examinations

Many schools recognised early on that it was unlikely public examinations would take place as normal this year. Nevertheless, leaders report that they consider schools have a responsibility to help pupils to prepare for the next stage of education. Leaders believe this includes some form of 'higher-stake exam' to help pupils to develop the necessary skills and confidence to take exams in the future. These schools have established policies and approaches that leaders believe replicate typical examination conditions, as far as possible, to help determine grades in each subject.

Although schools have adopted slightly different approaches to help determine grades, headteachers report that they have been approved by the relevant English and Welsh examination boards. These arrangements commonly include a mixture of assessments and ongoing coursework that can help create a portfolio of evidence to support secure grades.

Leaders at **Christ College, Brecon** allocated two discrete weeks to formal internal assessments to support the evidence acquired through ongoing teacher assessment. The school made a conscious decision not to carry out any assessments before Easter but to focus on pupils' wellbeing and engagement as well as consolidating earlier learning and tackling deficits where evident. The first formal assessments took place in the first week of May with a further batch of assessments two weeks later using practice papers provided by exam boards. The content of these assessments has been reduced and includes only those areas of the syllabus that have been covered in class. The headteacher maintains that this approach feels quite normal for pupils and stresses that the school believes it has an 'obligation to prepare all pupils for the next stage of education'. This includes some form of 'higher-stake exam' to help pupils develop the skills and confidence to take exams in the future.

Howell's School has implemented a systematic approach to assessment to support the process of Centre Determined Grades (WJEC) and Teacher Assessed Grades (Ofqual). The headteacher reports that since January, the school has been conducting short and frequent assessments for Year 11 and Year 13 pupils to support their learning and to inform teacher assessed grades. More recently the school organised a two-week assessment period for Year 11 pupils.

In preparation for this programme of assessments, the headteacher explained that the school provided briefing documents and formal responses to frequently asked questions and organised online meetings to inform and explain the process to pupils and their parents. As a result, the headteacher believes that parents and pupils have a secure understanding and confidence in the school's approach to assessment. The headteacher reports that this has helped staff to manage a natural degree of anxiety when facing a new situation that has such an impact on pupils' aspirations and future ambitions.

To help ensure rigour and confidence in the process, Year 11 and Year 13 pupils are monitored by cameras and microphones while completing the online assessments. The headteacher explains that these assessments have been organised to replicate exam conditions as far as possible, including extra time allowances for certain candidates. In addition, the school has trained external invigilators to monitor and oversee the online assessment process. In the second round of assessments carried out in March the school adapted processes, for example using scanners and mobile phones to return test papers with nearly all marking carried out online.

Leaders at the **Haberdashers' Monmouth Schools** report that teachers are using the most recent formal assessments as well as an ongoing programme of class-based assessments to determine grades in line with relevant English and Welsh exam board requirements. Leaders maintain that this process is demanding and stressful for staff. As subject leaders identify aspects of the course they wish to assess, the senior leadership team is monitoring requirements to balance the assessments appropriately and to avoid excessive pressure on staff and pupils. The school also organised a formal set of 'mock exams' for Year 11 pupils immediately after Easter as staff believe it is important these pupils have some experience of 'formal exams' before tackling A levels at the end of the sixth form. Year 13 'mock exams' have been spread out in the form of several one-hour assessments on particular aspects of the syllabus.

In January 2021, leaders at **Cardiff Sixth Form College** provided pupils with an initial explanation of the spring assessment strategy and how this would meet the Qualifications Wales quality-assurance protocols. This document explained the purpose of assessments, which would take place during three specified windows in the spring term, to produce 'clear, verifiable evidence of pupils' ability and attainment level in each of their subjects'. It also set out how the college intended to prepare students for the likelihood of in-school assessments and explained the nature, scope, and format of these assessments as well as invigilation procedures.

The newsletter also emphasised the importance of all pupils remaining fully engaged in their learning since any grade submitted by the college would be a holistic assessment of academic performance. Further newsletters during the spring term, provided greater detail about these arrangements, for example explaining how AS/A level and IGCSE grades would be awarded. Leaders report that this approach has been successful in helping students to focus on their work and feel confident about achieving their future ambitions.

Generally headteachers report that pupils understand how the process of awarding GCSE and A level grades will be determined and believe many are confident that they will achieve the grades that match their abilities and that they are well-prepared for progression to the next stage of their education. Nearly all leaders expect outcomes to be as high as is normally the case.

Headteachers also emphasise the potential challenges that schools will face in 2022 if A level examinations take place as normal. For example, current Year 12 pupils have already experienced two years of disrupted education and have not had opportunities to experience formal GCSE examinations. Leaders express concerns that this might affect pupils' preparations and confidence in approaching these examinations.

Challenges that online learning presents for specific groups of learners

Vulnerable learners

During lockdown, many schools invited as many pupils as possible within the parameters of COVID-19 guidelines to continue to attend school. In addition to the

children of key workers, these pupils were usually identified as being more vulnerable or less engaged with their learning. Generally, these pupils were in primary classes or key stage 3. Often, they attended on a rota for between one and three days a week so that capacity was not exceeded. Headteachers report that parents appreciated and valued this initiative which, in many cases, contributed significantly to improved pupil wellbeing and outcomes.

Age-related challenges

During the early stages of lockdown, teachers understood that younger pupils in primary schools rely much more heavily on parental support while some pupils with additional learning needs have difficulty in remaining on task or perhaps organising their work. In many cases, parents of pupils in independent schools provide a lot of one-to-one support for their children but this is not always possible particularly when both parents are working. Many schools responded to this situation by using platforms on which staff could record lessons and store resources so that parents could work with their children to support their learning in the evenings or whenever convenient.

In some cases, leaders reported that there have been difficulties for families, for example where both parents are working at home. They explain that unless parents can help their children to complete their work, too often the children will rush and complete the task too quickly without sufficient care and attention. Consequently, parents in several schools have suggested that schools should provide more live synchronous lessons.

Teachers in primary classes have generally been cautious about streaming live synchronous lessons. These teachers recognise that for younger pupils it is necessary to achieve a suitable balance of synchronous and asynchronous learning partly to manage the extent of on-screen time. In such circumstances, leaders have generally continued to evolve their approach to online teaching and learning based on teachers' ongoing assessment of pupils' experiences and progress. In many cases, this has included use of break-out rooms where pupils or their parents requiring additional support can contact teaching staff for help and guidance.

One approach has involved staff liaising with parents to help them appreciate what is required with specific tasks and the quality and extent of the work required. Leaders report that this approach is contributing to greater parental engagement and support for their children. In a few schools, parents join on-line lessons or class check-in sessions so that they can help their children, particularly those who require extra support with their work. Leaders believe this involvement has been particularly beneficial in helping parents to understand how children learn and what they can be expected to achieve, and how parents can support their children's learning. One headteacher reports that many parents were initially concerned about how their child might manage online learning and wanted to provide necessary support for them. These parents have gradually realised that it is equally important to encourage children from Year 3 onwards to develop the skills to learn independently.

During the second lockdown, the **Cathedral School** established a daily programme in the primary section that included two live check-ins each day. The first was for 20 minutes during which teachers set the context for learning and a plan for the day as well as some fun activities such as wearing hats, silly games, rainbow day, Freaky Friday and showing your pet to help build a community spirit. This was followed by four recorded lessons each day with the focus on English and mathematics in the morning and other subjects such as humanities, drama and music in the afternoon. Throughout the day pupils were able to liaise with their teachers online using a chat facility if they required extra help or support while at the end of the afternoon, there were opportunities for a plenary session or review of learning. Leaders judged this approach to be successful with more than 90% of pupils engaging productively.

After three weeks, the school introduced more live synchronous English and mathematics lessons for key stage 2 pupils which staff believed worked well and were popular with parents. The headteacher reports that this evolving approach led to pupils being more engaged while staff were able to monitor their progress and provide feedback more effectively. As part of an ongoing evolution, around three-quarters of lessons were synchronous at the end of lockdown.

Staff recognised that a very few pupils preferred recorded lessons since they could work more slowly at their own pace and did not feel exposed by their slower progress. In response to parents' requests, the school allocated teaching assistants to support these pupils online with their work.

Overseas pupils

Many leaders report that maintaining continuity of learning for overseas boarders presents significant challenges. This is particularly the case regarding quarantine requirements for pupils returning to the United Kingdom but also providing accommodation and a programme of activities for those who have remained here throughout the year. Schools with overseas boarders have implemented a range of strategies, including adaptations to the school day and extension activities to support these pupils when they are required to quarantine.

Many schools report that a few overseas boarders did not return to school to resume their education in September 2020 due to concerns about the level of COVID-19 infections in the United Kingdom. In some cases, these pupils left the school, but a few have continued to access online learning throughout the year. Where pupils returned home before Christmas, they began the summer term in quarantine in their boarding houses but were able to access all learning online.

In September 2020, when overseas boarders returned to **Westbourne School** they were quarantined for two weeks at a local outdoor pursuits centre. During this period these pupils followed a discrete induction programme that included morning lessons and afternoon recreational activities.

When preparing to re-open in September 2020 after the first lockdown, leaders at **Cardiff Sixth Form College** considered a range of scenarios that included learners being unable to return to the United Kingdom and potential 'second waves' of the virus. Working from 'fully open – business as usual' to 'fully closed – no one on site', leaders identified seven stages of operation reflecting the nature of boarding provision at the college. The headteacher reports that this provided clarity for the community and ensured leaders were able to respond rapidly to changing circumstances such as the firebreak lockdown while ensuring the safety of pupils and staff ensuring continuity of learning.

During the spring term 2021, one school provided a full timetable of live lessons but made several adaptations to the timetable such as bringing forward some afternoon lessons to lunchtime to make it more convenient for international students who remained at home in different time zones. Staff also recorded or pre-recorded some lessons so that pupils could access this material and undertake the work when most convenient for them.

Despite these adaptations and initiatives, leaders recognise that pupils speaking English as an additional language (EAL) have been disadvantaged to some degree. For example, some of these pupils have not always fully understood aspects of language during streamed lessons and are often reluctant to seek clarification or request help. When pupils are actually 'in-class' it is easier for teachers to appreciate misunderstandings and possible misconceptions as part of ongoing monitoring of their work.

In a few cases, virtually all overseas pupils have remained in boarding accommodation throughout the year including the Christmas and Easter vacations rather than returning to their home countries. Leaders in the independent sector are currently planning for unpredictable circumstances later this year depending on progress in tackling the pandemic.

The principal at **Cardiff Sixth Form College** anticipates that most Year 12 students will remain in Cardiff at the end of the summer term. The college is developing a package of certified extension courses such as university preparation courses for Year 11, Year 12 and Year 13 students. This builds on the programme offered to students last summer term, where, for example, Year 13 learners received guidance and followed a range of skills-based courses involving research modules and presentations to help them prepare for university in September. The principal reports that feedback from higher education institutions was that these courses had been extremely beneficial to the students. During that period, Year 11 learners followed courses in preparation for their A level studies while Year 12 learners undertook an extensive UCAS programme that included work experience and guidance from visiting speakers.

In anticipation of possible difficulties that may prevent overseas boarders returning to the United Kingdom in September, leaders at Cardiff Sixth Form College have formulated potential timetables for the next academic year. This approach is designed to ensure parity of provision and to cater for pupils remaining at home in different time zones. These plans incorporate changes to the school day and a variable mixture of synchronous and asynchronous learning to accommodate and support access for students in different international time zones depending on the extent of challenges in particular parts of the world.

Reflections on progress in the last year and emerging approaches to learning

Most schools refer to evolving aspects of provision that they will maintain or adapt in the future. Headteachers report that the last year has been a valuable 'opportunity for us to learn about ourselves as a school' and to retain and build upon particular learning approaches, strategies and skills.

Teachers generally value the use of ICT to provide immediate feedback to pupils about the quality of their work as well as to provide targeted intervention support. Similarly, leaders believe that many pupils have developed improved skills and competencies such as the ability to organise themselves and manage their work more efficiently.

Some schools are considering changes to current provision and timetabling arrangements. One school intends to adopt a 'little and often' immersion approach by including perhaps three short sessions of English each day for some primary classes. Leaders believe that such an approach will help address possible learning deficits and consolidate learning more effectively.

In preparing 'life after COVID-19', a few headteachers have reflected on the experiences of the last few months and considered how certain aspects of school life can be improved. For example, the headteacher of the **Cathedral School** recognises that in the past many pupils and staff have been extremely busy throughout the day partly due to a broad range of clubs and extra-curricular activities. While the school is gradually resuming many of these activities, the headteacher believes it may be beneficial to adapt the programme to some extent to provide pupils and staff with more opportunities and time to relax.

The headteacher also recognises that for younger pupils in Year 7 and Year 8 there have been considerable benefits from remaining in their own classroom due to the protocols currently operating. As part of an initiative to strengthen the school's transition arrangements from the primary to secondary section, she is considering various options to reduce movement around the school with perhaps fewer teachers for pupils in these year groups.

Over the last year, the pandemic has presented significant challenges for the 'business operation' of many independent schools, particularly regarding pupil retention and recruitment. Headteachers report potential issues within the local market due to the financial impact of lockdowns on many families. There are also great uncertainties about the situation regarding the pandemic across the world and potential quarantine requirements.

A few headteachers report that carrying out the recruitment and admissions programme online has been particularly successful. They suggest the successful vaccine programme has given confidence to many international pupils and refer to an increasing number of enquiries from Europe including France and Germany.

Appendix 1: Evidence base

This report focuses on how mainstream independent schools have evaluated and refined approaches to blended learning. It considers the monitoring processes schools have used to reflect on their blended learning provision, the challenges they have faced, and the changes they may have made.

The report summarises the findings from engagement phone calls made to 10 independent mainstream schools between the latter part of April and the first half of May 2021. The report also draws on the evidence gathered following Estyn's earlier programme of engagement calls and associated communications such as stakeholder meetings. This report is based on the information discussed during telephone conversations with the headteachers and senior leaders of the schools listed below:

- Cardiff Sixth Form College
- The Cathedral School, Cardiff
- Christ College, Brecon
- Haberdashers' Monmouth Schools
- Howell's School, Cardiff
- Oakleigh House, Swansea
- One School Global UK - Swansea
- Rougemont School, Newport
- St Clare's School, Porthcawl
- Westbourne School, Penarth

Appendix 2: Prompts for independent mainstream schools to consider when reflecting on and refining remote learning

Teaching and learning

1. What are our biggest challenges and how are we overcoming these?	2. How do we know our pupils are safe online and what measures are in place to keep pupils' devices safe?	3. What arrangements and support do we provide to help sustain parental engagement with their child's learning?
4. How do we provide quality learning and teaching for all groups of pupils during periods of remote learning? (<i>The curriculum offer - strengths /limitations</i>)	5. How has our approach to remote learning changed over time? (<i>Reasons for and change process</i>)	6. What are the challenges within our school to deliver live lessons safely and effectively? Where we do offer live lessons, how are we delivering feedback for pupils and ourselves?

Monitoring processes

7. How well do we monitor the provision for teaching and learning including pupils' engagement during remote learning? How has this monitoring process evolved over time?	8. How do we develop and monitor pupils' independent and learning to learn skills when engaged in remote learning?	9. How do we ensure that pupils engage with peers during remote learning experiences?	10. How do we seek the views of stakeholders including parents and pupils about the provision made for learning? What do we learn from this and how do we use this information?
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Supporting professional practice

<p>11. How do we support teaching staff in managing their workload for delivering multi-mode and increased remote learning provision including on-site, online and non-digital activities?</p>	<p>12. How are our teaching and wellbeing support staff deployed to maximise the impact of their work?</p>	<p>13. How well do our teaching staff collaborate to provide remote learning experiences? How do we know?</p>	<p>14. Have we benefited from the sharing of effective practice with other providers? Do we have practice we have shared or believe would be beneficial to other providers?</p>	<p>15. How have we adapted professional learning during this time? Have we identified specific requirements for professional learning and remote learning provision? If so, what are they and how have we addressed this need?</p>
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