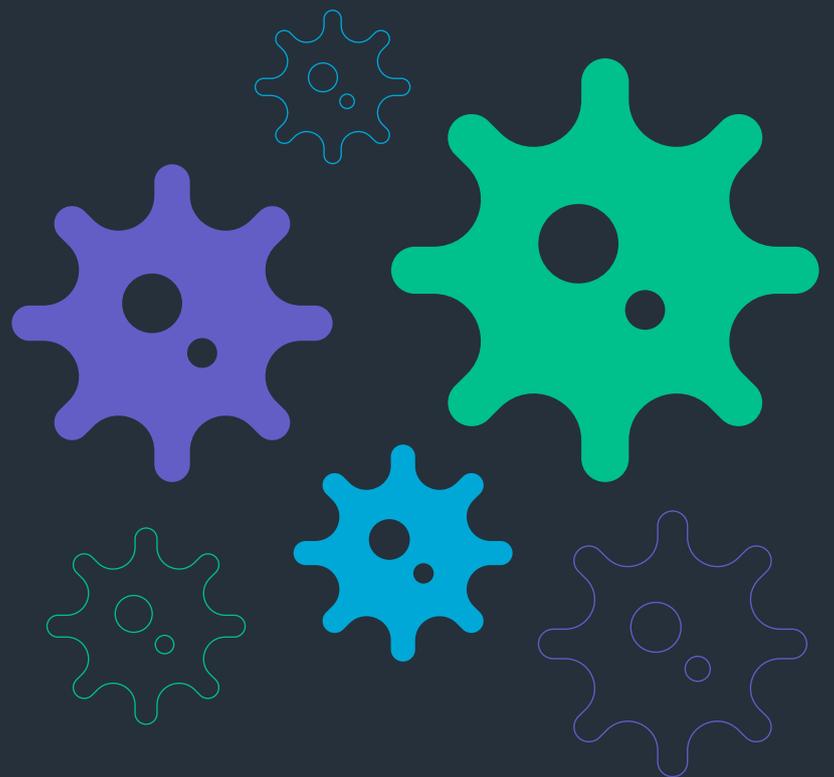


Coronavirus
guidance

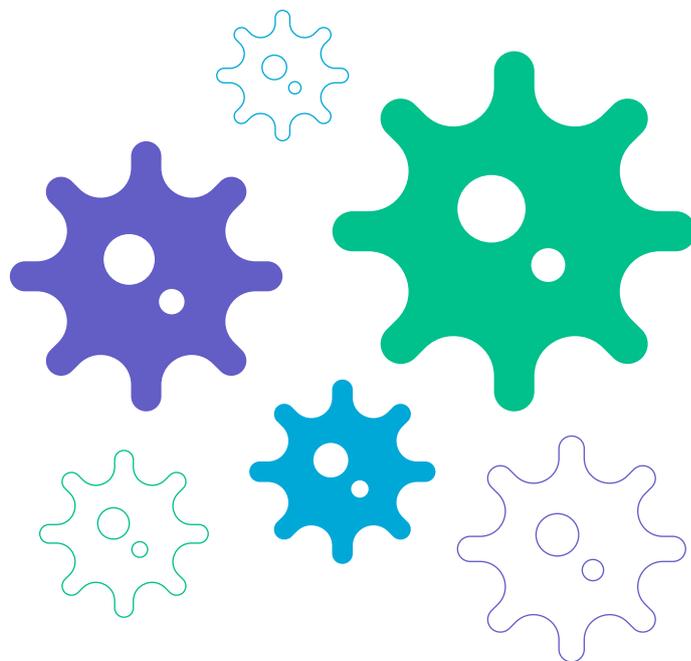


**NEU Education
Recovery Plan,
Northern Ireland**

February 2021



Foreword



The National Education Union (NEU) education recovery plan sets out how to reopen schools and colleges in a safe and sustainable way.

The plan outlines the challenges that our education system must overcome if pupils are to recover their confidence, interest and joy in learning and to make the progress they are capable of.

The last section of the plan looks beyond schools and colleges to wider societal issues, in particular the huge and lasting damage that child poverty wreaks upon our already most disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people, and proposes concrete measures to tackle it.

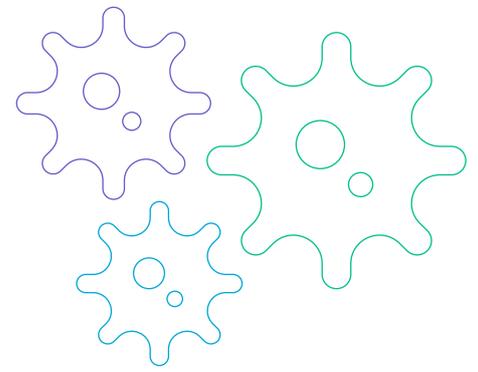
Our plan provides a route towards sustainable school and college opening and away from the Government's stop/start approach, which has resulted in schools and colleges being closed to full pupil intakes twice.

The plan is rooted in the union's detailed knowledge, drawn from our members' professional experience and expertise, and our close attention to the science around Covid-19, to state clearly what preparations and precautions are needed for schools and colleges to open, and be given the best chance to remain open. Our children and young people, and their parents, deserve no less.

This plan was written in advance of the Prime Minister's statement to the House of Commons on 27 January – where he outlined a possible commencement of a return to school on 8 March.

The NEU will work hard to get the Government to accept the proposals in this plan so that our members can return to school, when the science says it is safe to do so, with confidence that their health and the education of their pupils, will be properly protected.

NEU Education Recovery Plan, Northern Ireland – February 2021



The COVID 19 pandemic has been hugely disruptive to education. It has twice necessitated the closure of schools and colleges (except to vulnerable students and children of key workers) from March to July 2020 and within the current lockdown.

The Northern Ireland Executive must act urgently to create the conditions to sustain education throughout and beyond the COVID 19 pandemic. Declaring schools and colleges to be COVID secure does not automatically make them so. Reliable evidence is mounting that there is a direct correlation between closing schools and controlling the virus¹. Ministers must act, now, to create COVID secure conditions in all schools and colleges to keep those who work and learn within them safe and to stop education workplaces being, in the words of the UK Prime Minister, *'vectors of transmission causing the virus to spread between households'*.

We regret to say that neither the Executive nor the UK Government has, up to this point in the pandemic, made schools and colleges Covid secure. Ministers have consistently set their sights on returning all pupils and students to full time education rather than planning to return them to education safely. Errors were identified early by the NEU: School and college staff are working in education buildings without adequate cleaning, without social distancing – with whole year group 'bubbles' in secondary schools, with inadequate PPE and poor ventilation. The preparations we make now for wider reopening of schools and colleges must accept that a full return by all students

may not be possible for some time; and that safe education requires both a commitment to safety when in school and to continuing remote education where necessary.

COVID has exposed the endemic levels of poverty and inequality in Northern Ireland and across the UK. Child poverty is on the rise, with all the consequences that brings children and young people in terms of health, well-being, and educational outcomes. The causes of poverty and social disadvantage must be tackled. It is not helped by a level of social segregation in schools ranked by the OECD as the worst in the developed world².

Our education recovery plan is split into three parts. The first focuses on the challenge of educating pupils and students safely, by creating safer educational workplaces and continuing remote education where necessary. The second part is a call to action to fight child poverty – to build a better world out of the pandemic, for all our children and young people. The third contains proposals to build a better education system as we emerge from the pandemic.

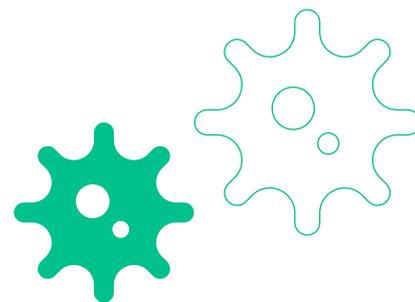
The NEU submitted its first education recovery plan **"On a return to education in Northern Ireland – What will "new normal" look like?"** to the Minister and the Northern Ireland Assembly in May 2020. Whilst warmly received, we did not receive a formal reply. We offer this second plan in the spirit in which the first was intended – to secure a safe and uninterrupted return to education for all.

¹ Refer to the work of Paul Hunter (East Anglia University), Jonathan Ball (Virologist, Nottingham University, the USCDC and the 85,000 cohort international study of Princeton University, California).

² OECD, UK 'Country' Report, 2012

Part 1

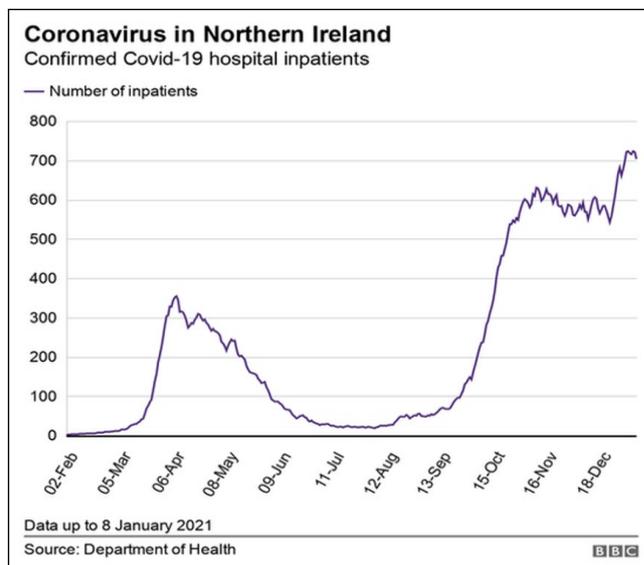
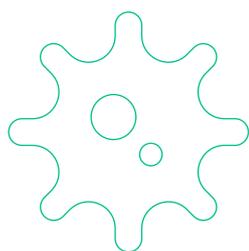
Safety in our schools and colleges



Social distancing in schools and colleges - Social distancing and limitations on social mixing are required for COVID security in schools and colleges and are even more essential than before because of the 50% increased transmissibility of the new COVID variants:

Rationale: From September to December 2020 COVID infection rates rose amongst secondary and primary age groups alike - so that by Christmas secondary students were the most infected age group and primary the second most infected age group. Levels of infection for secondary students multiplied by 75 times throughout the autumn term.³ Whole year group bubbles allowed COVID to spread amongst pupils. Social distancing is essential in order to reduce the spread of COVID amongst students, and from them to their families and into their communities. The third most highly infected age group, by the end of the Autumn term, were adults of parental age who are scheduled for later vaccination - so the importance of suppressing COVID infection in schools remains paramount.

The relationship between closing schools and suppressing the virus was highlighted in the Department of Health (Northern Ireland) graph published by the BBC on the 11 January.



While schools and colleges remain open only to some students, further steps must be taken to limit the numbers that are still attending, through reviewing the categories allowed to attend and permitting leaders to limit numbers further where necessary. Limits on bubble size and on mixing and crossing bubbles must not be relaxed. Rather, they should be tightened. When and if more students return, arrangements for 2m distancing and bubbles and constraints on mixing and crossing bubbles must be radically tightened.

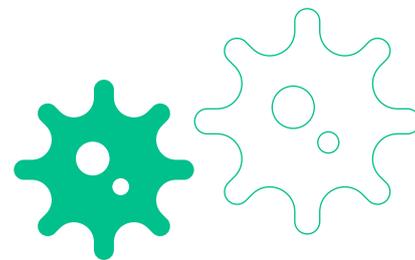
Limit numbers on site through rotas and remote education:

Rationale: The UK has some of the most crowded school and college buildings in the OECD. The average secondary school has a 97% occupancy rate. Northern Ireland's schools are not as crowded, and stricter social distancing is possible in more cases. Notwithstanding, class sizes in Northern Ireland have grown, with 30 or more in classes not unusual. Limits to class sizes in practical classes have also been stretched beyond previous limits.

³ [Coronavirus Infection Survey](#)

Part 1

Safety in our schools and colleges



Class Sizes should reduce. Class sizes remain unacceptably high. Class sizes should reduce by 50%, with a target of a teacher-pupil ratio of 12 and a maximum class size of 15.

Protective Bubbles: Protective bubbles should reduce to 6-8. The protective-bubble concept borrowed consciously from practice in Denmark were designed as a "firebreak" to limit numbers being infected and requiring self-isolation. Bubbles in Denmark are typically small, at 6 or 8 in number. In Northern Ireland, Year Group bubbles of 200 are not unusual, requiring more children to isolate after administration-intensive close-contacts analysis.

Using the experience from Denmark, these 'bubbles' of pupils should arrive at a separate time, eat their lunch separately, stay in their own zones in the playground and are taught by one teacher. They cannot then 'mix' with other pupils during the school day or travelling to and from school.

If social distancing in education buildings is to become a reality, then fewer students can be on site. Rotas are a good means of both keeping students involved in education because they allow regular attendance for in person teaching in schools and colleges whilst reducing over-crowding and enabling social distancing. Schools (including Special schools) and colleges should operate rota systems and must be encouraged to share good practice – what works for pupils and staff when operating rotas.

It will be necessary to employ more staff for rotas to work effectively both to lower numbers of pupils in classrooms and maintain high quality remote education. E-Learning, remote learning and support is time-intensive with more of teachers' time expended in

lesson preparation. Simply, more staff are required. Either that, or fewer classes.

Northern Ireland routinely over-produces teachers from high-quality teacher-training institutes. Schools and colleges should be given increased funding to employ supply staff and newly qualified teachers. The 'Engage' programme should be radically increased. The NISTR capacity should be fully utilised and exhausted. Additional teaching staff and support staff should be employed, including from recently retired professionals, to support the greatly increased workload involved in teaching some students in school and others remotely.

Other approaches which should also be adopted include erecting marquees on school sites and identifying and bringing back into use unused public buildings (like leisure centres) and other accommodation, which could permit primary schools in particular to reduce group sizes without implementing rotas.

Increase the use of face coverings and better ventilation:

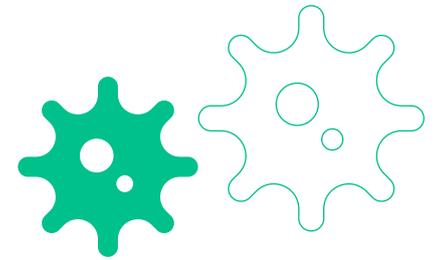
Rationale: The risk of infection is greatest indoors, in crowded spaces – a description which aptly sums up the situation in most schools and colleges. Secondary aged students in particular are known to be able to transmit the virus to each other and into their households⁴. NEU are concerned that the routine practice of recording home transmission, by default, as "adult to child" is likely to understate the levels of child transmission rates⁵. Mask wearing suppresses viral transmission in classrooms and other areas. They are also old enough to understand the importance of mask wearing, and able to learn and practise good habits in mask wearing. Masks should

⁴ [Children's Task and Finish Group: update to 4th Nov 2020 paper on children, schools and transmission, page9](#)

⁵ William Hanage, Harvard University.

Part 1

Safety in our schools and colleges

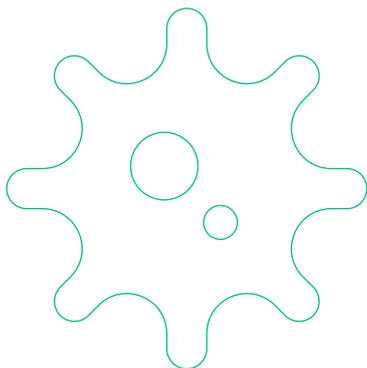


therefore be worn by secondary aged students in classrooms as well as all other areas of the school. They should be worn at all times by all staff in all schools and colleges. Classrooms must also be well ventilated, while maintaining a reasonable temperature; costs for additional heating must be reimbursed.

Secondary aged students in particular are known to be able to transmit the virus to each other and into their households⁶.

Education staff should be vaccinated as a priority:

Rationale: Whilst vaccination is not a “silver bullet” and will not stop the highest level of COVID transmission into the community – from pupils to their families – it will provide greatly increased levels of safety for school and college staff who, to date, have been obliged and instructed to work in close proximity with primary and secondary pupils who are the most infected age groups. Staff in special schools and in early years are at increased risk because of the need for close physical contact along with the difficulty in keeping these pupils socially distanced. Clinically extremely vulnerable, and clinically vulnerable education staff should be allowed to work from home supporting children’s remote education until they are vaccinated.



Specific support for SEN settings:

Rationale: The NEU would urge DE to recognise the unique issues faced by special schools and alternative provision in planning for the Covid safety of staff and pupils.

Special schools and alternative provision need (during Covid):

- Smaller class sizes (suggested at 50% of current levels)
- Social distancing of 2m around adults in the classroom, inclusive of teachers and educational support staff;
- Rotational systems for staff and pupils.
- CEV staff and pupils to work remotely.
- Mask wearing in class allowed where the school deem it appropriate.
- Medical grade PPE provided to carry out personal care and Aerosol Generated procedures (AGPs).

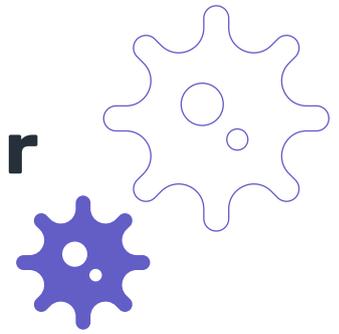
There are other specific needs for pupils with SEN, including:

- Funding for adaptive technology for remote learning.
- Specialist tutors and additional numbers of qualified specialist staff to work with students to address learning gaps and social and emotional development needs.
- Access for parents, carers to services such as CAMHs and Occupational Health and externally provided services throughout the Covid period with planning for additional services afterwards to meet increased demand.

⁶ [Children’s Task and Finish Group: update to 4th Nov 2020 paper on children, schools and transmission, page9](#)

Part 2

Let's build back better for our children and young people



COVID has exposed the brutal patterns of poverty and inequality in Northern Ireland and across the UK and the harm that this does to our children and young people. Too many children and young people suffer from food insecurity, poor housing, tech poverty, stigmatisation, and social exclusion, which combine to create a toxic combination of anxiety about the present, a lack of belief in the future and increasing rates of mental ill health for children and young people.

Collectively, we should be ashamed that we treat our most precious resource, our children, in this way. We need a new spirit abroad and a new determination, as was expressed in the 1942 Beveridge report, to transform the conditions in which poor children and their families live so that all children and young people, whatever their background, are given the best start in life.

End child poverty:

Rationale: COVID has exposed the brutal effects of child poverty in the UK. 2.3 million children are now living with food insecurity⁷. Over 80% of families with children at foodbanks were classed as severely food insecure, meaning that they had skipped meals and gone without eating, sometimes for days at a time because of a lack of money⁸. It should be understood by everyone that children cannot learn if they are hungry and are hugely stressed if they do not know whether they will be hungry soon. Nine pupils in an average class of 30 are poor⁹. Their lives are blighted by inequality and insecurity. 40% of the attainment gap between poor children and their more advantaged classmates is set

in stone before they start school¹⁰ leaving education professionals with a mountain to climb in their unending efforts to remedy the corrosive effects of poverty and inequality on children and young people's futures. The Executive, and the UK Government must reverse the increase in child poverty and ensure that all children and their families can live their lives with dignity and security that they will have the essentials that enable them to take their part as active citizens in our society.

All pupils must be guaranteed access to broadband and to laptops which will enable them to learn remotely, and to study and develop their skills once schools are fully open. All teachers should be guaranteed quality CPD in the pedagogies of e-learning, online and remote tutoring and support.

Rationale: Ofcom estimate that between 1.14m and 1.78m children in the UK have no home access to a laptop, desktop, or tablet. The government's scheme to provide these have so far failed to reach potentially one million children who need one. This picture is replicated in Northern Ireland, with broadband roll-out far from ubiquitous and device poverty widespread. Whilst online learning is not the only strategy used by teachers to educate their pupils remotely, it is an important element of that provision. And in any case, it is appalling that so many children and young people, being educated in 2021, do not have access to the internet nor to laptops when they are so essential for studying, information finding and for the development of their I.T. skills and

⁷ New Food Foundation Data, September 2020

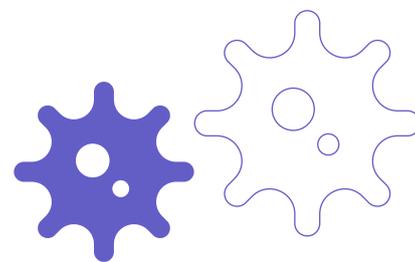
⁸ Trussell trust and Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute (SPERI), March 2018.

⁹ Child Poverty Action Group Facts and Figures, July 2020.

¹⁰ Grammar Schools and Social Mobility - Education Policy Institute, 2016.

Part 2

Let's build back better for our children and young people



confidence and when they will be vital to their future employment.

The same applies to teaching staff, many of whom do not have, and have not been provided, with adequate devices or 'kit'. And it is taken for granted that teachers will continue to privately subsidize home broadband packages for education system work.

Teaching practice in e-learning and in online or remote support is of variable quality with pockets of creative and innovative practice alongside more rudimentary "mend and make do" practice. A critical part of the recovery should be the availability of quality Continuous Professional Development in the pedagogies of e-learning, online and remote tutoring and support¹¹.

A fully resourced regional plan for children's wellbeing should be launched to support children who suffered trauma in the pandemic:

Rationale: Students' wellbeing must be placed at the centre of how we adapt education to meet the needs of children and young people. Reports from the Northern Ireland Youth Forum¹², the Northern Ireland Schools Students Union and organisations such as the National Children's Bureau have all called for well-being to form a central part in a recovery educative plan. Too many children and young people's mental health has suffered during the pandemic. They must be supported to recover and regain their mental health and their confidence in themselves and in their future. The NEU proposal for the 5C's curriculum should be considered as a basis for an educational recovery.¹³

Welfare reform is needed so that parents are not working for their family's poverty:

Rationale: The majority of poor children live in families where at least one parent is working. Job insecurity and poverty rates of pay leaves too many parents working for their poverty. Work must be paid a living wage. Universal credit must be reformed to end significant waiting times for payment; and Stormont initiated mitigations must be continued for the foreseeable future. Free School meal (FSM) provision should be expanded to all families in receipt of Universal Credit and children should be able to access FSM during school holidays. The costs to parents for schooling must be kept to a minimum, the government must ensure an upper cap to the costs of school uniforms.

The levels of gender inequality in Britain have also been laid bare, with domestic violence affecting millions of women. Parental caring responsibilities are shared unequally with women shouldering most of the care and this has become more marked during the current pandemic. Disabled people have been insufficiently supported and face increased discrimination. Black children and young people have been disproportionately affected by Coronavirus but we have so far seen little Government response to the question of how it plans to tackle or address the structural racism illustrated by the pandemic. The Executive must act decisively to address structural inequalities and discrimination in our society so that the next generation can lead lives which are free of the structural barriers and inequalities which so unfairly deny them the opportunities to fulfil their potential as adults and citizens.

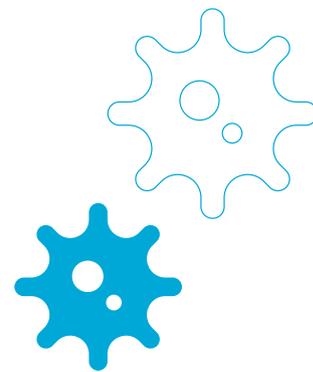
¹¹ For example, [Stranmillis University College provides a popular introductory course](#)

¹² [NIYF, Speaking Truth to Power, November 2020](#)

¹³ See at neu.org.uk

Part 3

Lets build a better education system as we emerge from the pandemic



This pandemic has highlighted many flaws in our education system, and we must address these as we begin to emerge from the pandemic. As more pupils return to schools, we must not rush headlong into a route march back to the past but should take this opportunity to question those aspects which are not working, and to reflect on those practices which school staff and pupils have learnt to do differently.

Until the population is vaccinated, and infection rates are manageable, there is likely to be continuing disruption to schools. A recovery plan is needed that focuses on what's most important for pupils over the next year. Schools must be encouraged to support students to learn what they need for their next stages of education, rather than to pass tests. The 5C's curriculum proposed by NEU is relevant, focussed on **caring**, the **context** for learning, a **creative** curriculum, maintaining **connection** as well as building and celebrating your **community**.¹⁴ A focus on a more broadly based curriculum is necessary at this time – a time when “business as usual”, public examinations, transfer tests are reduced to third-order priorities.

Radical change in education policy is also achievable at times of crisis. NEU's discussion paper on a Transition Year and on the relevance of GCSE's is an attempt to move from the high-stakes, results-focused, unduly driven and pressured system at middle and upper secondary level. And pupils will also need to more opportunities to revisit learning content that has been previously covered.

A well thought out reintegration plan, with flexibility for schools to meet the needs of their communities, as schools begin to open more widely:

Rationale: School leaders know the needs of their communities and their pupils and should be supported in their plans for gradual return. Government could provide models, and support leaders to share practice. Plans should also be made to support blended learning, where pupils access both remote and in-person teaching.

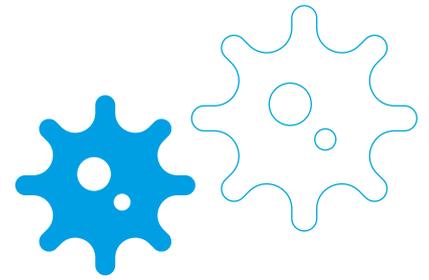
The Education and Training Inspectorate should not return to a full inspection programme while schools are working to reintegrate pupils, to assess their continuing needs and to understand what they have learnt during lockdown. Instead, ETI should focus on thematic reports which support school and college staff in understanding the most effective approaches to reintegrating children and young people to learning in school, and to understand better the learning loss experienced by their pupils and the most effective ways of tackling this.

NEU's first submission, a discussion paper of May 2020 “On a return to education in Northern Ireland- What will “new normal” look like?” stressed the need for a recovery curriculum with creativity and well-being at its heart. In particular, NEU are concerned that the pandemic is seeing a steady ‘cull’ of arts subject areas, when arts, music, drama and performing arts engender confidence in pupils, improve mental health and provide creative outlets for young people who have been trapped in lockdown for close to a year. The same could be said for PE and sports – areas which should be promoted at this time.

¹⁴ See at neu.org.uk

Part 3

Lets build a better education system as we emerge from the pandemic



Expand the 'Engage' programme and employ substitute teachers and newly qualified teachers who have not yet found full employment should be put to work in schools and colleges:

Rationale: Pupils returning to school will have experienced very different home learning environments. The attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children, already too big, will have grown. The NEU does not have confidence in mere 'catch up' schemes. It will be much better, and more effective, if schools are given increased staffing budgets to employ additional qualified teaching staff to support individualised and small group tuition for pupils who need it when they return to school and college.

This may involve an expansion of the 'Engage' programme, fuller use of the capacity with the NISTR and even the temporary re-engagement of recently retired professional staff.

Trainees and Newly Qualified Teachers have also suffered during the periods of lockdown, without sufficient time in classrooms or with colleagues to complete their Early Professional Development (EPD) training satisfactorily. The Department of Education should plan additional support, through an Early Career Framework, to ensure both that these teachers meet the standards and that they are motivated to stay in the profession.

Develop and properly resource a recovery curriculum to run over a number of years:

Rationale: Children and young people will have suffered huge disruption over two years, including learning at home for at least two terms. Pupils will need to be taught what they need for their next stages of

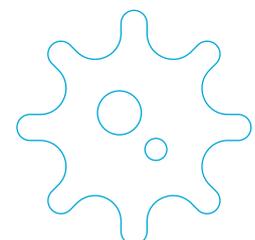
education, rather than to pass tests. Schools are best placed to know what their pupils need, and Government should develop a transition phase, over at least the next year, with flexibility to disapply the national curriculum as necessary in order to provide the depth and breadth of teaching and other support which pupils require.

While the Minister, DE, CCEA and Ofqual are now working on plans for exams for this year's cohort, it is too little too late. We must not be in this position next year, and the Minister should be planning now for those who are sitting exams and vocational qualifications in 2021/22. This should be a well-planned combination of exams and workload-proofed moderated centre assessment, with time given to develop moderation and to offer training to teachers.

Plans must be made for those who are transition years:

Rationale: The Executive must provide support for pupils currently in Year 6 so that their transition to secondary school can operate more smoothly than the previous year. Students in year 7 currently will have experienced a disrupted transition between primary and secondary schools, which will have impacted on their learning and their relationships with peers and teachers.

Children in the early years, and those about to start school, will have missed out on many formative experiences of social interaction with peers and unfamiliar adults. Nursery and Reception classes will need to be well resourced for social, physical, and academic support.



 Coronavirus guidance:
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