

## The Impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on schools, students, teachers and parents/carers in Exeter 2020-2021

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### Summary of the research

Research was conducted by the Graduate School of Education at the University of Exeter into the impacts and reactions to the changes in educational delivery in the Exeter EX1-4 postcode area from March 2020 to April 2021, with a view to how the University might provide a strategic approach to help Exeter's young people.

Following a rapid review of the extant evidence base, interviews were held with parents/guardians/carers, students, teachers, school leaders, and academics, along with members of organisations such as the Devon Children and Families Partnership, and Devon County Council Early Help Programme (a strategic lead for inclusion in schools), about the impacts of restrictions and social mobility.

A number of questions and issues became evident that formed the basis of three anonymised surveys which were sent to every school in the catchment area – one for each of the three cohorts: students; parents/guardians/carers; and teachers

Findings from our research highlighted the importance of socialisation as a key part of learning, and therefore the need to keep schools open at all costs. A sharp rise in anxiety levels was detected among children, especially regarding school work and the risk of passing on the virus to vulnerable family members. Fun and play, as well as access to mental health support, need to be an integral part of the education recovery.

### Policy recommendations

1. **Clarity over future exams** and assessments is required immediately.
2. **Playing with friends and fun activities** will help many pupils over the summer holidays but any attempt to make such events compulsory (i.e. “educational boot camps”) may not be welcome.
3. Schools know their students best so **provisions need to be made for teachers** to provide **targeted academic and social support** activities that can help pupils recover, gain back confidence and make up gaps in pupil understanding over the next 1-5 years.
4. At the same time, schools should focus on **reducing the stress of ‘catching up’** for pupils by creating increased opportunities for them to regain their sense of wellbeing with other activities.
5. Families, children and school staff all need **urgent and free access to appropriate mental health services and financial support services** over the next 12 months.
6. Schools have worked well with families during the pandemic and these links should be **sustained and developed**.

*“They’ve always said, ‘You can’t learn when you’re hungry.’ You also can’t learn when you’re anxious or you’re worried.”*

*(Local counsellor, speaking about rising cases of self-harm in young children)*

### **Key findings**

The key findings in this brief are a result of the data coming from the 1,012 respondents to the three surveys as well as the interviews, data mining, articles and other relevant data.

- Respondents recognised that COVID-19 had impacted on personal and social development as well as on learning.
- The exam debacle in the summer of 2020 over exams was extremely distressing and the lack of clarity over future assessment is stressful to pupils.
- Teachers (93%), students (88%) and parents (78%) agreed that the summer holidays should be a time for “freedom to play, have fun and catch up with friends”. They did not want educational “boot camps”.
- Most teachers felt unsupported by the government/media yet 91% of parents agreed teachers managed to meet or partially meet their child’s needs. A small proportion of key worker/vulnerable pupils thrived in the resulting smaller classes in school, whilst some thrived at home.
- There appears to have been a sharp rise in domestic abuse, family breakdown and hungry children. Over the whole year (March 2020 – April 2021), the Devon Children & Family Partnership recorded an average increase of 65% in the number of families presenting to them for triage, compared to previous years.
- A sharp rise in anxiety levels was detected among children, especially regarding school work and the risk of passing on the virus to vulnerable family members. One counsellor has seen a six-fold increase in cases of self-harm amongst young children.
- Home schooling in lockdown was especially challenging for working parent/s, key workers (with young children) and parents of children with disabilities/special needs.

### **Further reading**

- Dillon, J., Peat, S., Benham-Clarke, S. (2021) “The Impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on schools, students, teachers and parents/carers in Exeter 2020-2021: A report with recommendations”

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