



BRIEFING PAPER

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Coronavirus and schools: FAQs

By Shadi Danechi; Nerys Roberts

1. School closures and re-openings

1.1 School closures

Schools in all parts of the UK were closed to most children by the start of the week commencing Monday 23 March 2020. In England, some schools remained open where necessary for the children of critical workers, and vulnerable children, including:

- Those with a social worker
- Looked-after children
- Those with an education, health and care (EHC) plan because they have complex special educational needs.

Information on attendance rates can be found in section 2, below.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also put similar arrangements in place for the children of critical workers, and vulnerable pupils.

1.2 A potential phased re-opening in England

In his [address to the nation](#) on 10 May 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that if the Government's conditions were met, more children and young people could begin returning to school from 1 June 2020, at the earliest.¹

The DfE published [further guidance](#) on 11 May 2020. Initially, and for mainstream settings, the focus would be on children in the following year groups:

- Nursery
- Reception (aged 4 to 5)
- Year 1 (aged 5 to 6)
- Year 6 (aged 10 to 11 – in the final year of primary schooling in two-tier systems).
- Year 10 (aged 14 to 15 - the year before GCSE or equivalent exams)
- Year 12 (aged 16 to 17 - the year before A level or equivalent exams)

¹ [PM address to the nation on coronavirus](#), 10 May 2020.

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The DfE subsequently said it would encourage middle schools² to open to year 6 pupils first, “to ensure national parity for children in this year group.”³

Special schools would work toward a phased return, but without a focus on specific year groups.

It’s also the Government’s intention that from 15 June 2020, secondary pupils in years 10 and 12 may partially return to schools and colleges.⁴ The DfE has previously clarified that this would “not be a return to full timetables or pupils back in school or college full time, rather some support to supplement pupils’ remote education.” Providers would also be expected to limit the number of pupils in those years attending at any one time and keep them in small groups.

1.3 DfE guidance on protective measures: England

The DfE has published guidance, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings](#). This foresees schools and colleges in England employing a “hierarchy of controls” to limit transmission, including:

- minimising contact with individuals who are unwell by ensuring that those who have coronavirus symptoms, or who have someone in their household who does, do not attend childcare settings, schools or colleges
- cleaning hands more often than usual - wash hands thoroughly for 20 seconds with running water and soap and dry them thoroughly or use alcohol hand rub or sanitiser ensuring that all parts of the hands are covered
- ensuring good respiratory hygiene - promote the ‘catch it, bin it, kill it’ approach
- cleaning frequently touched surfaces often using standard products, such as detergents and bleach
- minimising contact and mixing by altering, as much as possible, the environment (such as classroom layout) and timetables (such as staggered break times).⁵

The guidance also stated that:

- for primary schools, class sizes should normally be limited to 15 pupils per teacher (and a teaching assistant where necessary).
- The same principle of halving class sizes should also apply to secondary classes, except where this would lead to very small classes.
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), including face masks, is not recommended in schools unless it’s a normal part of care for a pupil, or if a pupil displayed symptoms (until they could be taken home).

The guidance recognises that early-years and primary-age children could not always be expected to maintain a 2 metre distance from others.

² Some areas of England have three-tier systems of schooling, with first, middle, and upper/ higher schools. Middle schools typically cater for pupils aged 9 to 13.

³ Department for Education, [‘Actions for education and childcare settings to prepare for wider opening from 1 June 2020’](#), 11 May 2020.

⁴ Department for Education, [Opening schools and educational settings to more pupils from 1 June: guidance for parents and carers](#), updated 1 June 2020.

⁵ Department for Education, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings](#), updated 1 June 2020.

The DfE has published a [range of other guidance](#) for schools, multi-academy trusts, local authorities, parents and carers.

1.4 Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

On 5 May 2020, Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, was reported as saying that reopening schools in Scotland "might not be possible at all this side of the summer holidays ... We know that for younger children social distancing is very difficult."⁶ Scottish school summer holidays normally start at the end of June, so earlier than in England.

Also on 5 May, the Scottish Government published [further information](#) on easing Coronavirus restrictions. On schools, this said:

[I]n the 'better' scenario, primary schools and nurseries in Scotland would be able to re-open without causing a resurgence in the virus. However, given the current level of infections and R,⁷ [...] in the 'most likely' scenario, full re-opening would cause a resurgence in the virus such that hospital capacity in Scotland would be overwhelmed in less than two months. A 'worse' scenario would further exacerbate the situation. These scenarios illustrate the risks we face in considering different options and the merit in delaying a decision to re-open until transmission of the virus is much reduced from the current level.⁸

On 21 May 2020, the Scottish Government published [further details](#) of how the lockdown could be eased in Scotland.⁹ On schools, this stated that, providing tests were met and subject to public health guidance and risk assessment:

- Teachers and school staff would begin returning to schools in June in order to prepare for the new term and a "new model of learning".¹⁰
- There would be transition support, where possible, for children who were at key transition points in their school career.
- From 11 August 2020, schools would reopen but children and young people would not attend full-time. Instead there would be a blended learning approach. The Scottish Government is anticipating pupils would spend around half their time in schools, and half learning at home.

It subsequently [published guidance](#) for local authorities and schools on planning for the phased reopening.¹¹

In Wales, First Minister, Mark Drakeford, said on 10 May 2020 that schools there would "not return to normal on June 1." He added that the Welsh Government would "continue to make decisions, which are right for Wales, using information and expert advice about how coronavirus is circulating here to keep us safe."¹² On 15 May 2020, it published its [decision framework for the next phase of education and childcare](#).

Northern Ireland's [Executive Approach to Decision-Making](#), published 12 May 2020, does not set specific dates for any easing of restrictions, including in relation to schools.¹³ The

⁶ '[Scottish schools may not reopen until August, Sturgeon suggests](#)', in the *Guardian*, 5 May 2020.

⁷ R is the reproduction number – i.e., the number of people that one infected person will pass the disease on to, on average.

⁸ Scottish Government, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): framework for decision making - further information](#), 5 May 2020, p13.

⁹ Scottish Government, '[COVID-19 – Framework for Decision Making Scotland's route map through and out of the crisis](#)', 21 May 2020.

¹⁰ As above, p30.

¹¹ Scottish Government, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): re-opening schools guide](#), 28 May 2020.

¹² Welsh Government, press release, '[First Minister of Wales' message to the people of Wales](#)', 10 May 2020.

¹³ Northern Ireland Executive Office, '[Coronavirus - Executive Approach to Decision-Making](#)', 12 May 2020.

Education Minister, Peter Weir, was earlier quoted as saying that it was “extremely likely” there could be a phased return of schools in Northern Ireland in September.¹⁴ In an Oral Statement on 21 May 2020, Mr. Weir said:

Subject to medical guidance and safety it would be my aim to see a phased reopening of schools, beginning with a limited provision for key cohort years in late August, followed by phased provision for all pupils at the beginning of September. This will not be a return to school as it was prior to COVID, but rather a new normal reflective of social distancing and a medically safe regime. For all pupils it will involve a schedule with a mixture of school attendance and remote learning at home.

Finally, in line with the Executive Strategy, contingent upon medical guidance and scientific evidence around susceptibility and transmission, consideration may be given to a full return for cohorts of younger pupils.¹⁵

2. School attendance rates: key worker and vulnerable children

From Monday March 23, the Department for Education (DfE) [asked schools to report](#) daily attendance figures for vulnerable children, and the children of critical workers. Over the period the response rate of schools has varied between 12% and 74% of establishments (the low response rate was on 25 May, a bank holiday during what is usually half term).

The DfE has [published](#) national **estimates** of the number and proportion of children attending schools in person since March 23 based on the figures which schools have provided.

The published figures are estimates because they have been adjusted for non-responses using certain assumptions (these assumptions changed from Friday 27 March so like for like comparisons cannot be made over the entire period). A lower response rate can make this methodology to account for non-responses less accurate.¹⁶

2.1 Summary Statistics

As of Thursday 28 May 2020 (which would usually have been half term):¹⁷

- Around 115,000 pupils attended schools in England. This was an estimated 1.2% of pupils that would normally attend. This was a decline from 2.6% the previous week.
- The estimated proportion of children of critical workers attending school was around 3%. For vulnerable pupils it was around 7%. This was a decline from the previous week of 6% and 15% respectively.
- Around 12,800 schools were open (52% of schools that are normally open), this means that on average around 9 pupils attended each open school. This was a decline from 80% the previous week.

As illustrated in the following chart, in the first two weeks of the comparable period, the number of pupils attending school in person followed a downward trend in general, but this reversed rapidly after the Easter bank holidays among both children of critical workers and vulnerable pupils. Attendance increased (excluding the dip on the Early May Bank holiday) and peaked at around 254,000 pupils on the 20 of May. The following week was

¹⁴ [‘Coronavirus: September target for re-opening of NI schools’](#), BBC News, 7 May 2020.

¹⁵ [Oral statement to the Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID 19 response by Peter Weir MLA, Minister of Education](#), 21 May 2020

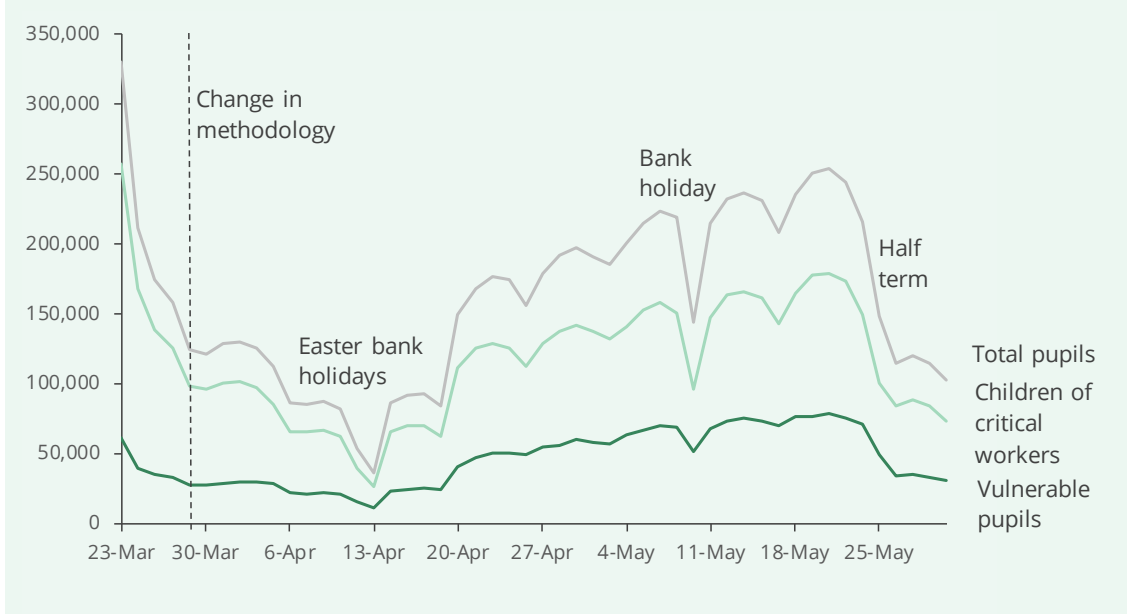
¹⁶ [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 28 May 2020, DfE](#) (p4)

¹⁷ [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 28 May 2020, DfE](#) (p5-6)

what is usually half term. During this week attendance levels declined and erased much of the increases in attendance since Easter.

In addition to these trends, attendance levels also tend to fluctuate within the week. In general, the highest numbers of pupils attend in the middle of each week.

The number of pupils attending school has fallen sharply in the last week England



Notes: All figures are estimates because they have been adjusted by the DfE for non-responses. The methodology for the adjustment changed from Friday 27 March, this means like for like comparisons before this time cannot be made. Caution should be taken for the results of 1 May, 13 May, 15 May. Due to technical issues with the DfE sign-in, lower rates of establishments were able to record attendance. The response rates were also lower on the bank and school holidays. The DfE cautions that vulnerable children attendance figures are underestimates.

Source: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 28 May 2020, DfE](#)

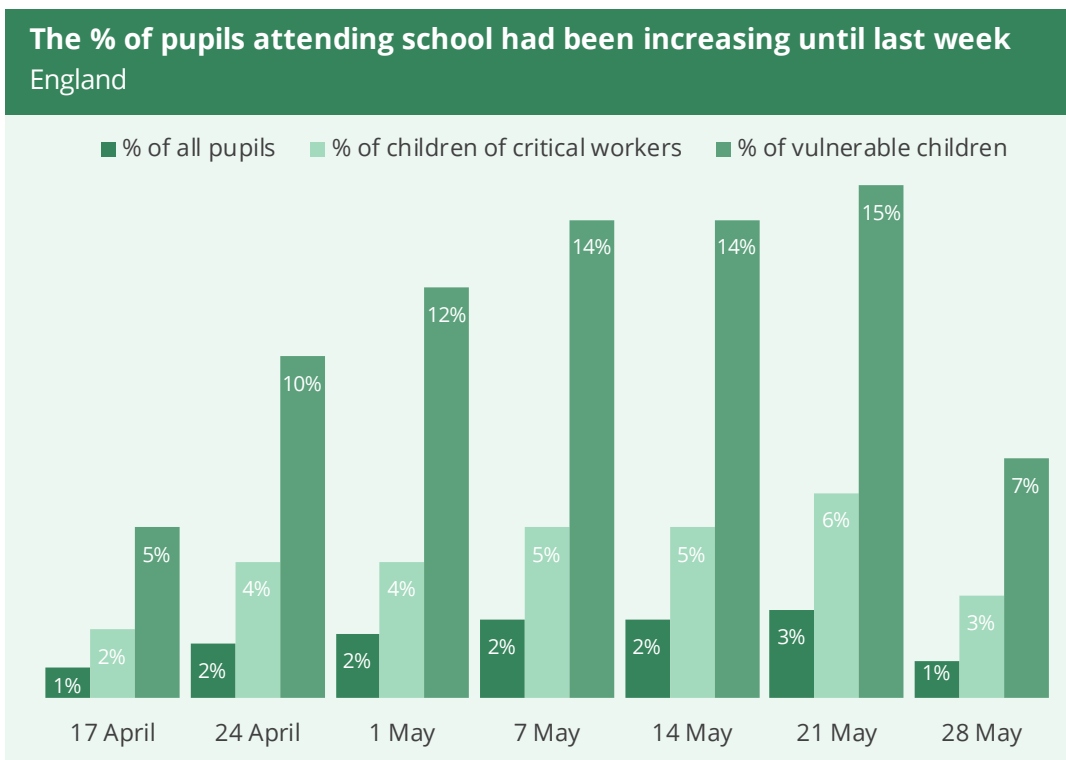
The number of pupils attending school in person expressed as a proportion of the children that would normally attend has followed similar trends as above. Overall it has remained consistently low. During the comparable period (27 March to 28 May) this proportion ranged between 0.4% and 2.7%.

The DfE has also estimated the number of pupils attending school expressed as a proportion of those that are eligible to attend on a weekly snapshot basis since Friday 17 April. The most recent snapshot is as of 28 May, which recorded lower rates of attendance from the previous week.

As shown in the following chart, between Friday 17 April and Thursday 28 May, the proportion of both vulnerable pupils and children of critical workers attending school had been increasing gradually, until last week (which would usually have been half term).

Tom Hunt MP stated in an Education Select Committee [oral evidence session](#) that the uptake of school places among children of critical workers and vulnerable pupils is lower than the Government's initial expectations of "around 20%".¹⁸

¹⁸ Education Select Committee, [The impact of covid19 on education and children's services](#), 22 April 2020. (Q16)



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

Due to technical issues with the DfE sign-in, on 1 May only 14% of establishments were able to record attendance. The DfE cautions that attendance rates of vulnerable children are underestimates.

Source: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 28 May 2020, DfE](#)

A breakdown is also published by setting type on a weekly snapshot basis since 30 April, the most recent snapshot is as of 28 May. Unsurprisingly, the rate of pupil attendance was highest in non-mainstream settings and lowest in mainstream settings for older pupils. The attendance rate varied between less than 0.5% in further education and secondary school settings, and 20% in special post 16 institutions.

Pupil attendance is highest in non-mainstream settings 28 May 2020, England

	Establishment Response rate	% of open establishments	% of pupils attending
Special post 16 institution	21%	49%	20%
Alternative provision	17%	40%	2-4%
Special	25%	48%	3%
State-funded nursery	21%	41%	3%
State-funded primary	36%	53%	2%
Independent school	10%	40%	1%
State-funded secondary	40%	60%	<0.5%
Further Education	15%	28%	<0.5%
Total	33%	52%	1%

Notes: All figures are estimates because they have been adjusted by the DfE for non-responses. Figures are ranked in the table by % of pupils attending. The DfE estimated a range of pupil attendance for alternative provision to communicate the uncertainty involved. This is due to pupils at these settings often being enrolled in other settings as well.

Source: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings: 15 May 2020, DfE](#)

3. Survey evidence about differences in home learning

3.1 Teacher Tapp

[Teacher Tapp](#) have asked a range of survey questions to a sample of around 7,000 teachers several times per week during the school closures. The results are then adjusted to provide national **estimates**.

The survey found very large differences between teachers' perceptions of state and private sector pupils' home learning environments, and also the average amount of online learning time.¹⁹

For example, 5% of private school teachers thought that more than 20% of the children in their class did not have access to an electronic device for learning (as of 25 March). In contrast, 15% of state-funded teachers thought the same.

In addition, 13% of private school teachers thought that pupils were learning less than one hour per day (as of 27 March). In contrast, 42% of state-funded school teachers thought the same.

The following charts show that there were also large differences in responses within the state-funded sector when schools are broken down by deprivation.²⁰

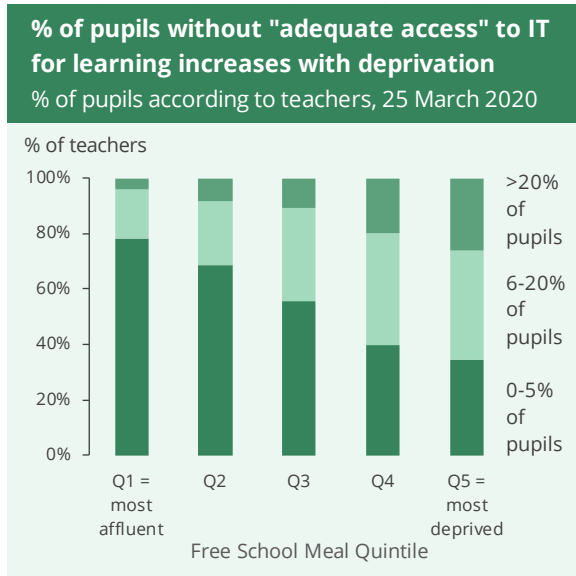
For example, in the least deprived state-funded schools 4% of teachers thought that more than 20% of the children in their class did not have access to an electronic device (as of 25 March). In contrast, 26% of teachers in the most deprived schools thought the same.

In addition, in the least deprived state-funded schools 27% of teachers thought that pupils were learning less than one hour per day (as of 27 March). In contrast, 57% of teachers in the most deprived schools thought the same.

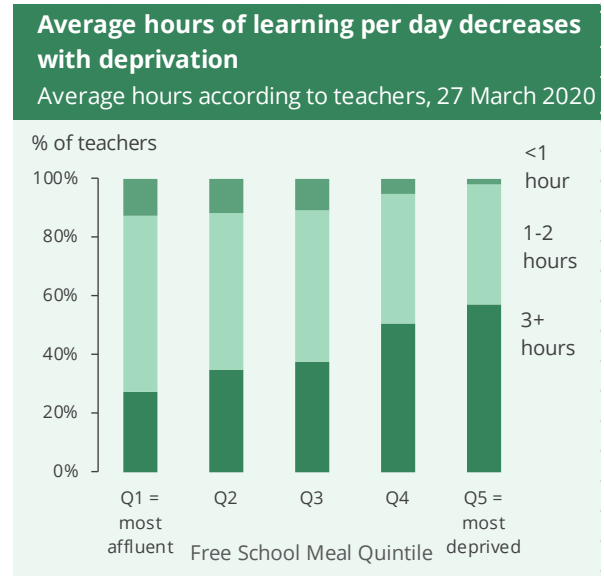
Some disadvantaged pupils without digital devices or internet access are eligible for Government support. Further details about this scheme are available [here](#).

¹⁹ NA responses have been excluded

²⁰ As above.



Notes: All figures are estimates
6,877 teachers responded to this survey question
NA responses have been excluded (3-5% of sample)
Source: [Monitoring Covid-19 readiness in schools: Q3144 25 March, Teacher Tapp \(Google doc\)](#)



Notes: All figures are estimates
2,068 teachers responded to this survey question
NA responses have been excluded (4-7% of sample)
Source: [Monitoring Covid-19 readiness in schools: Q3143 27 March, Teacher Tapp \(Google doc\)](#)

3.2 Institute for Fiscal Studies

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

The IFS survey found large differences between state and private school parents' responses about the provision of online learning resources from schools. The results also showed large differences within the state sector when broken down by family deprivation levels.²¹

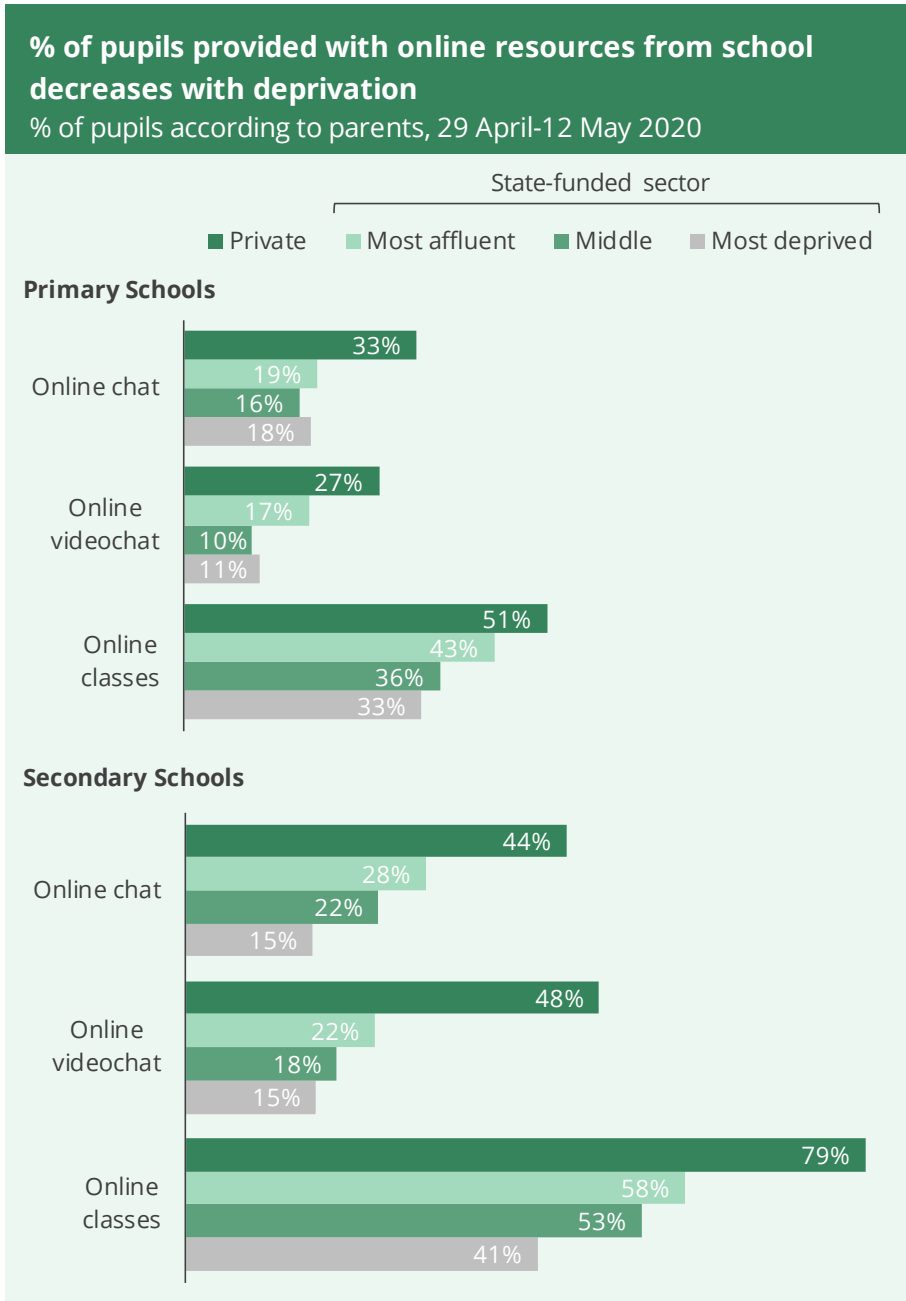
For example, the proportion of parents that report their child's primary school has provided online classes²² (regardless of whether or not the child has attended them) is 51% for children attending private schools, 43% for the most affluent in state-funded schools and 33% for the most deprived in state-funded schools.

The differences are more pronounced in secondary schools. For example, the proportion of parents that report their child's school has provided online classes is 79% for children attending private schools, 58% for the most affluent in state-funded schools and 41% for the most deprived in state-funded schools.

The IFS concluded from the survey results findings overall that "school closures are almost certain to increase educational inequalities".²³

²² There may be differences in the way parents from different groups interpret what is meant by 'online classes'. Some schools are offering short online catch-ups while others are running full lessons.

²³ IFS, [Learning during the lockdown](#), 18 May 2020, p3



Notes: All figures are estimates based on a survey sample of 3,091 primary parents and 1,554 secondary school parents. Parents were asked, 'Which of the following activities has [child]'s school provided while schools are closed? Please tick all that apply.' Deprivation quintiles are based on equivalised pre-pandemic family earnings, only most affluent, middle, and most deprived quintiles are shown here.

Source: [Learning during the lockdown](#): 18 May 2020, IFS ("Underlying data", Fig4)

4. How will GCSE and A Level grades be calculated (England)?

There will be no GCSE or A Level examinations this summer. Instead, a different process will be used to provide most candidates in England with grades in summer 2020.

Schools and colleges are being asked to provide a centre assessment grade. This is the grade a student would have been most likely to have achieved if they'd sat their exams

and completed any non-exam assessment. They are also being asked to supply awarding bodies with a list of candidates in rank order, within each grade, for each subject.

Evidence considered when calculating the centre assessment grade could include:

- classwork
- bookwork
- any participation in performances in subjects such as music, drama or PE
- any non-exam assessment – whether or not complete
- the results of any assignments or mock exams
- previous examination results – for example, for any re-sitting students or those with relevant AS qualifications
- any other records of student performance over the course of study.²⁴

Standardisation

Following a [consultation](#), Ofqual has also decided that exam boards should standardise grades. This will involve the use of:

a statistical model which will include the expected national outcomes for this year's students, the prior attainment of students at each school and college (at cohort, not individual level), and previous results of the school or college.²⁵

The consultation set out the aims of standardisation as:

- i. to provide students with the grades that they would most likely have achieved had they been able to complete their assessments in summer 2020;
- ii. to apply a common standardisation approach, within and across subjects, for as many students as possible;
- iii. to use a method that is transparent and easy to explain, wherever possible, to encourage engagement and build confidence;
- iv. to protect, so far as is possible, all students from being systematically advantaged or disadvantaged, notwithstanding their socio-economic background or whether they have a protected characteristic;
- v. to be deliverable by exam boards in a consistent and timely way that they can quality assure and can be overseen effectively by Ofqual.²⁶

In response to the consultation, Ofqual confirmed that the standardisation process would:

place more weight on a centre's historical performance in a subject than the submitted centre assessment grades where that will result in students getting the grades that they would most likely have achieved had they been able to complete their assessments in summer 2020.²⁷

4.1 Appeals

If a candidate is unhappy with their calculated grade, there will be an appeals process. Following the consultation, Ofqual confirmed that students will **not** be able to appeal on the basis of their centre's professional judgement or rank ordering. Further details on the

²⁴ Ofqual news story, '[How GCSEs, AS & A levels will be awarded in summer 2020](#)', 3 April 2020.

²⁵ Ofqual news story, '[Ofqual GCSE and A level consultation outcomes and autumn exam series proposals](#)', 22 May 2020.

²⁶ Ofqual consultation, '[Exceptional arrangements for assessment and grading in 2020](#)', 24 April 2020, p7.

²⁷ Ofqual news story, '[Ofqual GCSE and A level consultation outcomes and autumn exam series proposals](#)', 22 May 2020

general rules surrounding appeals can be found in section 3.10 (p31 onward) of Ofqual's [consultation response](#).

Students may also choose to sit exams in the anticipated autumn 2020 exam series, or in summer 2021. Ofsted launched a [detailed consultation](#) on the arrangements for the autumn series on 28 May 2020. This will close on 8 June 2020.

4.2 What about private and home-educated candidates?

Some students take exams as private candidates, because, for example, they are home-educated, studying independently, or have left their school or college and are taking re-sits. Ofqual published [updated guidance](#) on private candidate assessment on 30 April 2020. This states:

[I]f the Head of Centre where a private candidate was registered to take their exams is confident they, or their staff, have seen sufficient evidence of the student's work to form a judgement they can submit a centre assessment grade for the student, and include them in the centre's rank order.²⁸

If the Head of Centre is confident that they have seen sufficient evidence of an applicant's work then students would be awarded grades in the same way as students who'd attended schools or colleges. Practically, however, this may present difficulties if the centre has had limited prior contact with the candidate and it is hard to form a confident judgement of the candidate.

The Ofqual guidance refers to the Joint Council for Qualifications' (JCQ) new [supplementary guidance](#) – JCQ is the body that represents all the main GCSE and A-level-awarding bodies in the UK. This guidance, which applies to awarding bodies regulated by Ofqual, states that the general principle is that "where possible" centres should use information they already hold about the student's performance in order to produce a grade.

The guidance recommends:

Heads of Centre should only submit centre assessment grades where they have seen sufficient evidence to be confident in their judgements. Such evidence must be in compliance with the Ofqual information and, in particular must use "holistic professional judgement, balancing the different sources of evidence". Where sufficient evidence is not already held within the centre, and a head of centre wishes to consider alternative sources of evidence, the following table on levels of confidence should be followed. [...] ²⁹

Guidance on other evidence and levels of confidence are set out in the guidance on p2-3.

If a private candidate's exam centre cannot submit estimated grades, options may include:

- Transferring to a new exam centre, that does have the capacity to obtain and verify evidence. The new centre needs to be approved by the exam board for the purpose of taking on new students that it hasn't previously had a relationship with.
- Transferring to an exam centre where the student has previously studied at some point in the past.
- Waiting until the next exam series – which should be in the autumn, or waiting until next summer's exam series.

²⁸ Ofqual, [Update on centre assessment grades and rank orders for private candidates and for students who have worked with other centres](#), 30 April 2020.

²⁹ Joint Council for Qualifications, [Supplementary information on validation of evidence by centres](#), 30 April 2020, p2.

Government guidance for England, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): cancellation of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2020](#), 11 May 2020, stated that Ofqual has asked bodies representing universities to encourage their members to consider using flexibilities in relation to private candidates who cannot be awarded a grade this summer to allow them to progress wherever possible:

Unfortunately, not all external candidates will be able to be awarded a calculated grade this summer because some will not be in a position to provide sufficient evidence to enable their exam centre to include them in their centre assessment grades and rankings. Students in this position will need to sit exams to get their grades, either in the autumn or in summer 2021.

Ofqual has asked organisations that represent higher and further education providers to consider the steps that providers could take when making admissions decisions this summer for any private candidates who do not receive a grade. They have said that they believe that institutions will consider a range of other evidence and information for these students to allow them to progress wherever possible.³⁰

4.3 When will students get their results?

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, A and AS level results will be published on 13 August 2020. GCSE results will be published a week later, on 20 August 2020.

³⁰ Department for Education, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): cancellation of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2020](#), 1 May 2020.

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