

IFS Briefing Note BN318

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The return to school and catch- up policies

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Executive summary

On 8 March, all pupils in England will return to in-person schooling after what is hopefully the final period of COVID-related blanket school closures. This is an important first step in starting to undo some of the damage that the pandemic has inflicted on children's education and well-being, and in starting to close the educational inequalities that have widened between those from disadvantaged and better-off backgrounds. However, simply reopening the school gates will not be enough on its own; addressing the consequences of the pandemic is set to be the most important challenge in education policy over the coming years.

In this briefing note, we analyse data collected in the last week of February 2021 to understand parents' views about two important aspects of the return to school. We first consider the very short term: how do parents feel about sending their children back to school, and what concerns do they have? We then turn to the challenge that will dominate the longer-term debate: the extent of lost learning and what schools and policymakers can do to help children recover from the consequences the pandemic has had for their learning and their mental health.

To understand parents' views on these two challenges, we surveyed almost 6,000 parents of school-aged children in England. The data in this briefing note were collected between 23 February and 2 March 2021, after the government announced its school reopening plan but before children returned to the classroom. The data have been weighted to be representative of parents in England.

Key findings

- 1 **Most parents support the return to school on 8 March.** Nine in ten parents say they would send their child back on Monday even if the return were not compulsory. That compares with fewer than two-thirds of families during the staggered return to school last summer.
Encouragingly, the differences between better-off and more

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disadvantaged families have also grown smaller – though gaps remain at secondary school.

- 2 Among parents who are still reluctant to return to in-person schooling, health concerns continue to be the most important reason. Nearly half of these parents say that the COVID-19 case rate is the key factor in whether they support a return to school. However, **around 40% of reluctant parents cite factors that are directly under the control of policymakers** (precautions taken at school such as lateral testing or mask-wearing, and progress in vaccinations).
- 3 Overall, 65% of primary school parents and 68% of those with secondary school children are concerned that their child has lost out on learning. While close to half of those whose child was in primary school think that their child will have recovered within a term, **a third of concerned parents think that recovery will take a school year or more. At secondary school, 9% think that their child will never make up for the pandemic's effect on their learning.**
- 4 **Support for catch-up policies is very high**, with over 90% of parents in favour of at least some academic policies for catch-up and 83% in favour of policies to support pupil well-being. **The most popular academic policy by some distance is tutoring, which over 80% of parents support.** Parents are more divided in their priorities for supporting pupil well-being, but around four in ten would prioritise in-class activities such as arts or time outdoors.
- 5 Support for policies that would increase the amount of learning time is much lower, with around half of parents in favour of a longer school day and fewer than half in favour of an extended term or repeating school years. Support for these policies is also more divided, with **parents in the most disadvantaged third around 10 percentage points less likely to support policies that would change the regular school schedule** than those in the top third. The design of the recovery programme must explicitly consider not just what is likely to be effective, but also what is feasible for families and how to ensure that support actually reaches the students who need it most.

1. Introduction

Over the past year, school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in children in England spending at least 16 weeks learning at home instead of in the classroom. However, from 8 March 2021, all children are due to return to school after what will hopefully be the final period of school closures.

The return to school is an important first step in starting to undo some of the damage that the pandemic has inflicted on children's education and well-being, and in starting to close the inequalities that have widened between those from disadvantaged and better-off backgrounds. However, simply reopening the school gates will not be enough on its own; addressing the consequences of the pandemic is set to be the most important challenge in education policy over the coming years.

In this briefing note, we use data collected last week to provide real-time insight into parents' views about two important aspects of the return to school. The first of these looks at the very short term: How do parents feel about sending their children back to school? And, if they have concerns, what are the issues that they raise and what would need to change for them to support the return to school?

We then turn to the challenge that will dominate the longer-term debate: the extent of lost learning and what schools and policymakers can do to help children to recover from the adverse impacts of the pandemic on their learning and their mental health.

To understand parents' views on these two challenges, we surveyed almost 6,000 parents of school-aged children in England. The data in this briefing note were collected between 23 February and 2 March 2021, after the government announced its plan for school reopening but before children returned to the classroom on 8 March. The data have been weighted to be representative of parents in England. Box 1.1 contains more detail about the survey.

Box 1.1. Data and survey collection

Sample: Data were collected via an online survey rolled out to 5,858 parents of English school children between 23 February and 2 March 2021. Parents were asked to respond on behalf of one randomly selected child in their household between the ages of 4 and 16, giving us coverage of every year group from Reception to Year 11.

Representativeness: We used quotas on survey responses to ensure that respondents were diverse in terms of their gender, education, region, marital status and employment status. We then reweighted our responses based on a larger representative sample. Specifically, we used a subsample of the UK Labour Force Survey (LFS) that was roughly equivalent to our population of interest: parents with at least one child of primary or secondary school age. We constructed balancing weights based on parental education, pre-lockdown working status, earnings, industry, occupation and region to bring our sample into line with the more representative LFS.

Data collected: We asked parents questions about their willingness to send their child back to school on 8 March, perceptions regarding their child's learning loss during the pandemic, and their support for various remedial policies that have been proposed. Detailed descriptions of the questions posed can be found in the notes to the relevant figures.

2. Return to school

Schools in England are due to reopen to all pupils on 8 March. While the return is intended to be both universal and compulsory, it is also important to gauge the extent of parents' reservations about a return to in-person schooling – and to understand whether there are any policy solutions that will help them to feel more comfortable.

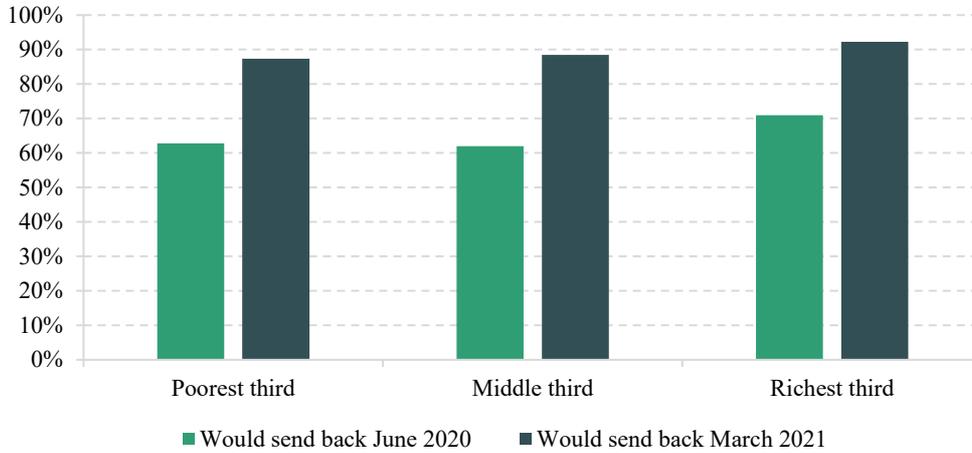
Our previous research has shown that, when schools started to reopen in June/July 2020 following the first national lockdown, many parents – especially those in disadvantaged families – had reservations about sending their children back to the classroom (Andrew et al., 2020a). In the current survey, we again asked parents whether they would be willing to send their child back to school on 8 March, assuming they were given the choice.

Encouragingly, the results in Figure 2.1 clearly show that parents are much more supportive of the return to school this time around than they were before the summer holidays. The great majority (89%) of parents support sending their child back to school on 8 March, compared with just 65% of parents back in June/July.

Since the increase was smallest among families with pre-COVID earnings in the highest third, willingness to send children back to school has also become much less unequal than it was in June/July (though there remains a 7 percentage point gap between the most and least disadvantaged third of secondary school parents – see Figure 2.2). A more equal return to school is particularly important given the large body of evidence showing that disadvantaged students have, on average, had a more difficult experience with home learning and have fallen further behind than their better-off peers (Andrew et al., 2020b).

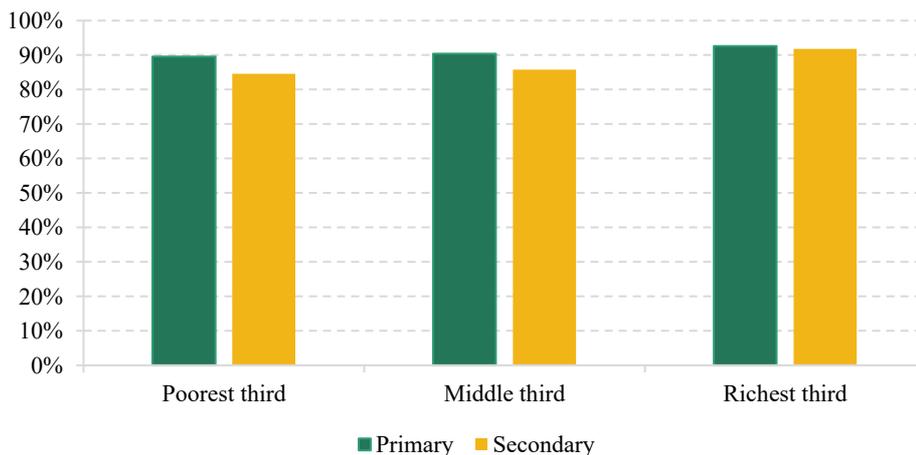
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Figure 2.1. Willingness to send child back to school, by pre-COVID family earnings



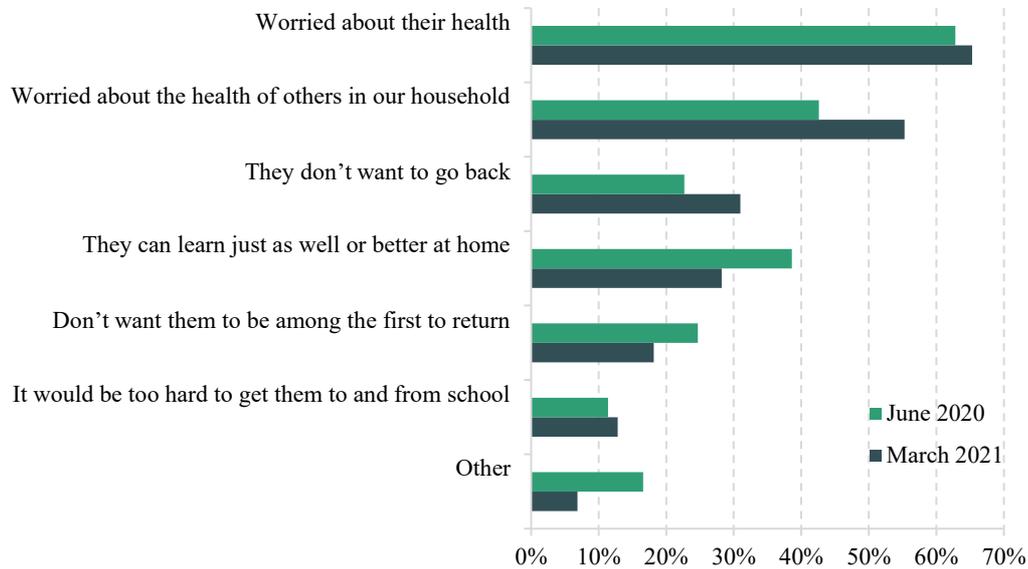
Note: Bars for 'June 2020' show the percentage of parents who say they would have sent their child back to school if they had been given the option (among the group of children whose school is not yet open to their year group) or who did send their child back when given the option, based on the wave 2 survey conducted in June/July 2020. Bars for 'March 2021' show the percentage of parents responding yes to the question 'In England, the government has said that schools will reopen at the earliest from March 8th. Would you send [name] back to school then, if you were given the choice?'. Poorest, middle and richest thirds refer to the distribution of pre-pandemic household equivalised earnings.

Figure 2.2. Willingness to send child back to school, by age and pre-COVID family earnings



Note: Bars show the percentage of parents responding yes to the question 'In England, the government has said that schools will reopen at the earliest from March 8th. Would you send [name] back to school then, if you were given the choice?'. Poorest, middle and richest thirds refer to the distribution of pre-pandemic household equivalised earnings.

Figure 2.3. Parents' reasons for being unwilling to send children back to school

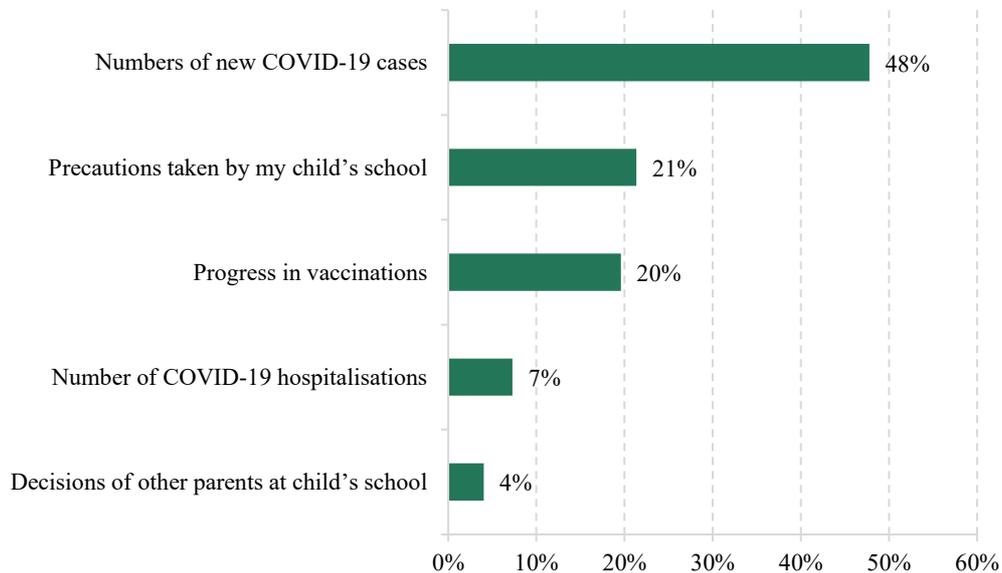


Note: In both waves, parents who said that they would not send their child back to school given the choice were asked to respond to a list of reasons for this. Respondents could select multiple options so answers do not sum to 100%.

As Figure 2.3 shows, among parents who would not choose to send their children back, the primary reason – as it was last June – is worry about the health of the child themselves. Interestingly, compared with last June, reluctant parents are now substantially more likely to cite the health of family members as a concern, though they are less likely to say that their children can learn just as well at home. However, since there are now many fewer parents in this group than there were before, we cannot say whether these changes reflect changes in parents' attitudes over time or just a change in the composition of this group (for example, with a greater share of this smaller group at very high risk from COVID-19).

In Figure 2.4, we explore the factors that would convince these reluctant parents to support sending their children back to school. Consistent with the predominance of health-related concerns, nearly half of these parents would want to see reductions in the number of new COVID-19 cases before sending their child back. About a fifth of the reluctant parents cited precautions taken by the school to reduce transmission (21%) and progress on vaccinations (20%) as important factors for their attitude to school return.

Figure 2.4. Most important factor to convince parent to support return to school



Note: Parents who said that they would not send their child back to school given the choice were asked 'Which factor is most important to you in deciding when you would be happy to send [name] back to school?'.

While COVID-19 case numbers are not under the direct control of policymakers, the responses suggest that policymakers do have some levers that would directly influence parents' willingness to send children back to school. In particular, these results suggest that both national policymakers and individual schools should be consulting with parents and others in the school community to work out precautions that will both help to minimise health risks from the return to school and help to reassure parents.

3. Learning loss and catch-up policies

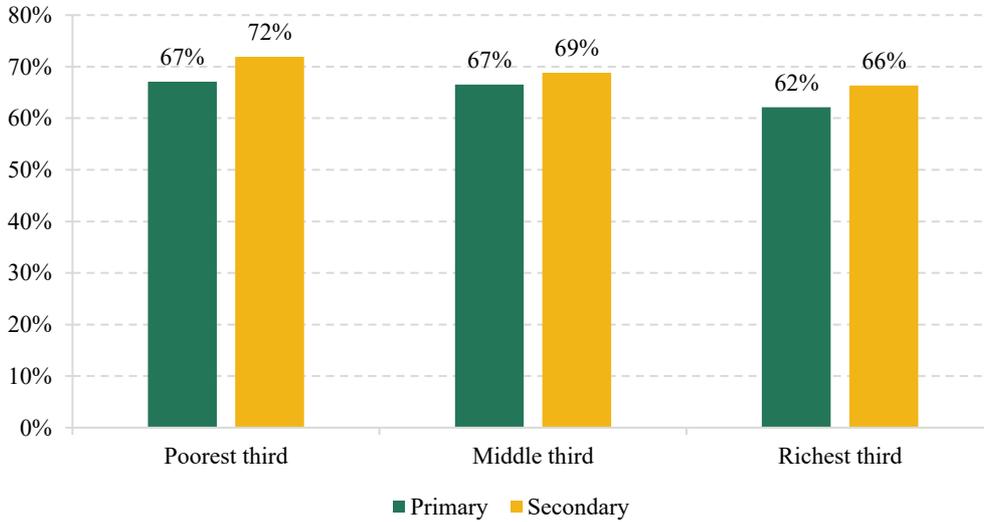
While there has been considerable focus over the last year on how to make home learning work better and how to handle assessments for older students, there is a growing discussion about how much learning children have lost out on and the best way forward to ensure all children catch up. In this section, we analyse parents' views on how much learning children have lost, and what policies they would support to help pupils catch up.

Learning loss

Early estimates for England suggest that the average child was around two months behind where they would expect to be in the autumn term (Rose et al., 2021; Renaissance Learning and Education Policy Institute, 2021). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds fell behind even further. And, while there are encouraging signs that home learning during the current lockdown has been more effective than it was before the summer (Montacute and Cullinane, 2021), it is still too early to know whether learning loss has grown even further since the autumn.

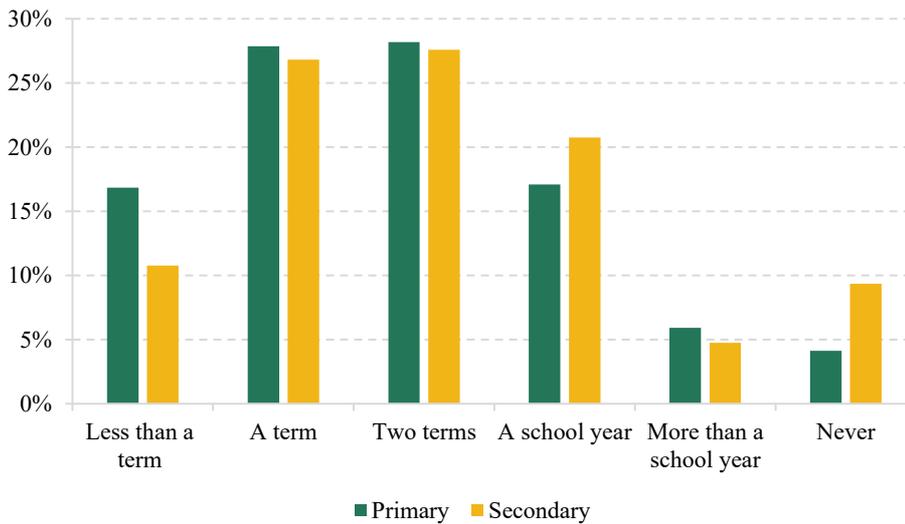
In our survey, we asked parents whether they are worried that their child has lost out on learning. We find that a large majority of parents are concerned about this – overall, 65% of primary school parents think that their child has lost out on learning time, and the figure is higher for secondary school parents. Figure 3.1 also shows that concern is high across the socio-economic spectrum; the proportion of concerned parents is only about 5 percentage points lower in the top earnings third than in the bottom earnings third.

Figure 3.1. Share of parents concerned about lost learning time, by pre-COVID family earnings



Note: Percentage of parents responding yes to the question ‘Some people worry that as a result of school closures and difficulties with home learning, children will have “lost out” on the learning time they otherwise would have gotten. Do you think this is the case for [name]?’.

Figure 3.2. Parents’ expectations for how long it will take children to catch up on lost learning



Note: Responses to the question ‘Once schools re-open, how long do you think it will take [name] to catch up to the level of learning they’d have been at had the pandemic never happened?’. This question was only asked to parents who agreed that their child had lost out on learning (Figure 3.1).

However, as Figure 3.2 shows, there is considerable diversity in how long parents think it will take their child to catch up to the level they would have been at without the pandemic. Among parents concerned about learning loss, 45% of the ones with primary school age children (38% of the ones with secondary school age children) think that their child will have recovered within a term. On the other hand, nearly a third of parents think that recovery will take a school year or more. At secondary school, 9% of parents think that their child will never make up for the effects of the pandemic. Again, we find few differences between parents in better-off families and those with lower earnings.

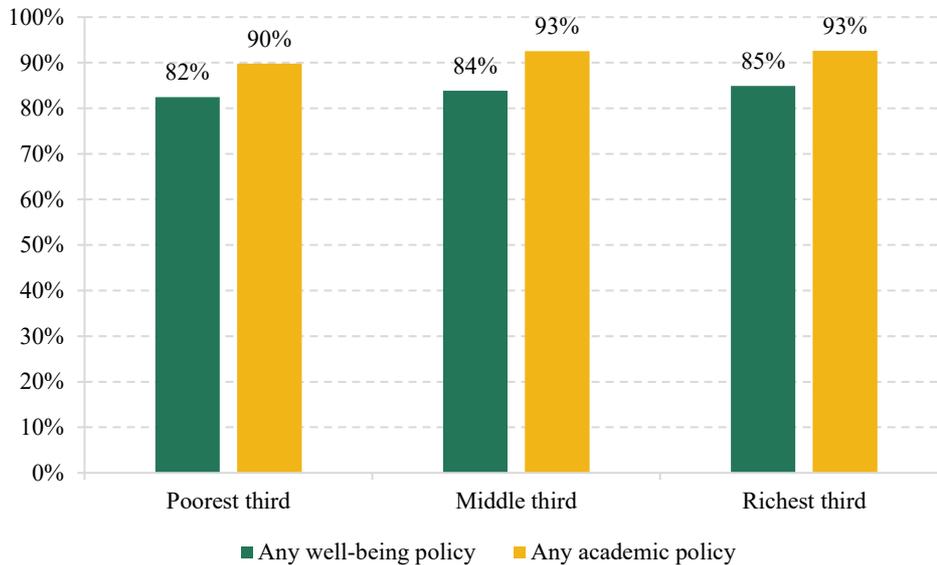
Policies for recovery

Given the extent of expected learning loss, designing policies to help children recover from the effects of the past year is therefore set to be the most important education policy debate for the next several years. The government has announced a package of support for England worth £1.7 billion, including £550 million for tutoring, £200 million for summer schools and £300 million for a ‘Recovery Premium’ targeted at disadvantaged students. However, there is widespread agreement – including from Sir Kevan Collins, who is leading the catch-up strategy – that spending on recovery will need to grow beyond this, and to be sustained over several years.

Given the extent of concern about children falling behind on learning, it is unsurprising that parents are eager for policies to help their children catch up academically. As Figure 3.3 shows, over 90% of parents support at least one academic catch-up policy. The options given included tutoring, longer school days, extra schoolwork to do at home, longer school terms, summer school, or repeating the school year.

However, Figure 3.3 also highlights the importance that parents place on supporting children’s well-being. There is emerging evidence that at least the first round of school closures has taken a toll on children’s mental health and well-being (Raw et al., 2021; Newlove-Delgado et al., 2021). Parents’ support for additional well-being and mental health resources, or additional extracurricular activities, was nearly as high as their support for academic catch-up.

Figure 3.3. Parents' support for catch-up policies, by pre-COVID family earnings

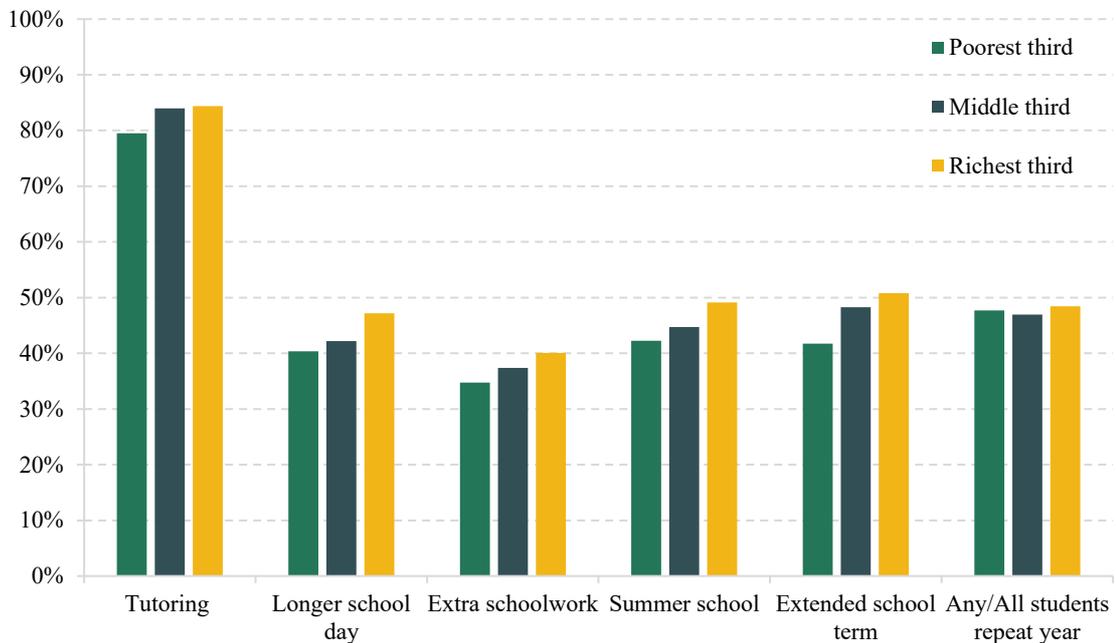


Note: Percentage of parents who would be in favour of at least one policy targeting well-being / academic achievement. Well-being policies include 'Increased support for well-being and mental health' and 'A longer school day (with extracurricular activities)'. Academic policies include 'One-on-one or small group tutoring' within and outside the school day, 'A longer school day (with teacher)', 'Extra schoolwork to do at home', 'A longer school term', 'Summer school / catch-up classes during the school holidays', 'All pupils repeating the school year' and 'Some pupils who have fallen behind repeating the school year'.

While overall support for catch-up policies is very high, Figures 3.4 and 3.5 show that some policies are more popular than others. The most popular policy, by some distance, was tutoring, with around 80% of parents in favour. By contrast, support for policies that would see children spending more time in the classroom – longer school days, summer school, extended school terms, or repeating school years – was much lower, with fewer than half of parents in favour.

Parental support for this latter group of policies also differed by family earnings. Parents in the most disadvantaged third of families were around 10 percentage points less likely to support policies that altered the regular school schedule than those in the top third. Since children in better-off families have, on average, not fallen behind by as much as their more disadvantaged peers, this pattern of take-up could see inequalities widen further.

Figure 3.4. Parents' support for specific academic catch-up policies, by pre-COVID family earnings



Note: Tutoring includes 'One-on-one or small group tutoring' within and outside the school day. Longer school day denotes support for 'A longer school day (with teacher)'. Extra schoolwork denotes support for 'extra schoolwork to do at home'. Summer school denotes support for 'Summer school / catch-up classes during the school holidays'. Extended school term denotes support for 'A longer school term'. Any/All students repeat year includes 'All pupils repeating the school year' and 'Some pupils who have fallen behind repeating the school year'.

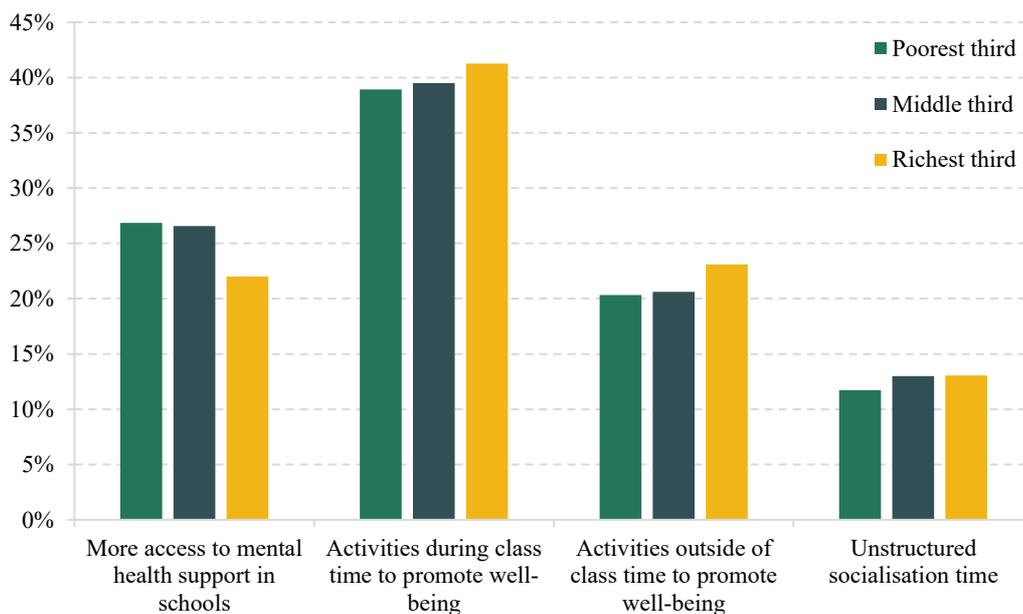
We cannot be certain what is driving these differences; as we have shown above, more disadvantaged parents are if anything slightly more concerned about lost learning, and their assessment of how long it will take their children to catch up is similar to that of better-off parents. However, based on these results, it seems that disadvantaged parents perceive there to be lower benefits or higher costs to programmes that alter the regular school schedule. For example, they might be more likely to think that their child would be too fatigued to benefit much from additional time at school, or they might find it harder to rearrange their family schedules to accommodate a change in the school schedule.

Whatever their cause, these preferences have important lessons for the design of the recovery programme. Policymakers need to consider not only what kinds of policies are likely to be effective, but also what is likely to be feasible and what is likely to

be attractive to parents and students – particularly those who have fallen furthest behind.

Parents also have clear preferences in relation to the kind of well-being policies schools should introduce. Figure 3.5 shows that, among those who said they supported policies aimed at children’s well-being, the largest share believed that in-class activities (such as arts, creative writing or spending time outdoors) would make the biggest difference for their child. Around a quarter of parents – though only a fifth of those in better-off families – prioritised greater access to mental health services. Another fifth favoured activities outside of class time to promote well-being, such as sports, extracurricular activities and free school trips. Setting aside unstructured time for socialising was a lower priority for most parents.

Figure 3.5. Parents’ views on the highest-priority well-being policy, by pre-COVID family earnings (among parents supporting well-being policies)



Note: Responses to the question ‘In terms of improving [name]’s well-being, what specific policies would make the biggest difference?’. Parents could only choose one option. Parents were also given the option to write in an answer, but fewer than 2% of parents chose this. This question was only asked to parents who indicated that they supported measures to support pupils’ well-being.

4. Conclusion

The return to school on 8 March is an important first step in starting to undo the damage inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people. But helping children catch up academically and recover their mental well-being is a much bigger and longer-term challenge.

In this briefing note, we provide rapid analysis of parents' views on both the short- and the long-term challenges currently facing the education community. Some of our findings are very encouraging: on the whole, parents are far more willing to send their children back to school than they were during the partial school reopenings in June/July 2020. This is good news for policymakers, schools and children, since it means that most families welcome the chance to return to in-person learning.

However, we also find that over two-thirds of parents say they are concerned about learning loss that has accumulated during the school closures over the last year. While close to half of the primary school parents who are concerned believe that their child's learning will fully recover within a term, other parents are much more pessimistic: 9% of secondary school parents believe that their child will never be able to fully recover from the adverse effects of the pandemic on their academic attainment.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, parents strongly support both academic and well-being policies. By far the most popular academic policy is tutoring; this has already been emphasised in the government's programme for catch-up support, but the total amount that has been allocated is still quite small relative to the scale of the problem. Our findings suggest that parents overwhelmingly believe that tutoring is one important piece of the catch-up puzzle.

However, we also find evidence of policies that parents are less likely to support. In particular, just over half of parents support a longer school day. Support for extra homework, summer school, an extended term or repeating the school year is well below half. And while parents from more disadvantaged and better-off families are

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equally likely to support tutoring and well-being interventions, the least well-off parents are substantially less likely to support longer school days, summer school or extended terms.

These results should serve as a warning that – although parents are generally quite motivated to address learning loss – it will not be enough to take a ‘build it and they will come’ approach. Instead, the design of the recovery programme should explicitly consider not just what is likely to be effective, but also what is feasible and how to ensure that support actually reaches the students who need it most.

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