

The Catholic Education Service is making this submission on behalf of the Catholic schools' sector across all parts of Wales. Across the three dioceses of Cardiff, Wrexham and Menevia, this represents 86 schools and colleges at both primary and secondary level. These comments reflect the observations of our practitioners, based on their experiences. Some positives:

- School staff have developed a strong skills base in a short period of time in order to deliver learning online.
- In the second lockdown there have been better levels of pupil engagement with online learning.
- Students were happy to return to school in the Summer Term and responded well to the changes made to school routines to facilitate a safe return e.g., staggered start times.

We understand the second wave of the pandemic has added additional work and strain onto school staff, school leaders, directors of education and Welsh Government officials. Given this and the additional pressures that will surely follow as schools are re-opened across Wales, we would urge the Welsh Government to that sufficient capacity is available in all levels of the education sector to effectively engage with the historic changes this legislation will seek to bring. This would also include allowing ample time for schools and their staff to prepare for the implementation of the new curriculum.

#### Impact on pupils

- The second lockdown has led to a deterioration in well-being as more families have been affected by illness and bereavement.
- It should be recognised that the potential reluctance of some parents to send children to school will require management and a review of the student absence policy.
- Safeguarding reviews for pupils will be required as consideration is given on how to support families in financial or emotional difficulty. Although many will be pre-existing cases, newly identified families will have to be supported as a direct result of the pandemic and the lockdown.
- Concerns have been expressed about the FSM system and in some areas the quality of meals. However, schools were unanimous that a system should be continued to support vulnerable families.
- Pupils and teachers are anxious about the widening gap in learning due to school closure. This has been exacerbated further by the digital divide. A focused, well-funded catch up programme will need to be delivered and maintained for up to two years.
- The wellbeing of pupils who should be sitting GCSE or AS/A level examinations is adversely affected by the ongoing disruption to their school lives. Our schools urge the Welsh Government and Qualifications Wales to publish delivery plans for the academic year 2021-22 so that schools can identify specific help and support required for examination age pupils.



### Impact on school staff

- Many teaching and support staff are reporting increased anxiety about returning to school. Staff availability will remain a major consideration as schools reopen and increase pupil numbers. The situation will also remain volatile during the rollout of the vaccination programme.
- The second lockdown has led to an increase in workload for staff balancing professional demands with delivering home learning and caring responsibilities. Meeting the demands of remote learning has meant that staff may be online throughout the day, many delivering live lessons as well as uploading resources, providing feedback and preparing learning packs. Schools will require support and guidance on how they will meet the demands of maintaining blended learning approaches if there is a gradual re-opening of schools.
- The definition of a key/critical worker has been widened resulting in an increase in numbers of children accessing hub provision. In primary schools, this has made the management of online learning and hub provision more difficult.
- Head teachers and senior leaders have been under considerable strain throughout this period. The time-lapse between the public announcement of the opening of schools and the publication of operational guidance just before half term has added to the pressure felt by headteachers.
- Continued support from government at a national level to negotiate with unions would help mitigate against the possibility of head teachers and governors being personally faced with challenges if changes to normal working practice are required because of national guidelines due to the extraordinary circumstances.
- Future planning for the realisation of the new curriculum has become more of a concern for school leaders who felt that the focus when they return to school will be on managing risk and making up deficits in pupils' learning.

### Reopening schools

#### Operational concerns:

- Capacity to provide support for the wellbeing of pupils, staff and the wider school community alike.
- Managing a staggered return to school.
- Risk management.
- Hygiene rules.
- Availability and costs of supplies and services.
- Availability of funding and staffing for curriculum recovery.
- Maintaining the integrity of bubbles.
- Reorganisation of the school to facilitate social distancing.
- Managing on site testing.
- Developing an effective system to identify, trace and isolate.

#### Impact on the school building and services:

- School transport remains a concern whether providers will be able to provide adequate transport in line with any specified health and safety requirements, including social
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distancing. This is a matter which particularly impacts on Catholic schools who more greatly rely on school transport services due to their larger pupil catchment areas.

- Wrap around childcare services on the school site will need to be addressed. Removing breakfast and afterschool club provision will reduce the number of staff and children on site but this will clearly create an issue for parents seeking to return to normal working practices.
- After the closure of many school buildings over recent months there have been increased reports of fallen roofs, burnt out boilers and other buildings issues that may need to be addressed, again impacting on funding at a time when greater costs are to be expected.

This is a fast-evolving situation, and all information is accurate as of sending. The CES makes every effort to keep our information on our partners and schools as up to date as possible. As a partner, the Catholic Education Service remains available to work directly with Welsh Government officials whenever required, to help secure schools coordination and to facilitate an efficient and successful transition in these difficult and unprecedented times.