CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19): INFORMATION FOR GOVERNING BOARDS

NGA has made its GOLDline advice service, provided to GOLD governing board members, available to all governing boards that have questions relating to governing during the COVID-19 period. You can contact GOLDline by emailing gold@nga.org.uk or by calling 0121 237 3782. NGA GOLD members are asked to make a request through the usual route.

The role of governing boards in reducing the impact of COVID-19 school closures on disadvantaged pupils

The government classifies a pupil as 'disadvantaged' if they have been eligible for free school meals in the last six years or if they have been in care or adopted from care. These are the children and young people we are considering in this information briefing.

Despite the best efforts of schools to provide continuity of education for all pupils during lockdown, there is no doubt that disadvantaged pupils and their families will have experienced greater challenges than most of their peers. These challenges will, in many cases, have restricted opportunities to engage in online learning as well as placing a great deal of pressure on parents/carers doing their best to create a supportive learning environment within the confines of their home. This has been recognised by the government and there is some provision of free laptops and tablets for disadvantaged year 10s and other vulnerable pupils to help them learn at home.

The combination of economic hardship and reduced time at school will serve to widen the gap which exists between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. Analysis published this week by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) on the impact of school closures on the disadvantage gap finds that the past decade's progress in closing this gap is likely to be reversed. Furthermore, the economic legacy of COVID-19 is likely to result in more pupils experiencing poverty and challenging family circumstances that create educational disadvantage.

The Department for Education (DfE) is looking at summer school options to help disadvantaged pupils catch up and ministers have also given their backing to a national online tutoring pilot that will see approximately 1,600 disadvantaged pupils receive free tuition from university undergraduates.

As well as a systemic response and government funding, these complex issues require leadership and governance decision-making to support schools to close the attainment gap, and to provide access to the pastoral and mental health support needed by pupils who have suffered neglect, abuse, anxiety or bereavement during the pandemic.

A strategic approach to reducing the impact on disadvantaged pupils

As schools open to more pupils, governing boards will reinstate a routine but strategic cycle of business supported by their integrated curriculum and financial planning and the normal checks and balances of governance. This requires governing boards and their senior executive leaders to assess their school/trust vision and strategic priorities in the light of COVID-19.

We recommend that governing boards schedule a strategy review discussion with their senior executive leader at the earliest available opportunity. Ideally this would be a dedicated governing board meeting held virtually (e.g. by video conference) as per the current DfE advice.

While the discussion will be focused on immediate responses, the recovery phase from September and how best to support disadvantaged pupils to regain the learning they have lost during the period of partial closure, it should remain grounded in the established features of successful strategies for raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils.

These, according to the National Foundation for Educational Research, are: **a whole school ethos of attainment for all; addressing behaviour and attendance; high quality teaching for all; meeting individual learning needs; deploying staff effectively; data driven and responding to evidence, and clear responsive leadership.**

Governing boards should discuss and encourage their senior executive leader to give thought to:

- How the school/trust intends to reduce the impact of partial school closure on:
  - the achievement and progress of all pupils;
  - how this is monitored and assessed (e.g. reliability of data);
  - the number of pupils who now count as disadvantaged;
  - the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and the attainment gap, and
  - their barriers to learning (and not just those that are addressed by teaching and learning).
- The immediate support the school/trust can put in place to reduce the impact on disadvantaged pupils. For example, opportunities may exist to offer pupils additional teaching or other activities over the summer holiday period.
- The research, proven practice and local networks the school/trust can draw on to inform their approach to overcoming barriers to learning and achievement created or exacerbated by COVID-19.
- How to balance academic catch-up (pure teaching and learning) with the wider pastoral and family support needed to address circumstances that affect behaviour, attendance, attitudes to learning etc.
- Which policies of the school/trust need to be reviewed, updated and aligned with the overall strategy in the light of COVID-19. The Pupil Premium strategy (see below) will need to be rooted in the context of the times.
- The support and CPD that all staff (including school leaders) require to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on all pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils.
- The financial planning and resource implications of new/revised strategic priorities designed to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on the disadvantage gap and the achievement and progress of all pupils.

Discussion of the above is unlikely to result in wholescale changes being made to the school/trust improvement plan or the governing board's strategy document, nor should it create an industry for school leaders in producing additional plans. More likely, it will result in governing boards and their senior executive leaders identifying the short-to-medium term objectives for recovering the learning loss, and adjustments that need making to the longer-term objectives in order for them to have a sustainable impact (e.g. stakeholder engagement initiatives).

Considering the Pupil Premium strategy in the light of COVID-19
The Pupil Premium is additional funding given to schools to narrow attainment gaps between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils. A guide to the Pupil Premium is available for NGA members in our Knowledge Centre. It includes a section on monitoring the impact of the funding that the school/trust receives.

It's important that governing boards review the school/trust strategy (written by school staff) for using this funding in the light of COVID-19 and seek assurances from their senior executive leader that the plan is still the right one targeted at the right pupils. It may well be the case that the Pupil Premium funding received by the school/trust needs to be distributed in a different way that reflects the increase in social, emotional and health issues that impact upon pupils' learning. All pupils will require some catch-up education and, as well as supplementing this, the Pupil Premium can be targeted on tackling the identified barriers of the disadvantaged pupils.

Questions to ask

1. What do we know about options for catch-up education for disadvantaged pupils – what research is available?
2. How are we supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged children continuing to learn from home?
3. Do the summer holidays present any opportunity – summer school/extra provision?
4. What are the complexities of re-establishing the school routine e.g. the challenge of travelling to school for pupils for whom public transport is their only option?
5. What can we do to support our pupils to re-socialise and re-establish positive learning habits?
6. What about the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of our pupils?
7. How can we increase pupil attendance and parental engagement?
8. How do we optimise the situation for all pupils and their learning?
9. How do we support and develop our staff to close the disadvantage gap?
10. What are the resource implications of focusing on new and/or different priorities – do we need to adjust our strategy for spending our Pupil Premium grant funding?

Further reading

Preventing the disadvantage gap from increasing during and after the Covid-19 pandemic – a report published by the Education Policy Institute

Tackling the disadvantage gap during the COVID-19 crisis – a briefing from the Children's Commissioner

Social mobility and COVID-19 – a report from the Sutton Trust

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COVID-19: Previous information briefings for governing boards
The following information briefings, along with guidance on business continuity and holding virtual meetings are available on the COVID-19 resources page of the NGA website.

- Information briefing 1: 12.3.2020 – Your school's response to COVID-19
- Information briefing 2: 18.3.2020 – School closures due to COVID-19
- Information briefing 3: 19.3.2020 – Immediate priorities for governing boards
- Information briefing 4: 2.4.2020 – Safeguarding information for governing boards
- Information briefing 5: 30.4.2020 – Supporting schools to deal with bereavement
- Information briefing 6: 14.5.2020 – Guidance on carrying out the staffing functions
- Information briefing 7: 21.5.2020 – The role of governing boards in the safe reopening of schools
- Information briefing 7: 26.5.2020 – Addendum