

February 2021

Towards resilience: Addressing inequalities in education

This report summarises findings from an event co-hosted by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) and Local Trust. It explores the fragility of the education system both before and during the pandemic and how communities can play a part in a more resilient future.

Our education system has faced a huge shock since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. With schools closing and students and teachers having to adapt to remote learning, the areas of weakness in our system have been widely exposed. According to [EPI research](#), the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers had stopped closing for the first time in a decade before the pandemic began. The disruption in learning caused by the crisis could lead to worsened outcomes for the disadvantaged children who were already over 18 months of learning behind their peers by the time they finish their GCSEs. This event explored whether a community-led or place-based approach could support the school system through any future crises.

This report outlines the key themes discussed by speakers during the event and does not necessarily reflect EPI's views.

Key points

- Schools need infrastructure in place to allow them to be more agile and to respond more readily to big shocks to the system.
- Disadvantaged and vulnerable children need additional support.
- Transformative community leadership can aid the recovery of our education system.

Introduction

On 3 February 2021, Local Trust and the Education Policy Institute partnered to host an online panel discussion on the question of how communities can play a role in building a more resilient education system for the future.

We heard from the following panellists:

- [Natalie Perera](#) – chief executive, Education Policy Institute (chair of the discussion)
- [Javed Khan](#) – chief executive, Barnardo's
- [Martyn Oliver](#) – chief executive, Outwood Grange Academies Trust
- [Gina Cicerone](#) – co-chief executive, Fair Education Alliance
- [Alan Fraser](#) – director of community partnerships and income generation, Cranford Community College and chair, Heston West Big Local

While the pandemic has undoubtedly presented a significant shock to our education system, it has also highlighted the need for change in the way the system operates. Vulnerable and disadvantaged students are still struggling with the lack of access to devices and a stable internet connection, while schools are expected to provide high-quality remote provision. Arguably, this is an opportunity to reflect on the weaknesses in our education system and to prepare our schools for future shocks.

Context

The pandemic has forced a new way of learning upon schools, parents and teachers. When the government announced that schools were to close and lessons moved online, few imagined that we would still be in this situation a year later. Most schools did not have the infrastructure in place to immediately switch to remote learning, and this was particularly true of schools with smaller budgets or those in the most deprived areas of the country.

A recent [OECD study](#) of nine countries found that students performed better when there was stronger engagement from parents, guardians and local communities in the schools activities. Throughout the pandemic, communities have come together to fill the gap in resources at a local and national level. A recent EPI event held for school leaders also found that pupils were more engaged when they felt part of a school community, which was beneficial for their learning and wellbeing outcomes. Our event drew upon these insights and explored whether community involvement in education could help to build a more resilient system.

Discussion: Addressing inequalities in education

1. Schools need infrastructure in place to allow them to be more agile and to respond more readily to big shocks to the system

Speakers highlighted the need for schools to have infrastructure in place that allows them to adapt quickly and effectively to shocks. Alan Fraser in particular emphasised the need for having a resilient system in place, and the need for mechanisms to deal with the next big education crisis – whether that be the fallout from the pandemic, the climate crisis or rising youth unemployment.

The pandemic has highlighted the weaknesses in our education system, and it is important that we find a long-term solution for the next generation of students who are set to enter school with a worsening mental health crisis and a widening attainment gap. When schools moved to remote learning, few schools had the infrastructure already in place to allow them to seamlessly begin teaching online classes. Alan spoke on how his school shipped its desktop computers from the school to students' homes and provided them with dongles to ensure they had internet access. The school has seen a rise in remote attendance as a result, but not all schools are able to respond as rapidly and effectively as this.

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[EPI research](#) found that disadvantaged pupils and those with lower attainment are more likely to miss school, and therefore may be more dependent on remote provision. The distribution of laptops to pupils has faced a number of logistical hurdles, such as a changing eligibility criterion and most students are facing a six week wait for devices.

Alan's experience at Cranford Community College is reflected across the system. According to [a recent Sutton Trust report](#), 72 per cent of senior leaders in secondary schools have had to source their own IT equipment for pupils. This statistic worsens for state schools and the most deprived schools, in which 56 per cent of teachers said only half or fewer pupils had been given the devices they needed.

2. Disadvantaged and vulnerable children need additional support

The pandemic has exacerbated already prevalent issues that impact mental health, including bereavement, the digital divide (that is, access to access to devices, having an appropriate place to work and good internet connectivity) and food poverty.

Martyn Oliver of Outwood Grange Academies Trust spoke about how teachers have also had to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and in some cases act as social workers and therapists on top of their usual work. In one Outwood Grange school, over 40 pupils

were suffering with a bereavement, which prompted the school to set up crisis centres. This is just one example of how communities of schools, parents, teachers and councils are pulling together to try and close gaps in provision for those who need it most.

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Javed Khan, chief executive of Barnardo's – the largest children's charity in the country – spoke about how the organisation has begun to provide emergency support for the first time during the crisis. Barnardo's is assisting with paying bills, delivering food parcels and investing in partnership working in order to provide support for those children who are suffering most from the fallout of the pandemic. Javed highlighted four key areas in which the most vulnerable children in our schools are at risk:

1. Poverty: parents are now forced to choose between food, heating or internet data to allow their children to learn remotely.
2. Mental health and wellbeing: children who are remote learning are missing out on socialisation with their peers, which can have a detrimental impact on their sense of self-esteem and wellbeing.
3. Risk of harm at home, online and in the community: Barnardo's has seen a rise in cases of domestic abuse and children facing harm online after spending more time at home.
4. The education gap: the attainment gap is widening between disadvantaged students and their peers, which is being exacerbated by the digital divide and lost learning.

Barnardo's worked with over 358,000 vulnerable people in 2019-20. Since the start of the pandemic, their Department of Education-funded [See, Hear, Respond](#) partnership has reached over 50,000 people directly and their online hub providing emergency support has been visited over 300,000 times. Javed raised his concern that we could see a long period of austerity in years to come, which he says will severely affect young people.

The educational impact of the pandemic is significant. According to the EPI report from 2020, the attainment gap had already stopped closing for the first time in a decade before the pandemic began. We can only assume that this gap will widen after this period of lost learning and the lack of access to devices.

3. Transformative community leadership can aid the recovery of our education system

Gina Cicerone of the Fair Education Alliance was keen to emphasise how COVID-19 has not been the 'great leveller' it was commonly imagined to be in its early stages (that is, although it has affected our whole society, certain communities have been affected far worse than others), and urged the audience to consider how the pandemic has affected ethnic and geographical communities differently. She argued that a new definition of community has risen out of the crisis, and that what we think of as 'engagement' has been challenged.

Communities of teachers, businesses, charities and parents have pulled together to fill gaps in resources on a local and national level. Parents have shared best practices with each other; teachers have come together in their free time to build online platforms such as Oak National Academy, and businesses have been offering their services for free to help the most disadvantaged pupils. This is evidence of what a community-led approach can do to support young people and our education system. The pandemic has bridged a divide between these communities, and created a sense of togetherness. In response to a question from the audience on how schools can best prepare for the next big shock to the system, all speakers agreed that no individual can fix this alone. The only way to prepare for shocks of this scale is to think collectively. Transformative community leadership is at the centre of the recovery of the system.

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As Martyn Oliver said, civic work has the most impact when it is delivered in partnership, and should be a conscious part of the strategy going forward at both a local and national level. Schools and communities must engage with stakeholders and focus on the promotion of resilience.

What next?

As referenced throughout the discussion by our panel, the pandemic has not affected everybody equally, and it is vital that schools are provided with the mechanisms to react effectively to future shocks and in turn support vulnerable and disadvantaged children. Schools and communities have a symbiotic relationship – when one becomes more resilient, so does the other, so we must also look beyond the school gates if we want to improve pupil outcomes.

As EPI Chief Executive Natalie Perera highlighted in her [recent blog for Local Trust](#), it is important to resist the temptation to aim to simply return to where we were before. Educational inequalities existed before COVID-19, and the pandemic merely shone a spotlight onto the cracks in the system. If schools are to truly become resilient, we need to work harder to close the gap between disadvantaged students and their peers.

Further reading

Education Endowment Foundation. (2019) "How Can Schools Support Parents' Engagement in their Children's Learning? Evidence from Research and Practice"
<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/evidence-reviews/parental-engagement/>

Education Policy Institute. (2020) "Addressing the digital divide in education"
<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/paper-addressing-the-digital-divide-in-education/>

Education Policy Institute. (2021) "Turning the corner: Tactical and strategic digital learning decisions in our schools"
<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/tactical-and-strategic-digital-learning-decisions-in-our-schools/>

OECD (2021) "Positive, High-achieving Students? What Schools and Teachers Can Do"
https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/positive-high-achieving-students_3b9551db-en

Hutchinson, Jo, Mary Reader and Avinash Akhal (2020) "Education in England: Annual Report 2020" Education Policy Institute <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-in-england-annual-report-2020/>

Mills, Bobbie and Jon Andrews (2020) "Assessing Covid-19 cost pressures on England's schools". Education Policy Institute <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/covid-19-cost-pressures-on-schools/>

Montacute, Rebecca and Carl Cullinane (2021) "Learning in Lockdown" Sutton Trust.
<https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/learning-in-lockdown/>

Schleicher, Andreas (2018) "Valuing our Teachers and Raising their Status: How Communities Can Help, International Summit on the Teaching Profession" OECD
https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/valuing-our-teachers-and-raising-their-status_9789264292697-en

Sibieta, Luke and Josh Cottell (2020) "Education policy responses across the UK to the pandemic". Education Policy Institute <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-responses-uk-pandemic/>

Sibieta, Luke (2020) "School attendance and lost schooling across England since full reopening". Education Policy Institute <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/school-attendance-and-lost-schooling-across-england-since-full-reopening/>

Initiatives mentioned during the event

[Action Tutoring](#), an education charity that partners high-quality volunteer tutors with pupils.

[Cranford Community College partnerships](#).

[Heston West Big Local](#): a lottery-funded project that has made a £1 million investment in Heston West, Hounslow.

[Oak National Academy](#): an online classroom and resource hub that provides teachers with free lessons for pupils aged 4 to 16.

[See, Hear, Respond](#): a service from Barnardo's, funded by the Department for Education, which provides rapid support for children and young people affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

[Star Bereavement](#): a support service that provides resources to bereaved children and young people in Wakefield.

[The Bridging Project](#): an initiative that matches up students with leadership development coaches who work to develop the skills they need to succeed at university and beyond.

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place

localtrust.org.uk

About the Education Policy Institute

The Education Policy Institute is an independent, impartial and evidence-based research institute that aims to promote high quality education outcomes for all children and young people, regardless of social background.

The Education Policy Institute's data-driven research and analysis sheds light on whether current policy is delivering a high quality, equitable, education system, and identifies issues where further policy development is needed. Through research and analysis, our aim is to hold government, policy-makers, and education providers to account for their performance, and help identify the policies which can improve educational outcomes for all, particularly for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people in our society.

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