

Long Covid in schools

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Google 'symptoms of long Covid' and the NHS website lists fatigue, shortness of breath, loss of smell and muscle aches as the most common. There follows a lengthy secondary list including chest pain, dizziness, depression, and tinnitus.

Perhaps we are only just beginning to really understand 'long Covid' in schools: lower attendance figures, increased exclusion rates, pupils' variable behaviours for learning, significant language and maths gaps, loss of learning stamina, student unrest, malignant social media, parental impatience and collusion, crisis in alternative provision... .

Last year the Essex Education Taskforce which I chair pioneered an independent survey of children's wellbeing in Essex - the first census of its kind across an English county. Just under 8,000 primary and secondary aged pupils responded from across the twelve districts of Essex.

The 2022 census findings can be read [here](#). The 2023 census is under way.

Based on the Good Childhood index developed by the Children's Society, the survey asks pupils how they feel about various aspects of their life such as their school, home, and friends.

Foremost amongst the report's recommendations was that schools should continue to build on a positive culture around mental health via a whole-school approach. Essex schools do this well.

Further, the findings mirror three key points from the Education Policy Institute's national research:

- As children get older, the drop in wellbeing scores is greater for girls than for boys, particularly in the areas of appearance and self-esteem.
- Young people highlighted the transition to secondary school as particularly hard on their self-esteem due to increased concerns about not fitting in.
- As young people get older, how they see and value themselves becomes more closely tied with how they feel about their lives generally.

The Education Taskforce was established with a brief to minimise the impact of the pandemic on all children and young people, with a three to five-year overview of phases of regeneration. A recently published [evaluation of the Essex Year of Reading](#) highlights the critical connection between reading levels and mental health.

The Task Force is renewing its focus on addressing disadvantage and promoting wellbeing. The ambition is to see the pioneering survey become an Essex-wide *Childhood Census* to help everyone focus on what it is to live a good childhood anywhere in the county.

While pupils' wellbeing and mental health lie at the heart of a post pandemic recovery plan, talk to any headteacher, Director of Education or multi-academy trust leader in the country and they will identify *attendance* of pupils and staff as the key management challenge.

In January, about 25% of pupils missed at least one day of school a fortnight.

A number of commentators have talked about the pandemic as 'breaking the social contract' in a variety of contexts, whether at work, at home or at leisure. Is it the case that families rise out of their beds in the morning and, if feeling just a little unwell, get back under the duvet? Working from home during the lock-downs was, in retrospect, manageable - so let's repeat it from time to time. Nothing lost.

And anyway, school lessons and homework are now all available on Teams and Google Classroom - with the answers provided by ChatGPT.

Train operators have started offering travel discounts for commuters on Mondays and Fridays as a 'new normal' of offices working the middle three days of the work has emerged. That shift may not reverse any time soon.

There are very few signs nationally or internationally of the five-day school-week being reduced. Yet. In the meantime, compounded by increased recruitment challenges, leaders are working overtime - and with a sharp eye on marginal gains - to secure pre-pandemic attendance rates.

This may take some time - and prove to be *the* education symptom of 'long Covid'.

Roy Blatchford's [The Teachers' Standards in the Classroom Fifth Edition](#) has just been published by Sage.