AN tAONTAS EORPACH
Ciste Sóisialta na hEorpa
A chistítear mar chuid de fhreagairt an Aontais ar phaindéim COVID-19

Evaluation of REACT-EU (Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe)

Final Report

Submitted to

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Prepared by

Indecon International Economic and Strategic Consultants

Indecon

www.indecon.ie

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Introduction

This report provides an independent analysis of the REACT-EU-funded support in Ireland for the reopening of schools following the implementation of public health measures necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Commissioned by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the study evaluates the effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and inclusiveness of these supports in achieving the REACT-EU thematic objective of fostering crisis recovery while addressing the pandemic's social consequences.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to significant societal and economic disruptions in Ireland in 2020, including the closure of schools during a nationwide lockdown. When primary and post-primary schools reopened later in the year, substantial changes were required to ensure the safety of students and staff. Measures included social distancing, reduced class sizes, enhanced cleaning protocols, mandatory PPE, and improved ventilation systems. To facilitate these changes, €88.3 million in REACT-EU funds was allocated to support the safe reopening and ongoing operation of schools, helping to mitigate risks and maintain educational continuity.

The analysis employed a comprehensive approach, including desk-based reviews, stakeholder consultations, surveys of primary and post-primary schools, international benchmarking, and case studies. The survey collected input on resource adequacy, the effectiveness of cleaning protocols and PPE measures, cost-effectiveness, timeliness of support, and inclusiveness, among other aspects. Feedback from schools was instrumental in shaping this evaluation.

Background and Context

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted significant global and national challenges, requiring unprecedented measures to mitigate its impact. REACT-EU (Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe) is a €50 billion initiative under the European Recovery Instrument, Next Generation EU, designed to address these challenges. Ireland received €88.3 million in 2021 from REACT-EU to support critical measures, particularly the safe reopening of schools. These measures included the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), enhanced cleaning regimes, improved ventilation, and additional supervision. Recognising the unique challenges faced by special classes and schools, enhanced resources were allocated to address the complex needs of students requiring additional support. An additional €53.3 million was received in 2022 from REACT-EU and this was allocated to supporting the implementation of operations to address migratory challenges resulting from the military aggression by the Russian Federation.

Ireland adopted a public health-led, whole-of-society approach to combat the pandemic, guided by principles of solidarity, fairness, and transparency. The national strategy included three phases:

1. Containment Phase: Focused on identifying and isolating cases to prevent further transmission.
2. Delay Phase: Aimed to slow the spread of the virus through public health measures.
3. Mitigation Phase: Activated when containment was no longer effective, prioritising the management of severe cases.

Key measures included nationwide lockdowns, school closures, mandatory quarantines, travel restrictions, mass testing, and vaccination campaigns. Ireland was among the first European countries to implement a full closure of educational institutions in March 2020, with closures lasting through June 2020. Remote learning became the interim solution, though challenges such as digital access and online education expertise emerged. When schools reopened in September 2020, and again in 2021, they adopted stringent measures to ensure safety. These included:

- Reduced class sizes and staggered schedules.
- Installation of hand sanitising stations.

- Mandatory mask-wearing for staff and older students.
- Enhanced cleaning protocols and improved ventilation systems.

REACT-EU funds supported these measures, enabling schools to mitigate health risks and maintain inclusive education amidst the pandemic. Special schools and classes received additional support to cater to students with complex needs. Despite these efforts, the phased reopening of schools faced challenges.

Ireland's vaccination rollout began in December 2020 and expanded rapidly, achieving one of Europe's highest vaccination rates by the end of 2021. High uptake rates among adults and vulnerable groups reduced hospitalisations and severe illness, allowing gradual easing of restrictions. By 2022, schools and public spaces had largely resumed normal operations, though safety measures like mask-wearing in crowded areas persisted.

Response to COVID-19 in a European Context

During the COVID-19 pandemic, countries across Europe adopted various strategies to manage school closures, mitigate learning disruptions, and address public health challenges. Ireland implemented some of the continent's longest school closures, while other nations such as Germany, Italy, and England emphasised phased reopening strategies that often included regional flexibility. Measures included improving digital infrastructure, implementing safety protocols, and offering tailored tutoring programs.

England: In England, schools closed in March 2020 but made exceptions for vulnerable students and children of key workers. A phased reopening began in June 2020, focusing on younger students, and by September, schools fully reopened. However, another closure occurred in January 2021. To address learning loss, £4.9 billion was allocated for education recovery, including a £1 billion tutoring initiative. Despite measures like reduced class sizes and ventilation improvements, inconsistent safety protocols and funding shortfalls created challenges for schools.

Finland: Finland emphasised regional flexibility and remote learning during closures. Schools reopened for younger students by May 2020 and remained largely open after that. Strong digital infrastructure supported the transition to remote learning, with targeted assistance for vulnerable students. Teachers, however, reported increased stress and inequalities in access to resources emerged. Finland received €84.3 million under REACT-EU for recovery, focusing on digitalisation and education resources.

Germany: Germany adopted a phased, regionalised reopening strategy with an emphasis on in-person learning. Schools reopened in the spring of 2020 with safety protocols like staggered schedules and mask mandates but closed again during later infection surges. Digital initiatives such as the DigitalPakt Schule program and investments in air filtration systems were key. However, resource limitations and the digital divide remained significant challenges.

Italy: Italy employed hybrid learning models, alternating between in-person and remote learning depending on infection rates. Schools reopened in September 2020 but faced repeated closures. Investments in digital devices and internet connectivity expanded under the Digital School Plan. Safety measures, including enhanced hygiene and testing, were implemented, but challenges in staffing and resource allocation persisted.

Scotland: Scotland adopted a cautious approach, reopening schools in August 2020 through a phased strategy. Measures such as reduced class sizes, enhanced cleaning, and regular handwashing supported reopenings. Over £450 million was allocated for education recovery, including funding for additional staff and ventilation systems. Specific initiatives targeted vulnerable students through the Scottish Attainment Challenge, though reopening delays were longer compared to other parts of the UK.

Spain: Spain reopened schools in September 2020 with regionally tailored strategies. Catalonia implemented "bubble groups" to minimise interactions, while Madrid used hybrid models. Enhanced hygiene protocols and tracking systems were introduced. A €16 billion COVID-19 fund supported pandemic-related expenses, including €2 billion for education. Spain prioritised in-person education, citing its importance for children's social and emotional development.

Sweden: Sweden kept schools for younger children open throughout the pandemic, emphasising the importance of in-person education for mental health and social development. Upper secondary schools transitioned to remote learning temporarily but returned to in-person instruction by autumn 2020. Measures like hygiene and distancing were less stringent than in other countries. Sweden faced criticism for its handling of the pandemic and stress among educators, but its approach minimised educational disruptions.

Allocation of Funds

Ireland's capitation funding model for primary and post-primary schools is designed to support operational costs, ancillary staff, and students with special educational needs (SEN). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this model was adapted to include enhanced allocations for health and safety measures, funded by REACT-EU. These changes aimed to address the increased costs and challenges posed by the pandemic. The capitation funding model provides a per-pupil grant to cover operational expenses such as heating, maintenance, and teaching materials. Primary and post-primary schools receive different rates, with post-primary schools allocated higher funding to reflect their specialised subjects and facilities. Ancillary grants provide additional funding for secretarial and caretaking staff. SEN funding is provided through the Special Needs Assistants (SNA) scheme and the Special Education Teachers (SET) allocation. In response to the pandemic, Ireland introduced COVID-19 capitation funding to support schools in maintaining safe environments. The funding followed the existing capitation model and was distributed based on school enrolment figures. The table below shows the capitation rates per pupil for the 2020/21 academic year.

COVID-19 Capitation Grants 2020/21 Term 1, 2, and 3 Rates per Pupil		
	Mainstream	**Special Classes/Special School**
Term 1		
Primary Schools		
Enhanced Cleaning	€21.00	€25.67
PPE	€25.00	€100.00
Post-Primary Schools		
Enhanced Cleaning	€11.00	€13.33
PPE	€40.00	€160.00
Enhanced Supervision	€35.00	€35.00
Terms 2 and 3		
Primary Schools		
Enhanced Cleaning	€21.00	€25.67
PPE	€15.00	€60.00
Post-Primary Schools		
Enhanced Cleaning	€11.00	€13.33
PPE	€24.00	€96.00
Enhanced Supervision	€35.00	€35.00
Source: The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science		

Funding was provided for schools to hire aides to assist with reopening logistics. These aides helped with tasks such as setting up sanitising stations and signage and managing physical spaces for social distancing. The number of days funded for aides depended on school size, with special schools receiving additional support.

Number of Days of Aide Employment to Assist with School Reopening	
Enrolment Range	**Number of Days**
<300	2
301-600	5
>600	10
All Special Schools	10
Source: The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	

Effectiveness of the Fund

Introduction

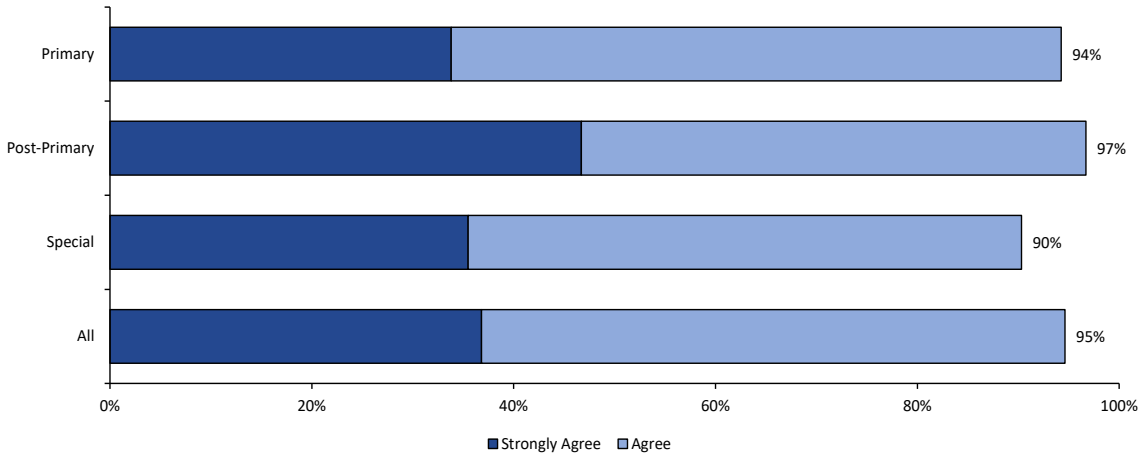
This chapter evaluates the effectiveness of the fund in enabling the safe reopening of schools in Ireland for the 2021/22 academic year amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The reopening adhered to government health guidelines, supported by financial contributions including from the REACT-EU fund, which covered additional costs for ventilation improvements, mask mandates, CO2 monitors, and enhanced cleaning protocols.

Schools reported positively on the support received to address critical infrastructure needs. Survey responses highlighted that the financial support enabled:

- Implementation of infection control measures, including ventilation, PPE, and classroom reconfigurations.
- Reassurance for parents, staff, and students about the safety of returning to in-person learning.

Across all school types, there was high agreement that the fund was successfully leveraged to reopen the schools.

Survey Responses on the Effectiveness of the Support in Achieving Their Planned Aim to Allow for the Reopening of the School



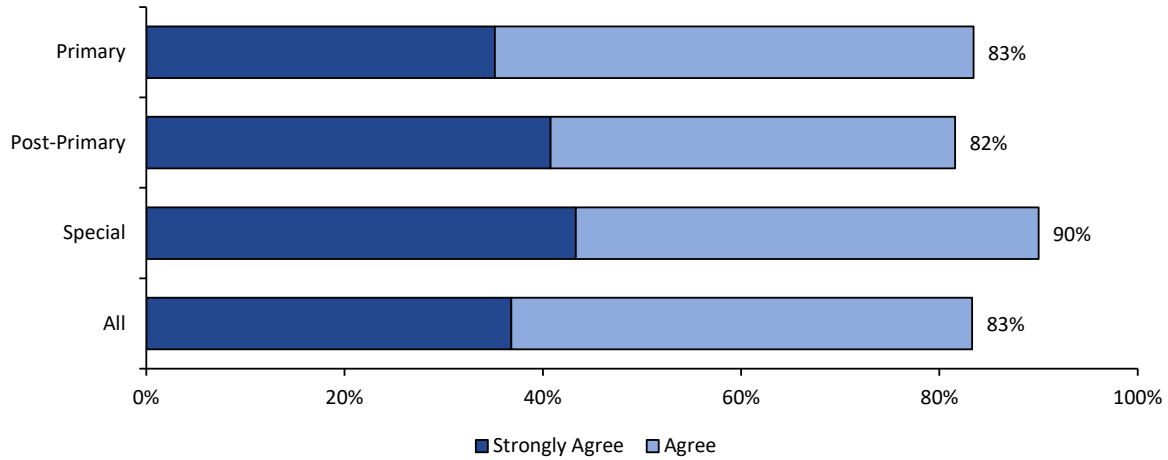
Source: Indecon Analysis of Survey of Schools

Open-ended feedback noted that government and school management efforts, while not perfect, were commendable given the uncertainty of the crisis. Respondents appreciated the swift action to provide

resources, which normalised health practices and reduced COVID-19 transmission within school communities. Further, the support played a role in helping schools address the social and emotional challenges of closures:

- Social Reintegration: Students reconnected with peers, restoring a sense of normalcy.
- Psychological Challenges: Teachers reported ongoing struggles to balance academic and emotional recovery, particularly for vulnerable cohorts.
- Special Schools: These institutions emphasised the critical importance of reopening to support students with additional needs who were disproportionately impacted by closures.

Survey Responses on the Importance of Reopening Schools as Soon as Possible for the Long-run Benefit of Children



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

While the fund enabled physical reopening, respondents identified a gap in psychological support for both students and staff, highlighting the need for sustained intervention in this area.

Evidence from Inspection Reports

A review of 50 inspection reports from primary and post-primary schools demonstrated high compliance (96-100%) with COVID-19 guidelines:

1. Planning: Comprehensive COVID-19 policies and risk assessments were in place.
2. Staff Training: All staff completed the required training and return-to-work protocols.
3. Control Measures: Primary schools achieved full compliance, while post-primary schools achieved high compliance with minor gaps in signage visibility.
4. Lead Worker Representatives: Both school types fully adhered to the appointment, training, and role requirements of Lead Worker Representatives.

Efficiency of the Fund

This section evaluates the efficiency of the COVID-19 funding distributed to schools in Ireland during the pandemic. Funding allocations varied across academic years and school types. Primary schools received the largest share of funding, with €78.5 million allocated in the 2020/21 school year, followed by €52 million in 2022/23. Spending per student was calculated at €0.66 per day for primary schools and €1.26 per day for post-primary schools, reflecting operational needs. The largest expenditures were directed toward PPE and enhanced cleaning, followed by supervision. Enhanced funding for SEN-focused schools aligned with best practices, addressing their higher operational demands. Survey data indicated that most schools viewed the funding as critical, with 85% of post-primary schools and 82% of primary schools agreeing that resources met their needs.

Average Cost per Pupil per Term, 2020-2023		
	Mainstream Schools	
Primary	**Per Term**	**Per Day**
Enhanced Cleaning	€21.00	€0.35
PPE	€18.33	€0.31
Total	**€39.33**	**€0.66**
Post-primary		
Enhanced Cleaning	€11.00	€0.18
PPE	€29.33	€0.49
Enhanced Supervision	€35.00	€0.58
Total	**€75.33**	**€1.26**
Source: Indecon Analysis and The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Per-day figure calculated based on a 60-day term.		

Impact of School Closures

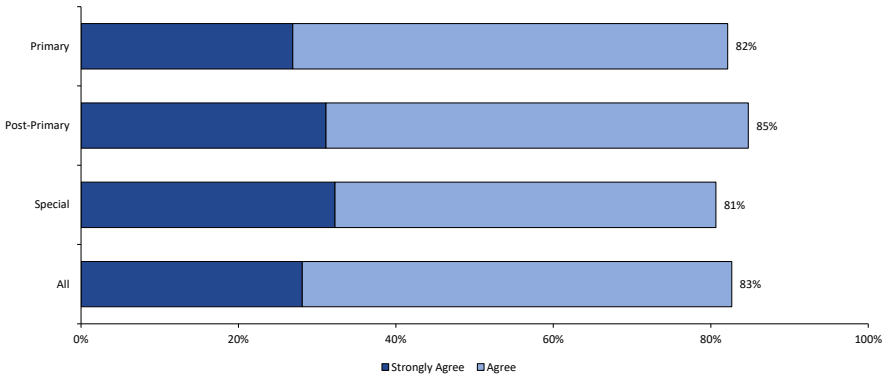
Research highlighted the significant negative impacts of prolonged school closures on students' academic, social, and emotional development:

- Academic Outcomes: Learning loss was most pronounced in mathematics, with students achieving only 50% of typical learning gains during closures. Reading outcomes were similarly affected, though to a lesser degree.
- Social and Emotional Well-being: School closures were associated with increased anxiety, depression, and loneliness among children. Vulnerable groups, including SEN students and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, faced heightened challenges due to a lack of resources and routine.

The reopening of schools, supported by REACT-EU funding, mitigated many of these impacts by restoring educational and social structures.

Given the nature of the intervention, the provision of support on a per-student basis reflected the fact that the requirement for social distancing and sanitary measures was uniform across students. The survey data indicates a positive perception of resource allocation across different school types, with high levels of approval of the supports in reflecting needs.

Survey Responses Detailing the Extent to Which Supports Reflected Needs



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

Cost-Effectiveness and Deadweight

The support provided was widely regarded as cost-effective, with 73% of respondents agreeing across all school types. Special schools reported the highest levels of agreement. Survey results underscored the low levels of deadweight (e.g., funding allocated where it wasn't strictly necessary), with 77% of special schools indicating that reopening would not have been possible without the funding.

Challenges included inefficiencies in procurement, with reports of overpricing and burdensome processes. Schools suggested that centralised sourcing by the Department of Education could have improved efficiency and reduced stress on school administrators.

Timeliness of Supports

The distribution of funds was largely timely, with grants issued before the start of each school term to allow for preparations. Survey data indicated 81% satisfaction with the timeliness of funding. While many respondents praised the proactive support, others noted delays in initial deployment, adding to the stress faced by school leaders during the reopening process.

Impact of the Fund

This section evaluates the impact of the fund in facilitating the safe reopening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey results highlighted the fund's role in reopening schools, with 95% of respondents agreeing that support achieved their planned aim of reopening schools safely. Key outcomes include:

- Enhanced Infrastructure: Grants enabled schools to adapt spaces for social distancing, install ventilation systems, and maintain consistent heating, which ensured comfortable and safe environments despite open windows.
- Improved Hygiene Standards: Enhanced cleaning protocols were viewed as essential for reopening, though some respondents expressed concerns about sustaining these practices after the cessation of funding post-pandemic.
- Safeguarding Operations: Respondents noted that the support not only allowed schools to reopen but also ensured their continued safe operation during subsequent lockdowns.

Open-ended feedback from schools underscored the importance of timely and adequate funding in addressing these needs.

Ireland's COVID-19 Response in the EU Context

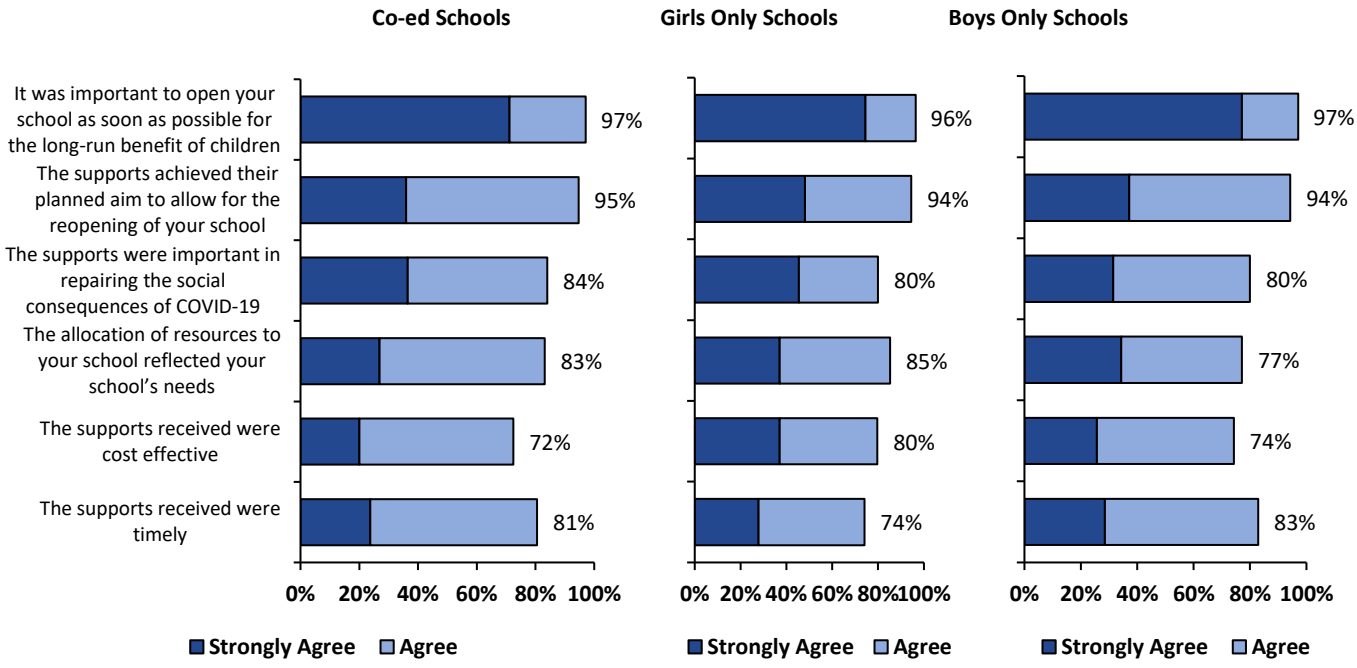
Ireland's school reopening strategy compared favourably with that of other European countries:

- Safety vs Speed: While some respondents felt reopening could have been faster, many praised Ireland's cautious and safety-focused approach.
- Perceptions by School Type: Post-primary schools had the highest proportion of respondents perceiving that Ireland prioritised reopening compared to Europe (31%), followed by special (23%) and primary schools (19%).
- Challenges in Context: Respondents highlighted issues like Ireland's high teacher-to-student ratio and rural broadband limitations, which impacted the efficiency of both remote learning and reopening efforts.

Inclusiveness and Non-discrimination

This section evaluates how supports provided under the REACT-EU framework addressed inclusiveness and non-discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on gender perspectives, disadvantaged schools, and students with special educational needs (SEN). Using survey responses, statistical data, and qualitative feedback, this analysis highlights the fund's impact in fostering equity and access in education. The majority of Irish schools are co-educational, ensuring financial support benefits boys and girls equally.

School Response by School Gender Mix



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

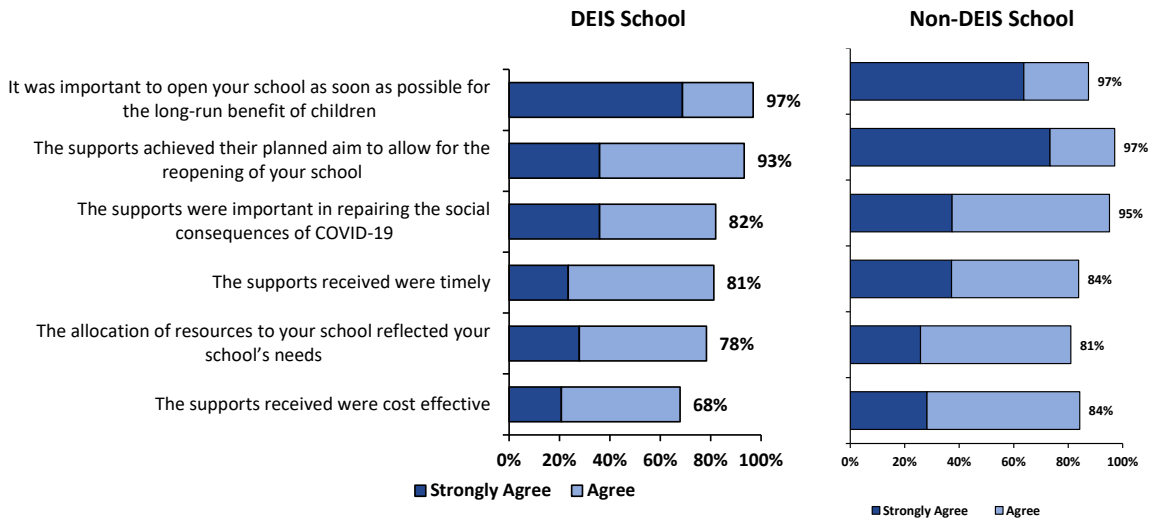
The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) program played a pivotal role in addressing educational inequalities during the pandemic. Findings include:

- High Satisfaction Levels: DEIS and non-DEIS schools reported comparable satisfaction levels with the support, with 68%-97% agreement across various metrics, including the effectiveness of support in reopening schools safely.

- Heightened Vulnerabilities: DEIS schools highlighted the necessity of financial assistance for PPE, sanitisation, and operational stability, given their critical role in providing security and services to vulnerable communities.
- Long-term Challenges: Feedback underscored ongoing needs in DEIS schools, including addressing the emotional, social, and educational impacts of closures and improving access to services for at-risk students.

Respondents stressed the importance of sustained support to mitigate the long-term consequences of the pandemic for disadvantaged schools.

Survey Responses Across DEIS School Status



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

Enhanced capitation grants and tailored supports were important for SEN students during the pandemic:

- High Agreement: 95% of respondents agreed that additional support for SEN students was necessary, with strong backing from DEIS and non-DEIS schools.
- Impactful Measures: Funds allowed for safety adaptations, PPE procurement, and operational adjustments, enabling SEN students to return to schools safely and effectively.
- Special Schools' Feedback: Special schools highlighted the benefits of targeted measures such as split breaks and enhanced safety protocols, which were retained for their effectiveness.

Qualitative feedback acknowledged the fund's role in creating safe environments for SEN students but called for ongoing guidance and resources to address complex medical and staffing challenges.

Assessment of Contribution of the Thematic Objectives

The REACT-EU initiative was central to the European Union's COVID-19 response, supporting recovery, resilience, and the transition toward a green and digital future. In Ireland, the initiative played a critical role in the education sector, enabling the safe reopening of schools and addressing social, educational, and health challenges. This section evaluates the initiative's contribution to crisis repair, institutional and social resilience,

and alignment with sustainability and digital transformation goals. The REACT-EU fund addressed immediate health and safety concerns, facilitating the reopening of schools across Ireland:

- Health and Safety Measures: Investments in PPE, ventilation improvements, and enhanced cleaning protocols ensured a safe environment for students and staff, with 95% of survey respondents agreeing that these measures were essential.
- Social Recovery: Schools provided a stabilising environment, addressing the emotional and social impacts of closures. Respondents emphasised the importance of reopening to reconnect students with peers and rebuild routines.
- Support for Vulnerable Groups: Tailored funding for SEN students enabled schools to meet their unique needs, highlighting the fund's role in mitigating the pandemic's disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations.

Despite these successes, respondents identified gaps in mental health resources, though, these resources were not under the remit of the REACT-EU supports. However, it is useful to identify gaps in the overall COVID-19 response, which emphasises the need for sustained support to address the long-term psychological effects of the pandemic.

Contribution to Resilience

The fund significantly enhanced the resilience of Ireland's education system:

- Infrastructure Improvements: Upgrades to ventilation systems and classroom reconfigurations strengthened schools' ability to manage future public health challenges.
- Procedural and Staff Preparedness: Safety protocols and staff training equipped schools to respond effectively to evolving guidelines.
- Equity in Resilience: Tailored supports for SEN schools and students ensured these institutions could meet the heightened needs of their communities, contributing to social resilience.

Respondents highlighted the importance of continued investment in emotional recovery and institutional capacity-building.

Alignment with Green and Digital Objectives

While not a primary focus, the fund supported aspects of the EU's green and digital goals:

- Green Objectives: Ventilation upgrades incorporated energy-efficient technologies in some cases, aligning with sustainability goals, though these efforts were not part of a comprehensive strategy.
- Digital Transformation: The pandemic underscored digital infrastructure gaps, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas. Respondents frequently noted challenges related to unreliable broadband and insufficient digital tools, highlighting the need for future investments in digital equity.

Survey feedback emphasised the importance of bridging digital divides to ensure schools can integrate technology effectively and enhance resilience.

1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This report represents an independent analysis of the REACT-EU-funded support in Ireland for the re-opening of schools following the introduction of public health measures in response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was conducted on behalf of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The study assesses the effectiveness, efficiency, impact and inclusiveness/non-discrimination of the supports and how they contributed to the thematic objective of fostering crisis repair in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social consequences.

1.2 Background and Context

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland caused major disruptions to all aspects of society and the economy during 2020. Due to the high risk of spreading, particularly in the context of an already strained healthcare system, in early 2020, Ireland entered a level five lockdown, which included the closure of businesses, restrictions on travel and socialising, and the closure of all educational institutions.

Later in 2020, prior to the widespread availability of a vaccine, primary and post-primary schools began to reopen, requiring significant adaptations to ensure the safety of students and staff and to try and prevent the further spread of COVID-19 in the broader population. Measures introduced included social distancing measures, reduced class sizes and staggered schedules to limit contact. This reopening of schools necessitated the introduction of stringent cleaning and PPE. Schools implemented enhanced cleaning protocols, with frequent disinfection of high-touch surfaces and shared spaces. Personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks for students and staff, became mandatory in many settings, and hand sanitising stations were installed throughout school buildings. Further, some schools improved their ventilation systems and made physical modifications to classrooms, such as reconfiguring spaces to promote social distancing. These changes required substantial logistical planning and additional resources to maintain a safe learning environment.

REACT-EU funds were used to support the costs to schools of ensuring safe reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic. REACT-EU stands for Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe. €88.3m was provided to the Department of Education for support for reopening schools. Originally, a proportion of the 2021 REACT-EU allocation had been allocated to a laptop provision measure. However, as a simplification measure, the PEIL Monitoring Committee approved the re-allocation of the laptop allocation to the "Supports for the reopening of schools" measure, increasing the latter's allocation from €77.3m to €88.3m. The laptop provision measure was, however, provided to students who required the support, though was funded by the Irish Exchequer.

1.3 Methodology

To complete the assessment, Indecon utilised a number of methods:

- Desk-based review of government policy publications and documents
- Review of academic research into the impact of school closures on various aspects of student welfare

- Survey of primary and post-primary schools (see below)
- Stakeholder consultation
- A review of Ireland's response to school closures/openings in an international context
- Review of school inspection reports
- Case studies

Indecon sent out a survey to schools to gather feedback on the effectiveness of the REACT-EU fund in reopening schools and in the continued operation of the same. The survey aimed to capture a wide range of perspectives regarding how the funding has impacted the school environment, safety measures, and overall experience during the reopening phase. Questions were designed to evaluate the adequacy of resources provided, the effectiveness of the fund for supporting enhanced cleaning, the sourcing of PPE, and enhanced supervision, the consistency across schools, the cost-effectiveness of support, the timeliness of support, and other aspects, including inclusiveness and discrimination.

1.4 Acknowledgements

Indecon would like to acknowledge the valuable assistance and input provided by Theresa Ryan, Andrew Diggins, Catherine Dolan and Sinéad Hickey in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and Tara Mulryan and Ciaran Hunt in the Department of Education. We would also like to thank Paul Thornton and Aine O'Sullivan (ACCS), Seamus Mulconry (CPSMA), Seamus Mulconry (CPMSA), Jennifer Buttner and Emer Nowlan (Educate Together); Deirdre Matthews (JMB) and Dominic McEvoy and Paul Fields (ETBI)[1]. We would also like to thank the two case study schools for their input, in particular Geraldine Barnett (Loreto, Balbriggan) and Colm O Suilleabhain (St. Oliver's National School, Ballycaheen, Killarney). Finally, Indecon would also like to acknowledge the valuable input from schools for their time in engaging with the Indecon team and completing the school survey. The usual disclaimer applies, and Indecon is responsible for the contents of this report.

1.5 Structure of this Report

The document is structured as follows:

- Section two discusses the background and context of the REACT-EU fund's role in reopening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Section three analyses Ireland's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in a European context
- Section four discusses how the REACT-EU fund and associated supports were allocated, including a discussion of the usual annual model of capitation employed in Ireland.
- Section five examines the fund's effectiveness in supporting schools' reopening and staying open during the pandemic, including an analysis of the consistency of results across schools.

[1] ETBI schools received the same supports as other schools but were funded by the Irish state. However, these schools were included in the consultation to get a broad a view as possible.

- Section six outlines the efficiency of the fund, including an analysis of the resources used and the relationship between resources and changes generated, the extent to which supports reflected needs, cost-effectiveness and timeliness of supports.
- Section seven examines the fund's impact, including whether the supports have an impact on school reopenings, how and why this occurred, and how other factors may have contributed.
- Section eight focuses on the inclusiveness and non-discriminatory nature of the funds, including an analysis of the same across gender, disadvantaged schools, and special needs students.
- Finally, section nine concludes with an assessment of the fund's contribution to the thematic objective of "Fostering crisis repair in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social consequences and preparing a green, digital and resilient recovery of the economy."

2 Background and Context

2.1 Introduction

REACT-EU (Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe) is a €50bn initiative under the European Recovery Instrument, Next Generation EU, to respond to the impact of COVID-19. 80% of the total funding to be allocated across individual Member States was provided in 2021, with details of the remaining 20% announced at the end of 2021 for programming in 2022.

Ireland received an allocation for 2021 of €88.3m and €53.3m in 2022. Supported measures included the purchase of PPE and hand sanitiser, enhanced cleaning regimes, enhanced supervision support to ensure physical distancing, and the employment of an aide to assist with the arrangements necessary for school reopening. Enhanced support was provided for special classes and special schools in recognition of the particular challenges that these faced due to the more complex needs of the children they cater for. These measures aimed to support schools in reopening safely and ensured the continued provision of inclusive education and training in COVID-19. In this section, we discuss Ireland's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2 Ireland's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 disease emerged in December 2019 and was detected in Ireland three months later. The policy response to the pandemic was extensive and public health-led and took a whole-of-society approach.[2] The following principles guided Ireland's national approach:

- the need for all to understand and work in solidarity with each other to minimise illness for everyone, but especially those who are at higher risk or are in vulnerable groups;
- ensuring that the cross-government COVID-19 response is public health-led and aligned to support our health service, our healthcare workers and all essential workers;
- solid ethical principles to ensure that Ireland's response is open, transparent, rational, inclusive and responsive to minimise harm, respect individual freedoms and ensure fairness in relation to the use of resources.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ireland prepared a strategy response with three phases:

- the containment phase, whereby the focus was on identifying all cases to inhibit further transmission.
- the delay phase focused on initiatives to slow the spread of the virus.
- the mitigation phase was activated when containment was no longer effective in controlling the spread of COVID-19. In this phase, the focus was on identifying the most severe cases.

COVID-19 was a new disease caused by a coronavirus strain that had not been seen in humans before December 2019. There was a lack of immunity in the population, which increased the general susceptibility to infection, and with no vaccine available at the time, COVID-19 had the potential to spread widely. Further, at the beginning of the pandemic, there was an absence of knowledge as to how the virus spread, and there was a lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and knowledge of the effectiveness of the same in slowing the spread of the virus.

[2] National Economic and Social Council, 2022. The Covid-19 pandemic: Lessons for Irish public policy (Vol. 158). Council Report No.

Ireland, along with countries in the EU/EEA and the UK, went into 'lockdown' in March 2020. This was to mitigate the risk of Ireland entering the third phase (mitigation), informed by the advice of the World Health Organisation (WHO), and due to the high risk of widespread national community transmission of COVID-19. Ireland had significant concerns about the pandemic's strain on the already stretched healthcare system. The announcement came one day after the World Health Organization formally declared that the outbreak was a global pandemic. Strict travel restrictions were implemented, including mandatory quarantines for international arrivals. Widespread testing and contact tracing were introduced, and public health guidelines such as social distancing and mask-wearing became part of daily life.

In response to the initial outbreak of COVID-19, Ireland was one of the first European countries to implement a full closure of schools. In March 2020, all schools, universities, and childcare facilities in Ireland were closed as part of the first national lockdown, a move to contain the virus's rapid spread. This initial closure lasted until the end of the academic year in June 2020. Schools quickly transitioned to remote learning, though many teachers and students faced challenges due to limited access to devices and unfamiliarity with online education.[3] The Department of Education published updated guidelines in August 2020, which stated that all teachers in primary and secondary schools and students in secondary school would be required to wear face coverings when a physical distance of two metres could not be maintained.[4] Thus, schools were reopened in 2020 with the revised measures.

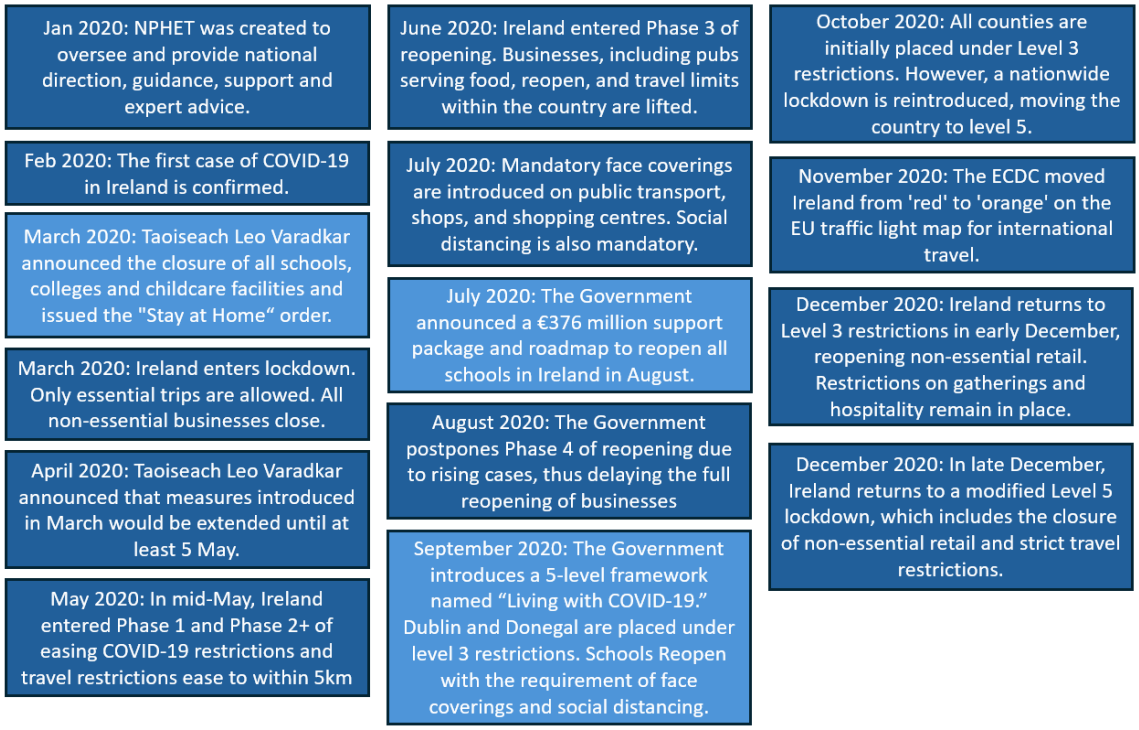
Ireland's vaccination program began in December 2020, starting with healthcare workers, older adults, and those most at risk of severe illness. As more vaccines became available, the rollout expanded to the wider population, opening vaccination centres nationwide. The Health Service Executive (HSE) launched campaigns to encourage vaccine uptake, resulting in one of the highest vaccination rates in Europe by the end of 2021, with over 90% of adults fully vaccinated.[5] The high vaccination rates helped reduce serious illness and hospitalisations, even as new variants like Delta and Omicron appeared.[6] Booster vaccines were later introduced to maintain strong immunity, particularly for vulnerable groups. As the vaccine rollout progressed, restrictions were gradually eased, allowing schools, businesses, and public spaces to reopen. Although some safety measures, such as mask-wearing in crowded areas, remained in place, Ireland's approach enabled a gradual return to normal life.

However, when schools reopened, they had to make significant changes to keep students and staff safe. These included reducing class sizes, staggering timetables, and implementing enhanced cleaning routines.[7] Hand sanitising stations were set up, and masks became required for staff and older students. Support from the REACT-EU fund was aimed at allowing schools to invest in PPE, improve ventilation, enhance cleaning measures, and ensure other necessary health and safety measures were in place.

The figure overleaf presents an overview of key COVID-19 Measures and events in Ireland in 2020 and highlights measures directly related to schools.

[3] Gouseti, A., 2021. 'We'd never had to set up a virtual school before': Opportunities and challenges for primary and secondary teachers during emergency remote education. Review of Education, 9(3), p.e3305.
[4] https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2020-12-15/516/
[5] Tumelty, M.E., Donnelly, M., Farrell, A.M. and Néill, C.Ó., 2022. COVID-19 vaccination and legal preparedness: lessons from Ireland. *European Journal of Health Law*, *29*(2), pp.240-259.
[6] Marron, L., Mateo-Urdiales, A., O'Donnell, J., Robinson, E. and Domegan, L., 2024. The impact of the COVID-19 vaccination programme on symptomatic and severe SARS-CoV-2 infection during a period of Omicron variant dominance in Ireland, December 2021 to March 2023. Eurosurveillance, 29(28), p.2300697.
[7] Dempsey, M. and Burke, J., 2021. Lessons Learned: The experiences of teachers in Ireland during the 2020 pandemic.

Figure 2.1: Key COVID-19 Measures and Events, 2020

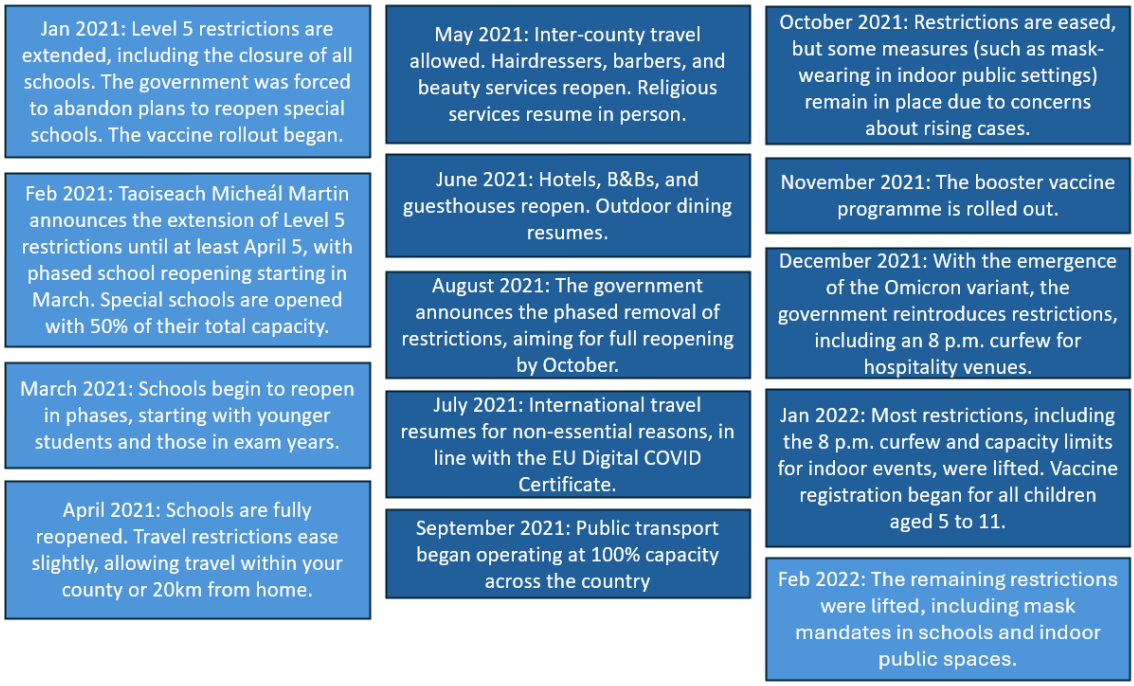


Source: Indecon Analysis

In January 2021, the Government agreed to several new lockdown measures, including closing all schools until February, with plans for Leaving Certificate students to attend school three days a week, though this was subsequently abandoned. Instead, students returned to homeschooling until February, after the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI) directed its members not to return to in-school teaching. Further, the government was forced to abandon plans to reopen special schools on 21 January for children with special educational needs following safety concerns among staff unions. The Department of Education agreed to reopen special schools at 50% capacity on 11 February and special classes in mainstream schools on 22 February. Special classes in mainstream primary and secondary schools reopened as the phased reopening of schools continued.

In late February 2021, lockdown restrictions were extended as the government published its new revised Living with COVID-19 plan called *"The Path Ahead"*, which included the phased reopening of schools and childcare in March. Schools were subsequently fully reopened in April. For the rest of the year, other COVID-19 mitigation measures were eased. Further, in February 2022, the Minister for Education confirmed that the 2022 Leaving Certificate would be held without accredited grades, while the Junior Cycle exam would be held for the first time since 2019.

Figure 2.2: Key COVID-19 Measures and Events, 2021-2022



Source: Indecon Analysis

2.3 Summary of Key Findings

This section sets out Ireland's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the phased closing and opening of schools. A summary of the findings of this section is as follows:

- REACT-EU is a €50bn initiative under the European Recovery Instrument, Next Generation EU, to respond to the impact of COVID-19. Ireland received an allocation of €88.3m for 2021 and €53.3m for 2022, which was used to support measures for the safe reopening of schools.
- Ireland went into 'lockdown' in March 2020, driven in part by concerns about the pandemic's strain on the already stretched healthcare system. This included the closure of schools, colleges, and childcare facilities, which lasted until the end of the academic year in June 2020, though schools also faced subsequent closures.

3 Response to COVID-19 in a European context

3.1 Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, countries across Europe implemented a range of funding measures and strategies to ensure the safe reopening of schools, mitigate learning disruptions, and address public health challenges. While Ireland opted for some of the continent's longest school closures, other nations like Germany, Italy, and England focused on phased reopenings, often with regional flexibility. Measures ranged from enhancing digital infrastructure and providing safety protocols to tailored tutoring programs. In this section, we contrast Ireland's approach to public health restrictions, including school opening and closing policy, during the COVID-19 pandemic with those of several other European countries. Further, Indecon examines the level of support provided in each county and its associated impact.

3.2 Ireland

In Ireland, the Government implemented some of Europe's longest and most stringent lockdowns, with measures such as a near-total shutdown of non-essential businesses, strict stay-at-home orders, and a 5 km travel limit during the most severe pandemic periods.[8] This contrasted with countries like Sweden, which avoided full-scale lockdowns, and other European nations such as Finland and Germany, which employed strict measures but with more regional flexibility.

Focusing on education, Ireland adopted some of Europe's most prolonged and cautious school closures. Schools were completely shut down in March 2020. Unlike countries like Denmark and Finland, which reopened schools with safety measures by mid-2020, Ireland maintained extended closures with remote learning acting as the main education mode. The government's strategy involved closing schools on a periodic basis at various points throughout 2020 and 2021 in response to rising case numbers and the spread of new variants, such as Delta. These prolonged closures were similar to the approach taken by the UK and France but contrasted with the earlier reopening of schools in countries like Denmark.

In January 2021, the government announced that schools were to close again for most students, with a return to remote learning. The government provided guidance for remote learning, allowing schools to maintain educational continuity during the closures. However, exceptions were made for special needs students, with special schools and special classes reopening on 11 January for SEN students.[9] Schools reopened fully for in-person learning on March 1, 2021, for primary school students and on March 15, 2021, for secondary school students. During these reopenings, strict health and safety measures were implemented to ensure the continued operation of schools, including physical distancing, enhanced cleaning protocols, and the use of face masks for teachers, staff, and secondary school students.

By 2022, as vaccination rates increased, Ireland gradually reopened schools with safety protocols such as mask-wearing, social distancing, and regular testing in place. This marked a shift towards a more targeted and flexible approach, emphasising vaccination and testing rather than blanket closures. The decision to close schools during the pandemic was driven by the spread of the virus in the broader

[8] Cathaoir, K.O. and MacColl, C., 2022. COVID-19 restrictions in Ireland Northern Ireland: a comparison of the legal framing of reasonableness. N. Ir. Legal Q., 73, p.234.
[9] https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2021-01-14/6/

community, meaning that external conditions, rather than the school environment itself, dictated the need for closures.

- **Summary:** Ireland had some of the longest school closures in Europe, with cautious and prolonged remote learning. Key measures included enhanced cleaning, PPE, and digital infrastructure improvements. Schools reopened in phases in 2021, guided by high vaccination rates and targeted public health protocols.
- **Comparison:** Ireland's closures were among the longest, emphasising virus containment over continuity in classroom education.
- **Insight:** Highlights the challenges of balancing strict public health measures with educational continuity and underscores the need for better digital readiness.

3.3 England

Schools in England closed in March 2020; however, exceptions were made for vulnerable students and the children of workers in key areas.[10] In mid-April 2020, the government announced that care leavers, children with social worker support and those pupils sitting national examinations the following year without digital devices would be given these to enable them to study online, and children in families without online access would receive mobile or broadband routers.[11] The government focused on the need to prevent students from falling behind and vowed to reopen schools for many pupils on 1 June 2020. Although schools experienced closures again in 2021.

Primary schools reopened first, with priority given to pupils in reception, year one, and year six. Secondary schools, including year ten and twelve students, followed, with the aim of providing face-to-face teaching before key exams in the following year.[12] The reopening plan included strict safety measures like reduced class sizes, staggered schedules, enhanced cleaning protocols, and improved ventilation to mitigate COVID-19 transmission. However, England's guidelines on mask-wearing were initially less stringent than those in Scotland and Wales, with mask mandates only introduced later in areas with higher infection rates. This approach led to some disruptions and uneven compliance with health protocols.[60]

After a phased reopening in June 2020, when schools were partially reopened for some year groups, they reopened in full in September 2020. Safety measures were implemented in the schools, including testing, face coverings in communal areas, smaller class sizes, staggered schedules, and improved classroom ventilation.[13] After the third national lockdown, Schools fully reopened in March 2021, following this lockdown, as part of the government's roadmap to ease restrictions. This reopening was supported by additional safety measures, including regular twice-weekly testing for students and staff, improved ventilation, and continued use of PPE where necessary.[14] From this point onward, the government prioritised keeping schools open, recognising the negative impact of prolonged closures on children's education, mental health, and social development.

[10] UK Department for Education. (2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19): Critical workers and vulnerable children who can access schools or educational settings.
[11] Kelly, P., Hofbauer, S., & Gross, B. (2021). Renegotiating the public good: Responding to the first wave of COVID-19 in England, Germany and Italy. European Educational Research Journal. https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041211030065
[12] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/schools-and-colleges-to-reopen-from-tomorrow-as-part-of-step-one-of-the-roadmap
[13] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65020a0397d396000d482e4a/Transmission-of-COVID-19-in-school-settings-and-interventions-to-reduce-transmission-a-rapid-review-update_2.pdf

In response to the rising costs associated with the reopening of schools, England implemented several funding initiatives analogous to the REACT-EU program to support recovery efforts, including funds for recovery interventions and a National Tutoring Programme.[15]

The Department for Education also provided funding for free school meals, exceptional cleaning costs, laptops and digital devices, teacher training, and supply staff costs to support schools during the pandemic.[16] However, a Q4 2020 survey distributed through the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) found that almost all schools reported extra expenditures on PPE and cleaning supplies. At the same time, a large majority faced additional costs from signage, digital equipment, and handwashing facilities.[17] The Education Policy Institute (EPI) estimates that of the combined total of all schools' Covid-related costs in England, less than a third (31%) will be reimbursed by the government's exceptional costs fund.[18]

In 2021/22, Randstad conducted teacher satisfaction surveys in which school leaders and academic mentors generally expressed positive satisfaction levels with the NTP.[19] The evaluation highlighted the successful integration of tutoring within school systems. However, there were challenges, such as administrative burdens and coordination issues when engaging external tutors. Schools indicated that the NTP offered beneficial support to pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, but some believed it could be better tailored to these students' specific needs. The evaluation found that educators saw tangible benefits, including improvements in student engagement and academic confidence. Some, however, noted challenges in ensuring consistent quality and effective delivery.

Thus, these funding measures were important in enabling schools to reopen safely and effectively. The resources facilitated the implementation of health and safety protocols, provision of additional academic support, and addressing the diverse needs of students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The National Tutoring Programme, for instance, provided targeted assistance to students whom the school closures had disproportionately impacted.

- **Summary:** Schools closed in March 2020 but reopened for younger and exam-year students by June 2020. Phased reopenings and safety measures like ventilation and testing were implemented. Funding initiatives such as the National Tutoring Programme aimed to address learning loss.
- **Comparison:** England reopened earlier and used phased approaches, unlike Ireland's prolonged closures. However, inconsistent safety measures and partial reimbursement for expenses created challenges.
- **Insight:** Emphasizes the importance of balancing reopening with financial and logistical support for schools.

[15] The Department for Education announced a total of £4.9 billion dedicated to addressing learning loss and supporting education recovery across early years, schools, and education for 16- to 19-year-olds, spread over the academic years from 2020/21 to 2023/24. Of this amount, £3.5 billion was allocated specifically for recovery interventions in schools over four academic years. A £650 million universal catch-up premium was provided to support schools in making up for lost teaching time. Additionally, £1 billion was allocated to establish tutoring initiatives aimed at providing targeted support to students most affected by the pandemic. Through this initiative, the Government is provided £350m to fund tutoring through the National Tutoring Programme to support young people hardest hit by the pandemic.

[17] https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/covid-19-cost-pressures-on-schools/

[18] https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/covid-19-cost-pressures-on-schools/

[19] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-tutoring-programme-satisfaction-surveys-2021-to-2022

3.4 Finland

Following the first Finnish case of COVID-19 in late January, the government closed school premises. Homeschooling was not new in Finland, though only a minority, c.1-2% of Finnish families utilised this method prior to the pandemic.[20] Because of this, the tools for home education were already established, and the media provided the authorities with educational material for homeschooling and distance education. After the onset of the first COVID cases, it became mandatory for almost all students to complete their education remotely. When school premises were closed, most students, apart from children with special needs or whose parents were needed as part of the medical sector workforce, turned to homeschooling and distance education. Finland, like many other countries, made special provisions to ensure that vulnerable children, including those with special needs and those in challenging home environments, continued to receive support.[21] This included allowing these students to attend in-person schooling or receive tailored services. Additionally, schools remained open for the children of essential workers, ensuring that they could continue attending while their parents were involved in critical services.[22] Finnish authorities placed a strong emphasis on ensuring that vulnerable students, including those with disabilities, migrant backgrounds, or socio-economic challenges, received the necessary support to continue their education during the pandemic.[23] [24]

Schools initially reopened for younger students, including early childhood education and primary and lower secondary grades, in May 2020, with specific safety measures like improved hygiene, social distancing, and spacing out classroom activities. By the autumn of 2020, all schools resumed in-person teaching.[20] To ensure the continued operation of schools, strict health and safety measures were implemented, including enhanced cleaning routines, maintaining physical distance, and adjusting teaching environments to reduce crowding. Masks were recommended but not mandated. The government's approach emphasised regional flexibility, allowing local authorities to respond to specific conditions.[25] This meant that while most schools continued with in-person teaching, some schools in high-risk areas temporarily shifted to distance learning when deemed necessary. At the national level, Finnish schools did not have to close again after the opening in May 2020.

Finland received €84.3 million in total under REACT-EU to support the post-pandemic recovery and the greening and digitalisation of their economy, as well as to support people in need, including people fleeing the war in Ukraine. However, the funding was predominantly focused on improving competencies and preventing unemployment, which indirectly supported sectors like education. The Finnish government implemented other measures and funding sources to ensure the safe reopening and operation of educational institutions during the pandemic. When schools were closed or operated in a hybrid mode, the Finnish government ensured that digital tools, platforms, and resources were widely available to support remote learning. Teachers received guidance and support to adapt to distance teaching methods. Many schools received support to acquire additional devices, such as laptops or tablets, to ensure that all students could participate in remote learning. With this support, academic research identifies that the switch to distance teaching and learning was organised

[20] Finnish National Agency for Education (2020) Basic education in Finland: The educational system, structure, and curriculum. Available at: https://www.oph.fi/en (Accessed: 9 October 2024).
[21] Finnish National Agency for Education (2020) Education in Finland during the COVID-19 pandemic. Available at: https://www.oph.fi/en (Accessed: 9 October 2024)
[22] UNICEF (2020) COVID-19 and Education: Finland's Response. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19 (Accessed: 9 October 2024)
[23] https://www.oph.fi/en/education-and-qualifications/education-finland-and-coronavirus
[24] https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/Inclusive%20Education%20and%20the%20Pandemic%20%E2%80%93%20Aiming%20for%20Resilience.pdf
[25] Reference: Ministry of Education and Culture (2020) COVID-19 and Education in Finland: Reopening of Schools. Available at: https://minedu.fi/en/coronavirus (Accessed: 9 October 2024).

effectively. Still, the distance-learning period weakened the equality of teaching and the conditions that encourage learning and well-being.[26]

The Finnish government allocated specific grants to municipalities and educational institutions to manage the costs associated with COVID-19 precautions and disruptions.

Research from the University of Helsinki and Tampere University further emphasised the pandemic's impact on the school community's well-being. While the rapid shift to distance education was managed effectively overall, teachers expressed a strong need for additional resources and support to navigate the new teaching environment.[27] This study suggests that while government funding and measures were important in facilitating the transition and safe operation of schools, there remained areas where further assistance was necessary, particularly in reducing teacher workload and enhancing student support. However, caution must be exercised when comparing the experiences of Irish and Finnish schools due to Finland's previous environment, which lent itself well to the transition to home learning.

- **Summary:** Finland prioritised regional flexibility and digital readiness. Schools reopened by May 2020, with provisions for vulnerable students and essential workers' children. Digital tools and hybrid learning were effectively implemented.
- **Comparison:** Finland's pre-existing digital infrastructure enabled smoother transitions compared to Ireland. Regional flexibility allowed tailored responses, unlike Ireland's centralized approach.
- **Insight:** Demonstrates the value of robust digital ecosystems and localized decision-making during crises.

3.5 Germany

Following the outbreak of the pandemic, schools in Germany closed in March 2020, with some exceptions. Schools remained open for the children of essential workers, including healthcare professionals and emergency service personnel.[28] Germany's schools initially reopened in spring 2020 after a few weeks of closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Reopening strategies varied across the 16 federal states, but the general approach involved strict safety protocols. As with other European countries, measures included staggered classes, alternating attendance schedules, social distancing, mask mandates, and enhanced hygiene practices. By the summer of 2020, most schools had resumed some form of in-person teaching, albeit under these modified conditions. However, a survey by the German Teachers' Association (Deutscher Lehrerverband) in 2020 highlighted that numerous schools lacked the financial resources to implement necessary hygiene measures and digital infrastructure improvements. The association called for increased government funding to address these deficiencies and ensure safe learning environments.[29]

German officials worked to keep schools open as much as possible, emphasising the need for continuity in education and supporting students' mental health. However, throughout the school closures, there were concerns over access and a digital divide accompanied by worries about school

[26] Salmela-Aro, K. and Lavonen, J., 2023. The Switch to Distance Teaching and Learning in Finland During the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2022) Went Technically Well but Was Emotionally Challenging. In *Schools and Society During the COVID-19 Pandemic: How Education Systems Changed and the Road Ahead* (pp. 63-83). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
[27] https://www.helsinki.fi/en/faculty-educational-sciences/news/news-and-articles/distance-learning-practices-improved-during-year-covid-19-teachers-stress-levels-remain-high
[28] https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2021/01/11/germ-j11.html
[29] https://www.lehrerverband.de/presse/

digitalisation. Thus, the BMBF initiative, which refers to programs and actions taken by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) in Germany to enhance education, research, and innovation, was launched because teachers did not frequently use digital media or technologies.[30] Two emergency programmes were launched within the BMBF initiative: one providing mobile devices to students and the other developing new digital content.

By early 2021, schools began reopening again, starting with younger children and prioritising the vaccination of teachers and school staff to facilitate safe in-person learning.[31] Schools largely remained open during 2021, with continued health protocols in place, aiming to balance education with public health concerns.[32]. This careful reopening process, supported by extensive safety measures, highlights Germany's attempt to sustain in-person learning while adapting to evolving pandemic conditions.

Germany, akin to Finland, received funding of €84.3 million under REACT-EU to support the post-pandemic recovery.[33] In Saxony-Anhalt, an additional €23 million will help disadvantaged pupils improve their digital skills. In addition, in conjunction with the REACT-EU funding, Germany implemented several funding initiatives to support school reopenings and address learning disruptions. The federal government allocated substantial resources to enhance digital infrastructure, provide hygiene supplies, and support educational staff. For instance, the "DigitalPakt Schule" program was expanded to accelerate the provision of digital devices and improve internet connectivity in schools.[34] Additionally, funds were directed towards implementing comprehensive hygiene measures, including regular testing and ventilation systems, to ensure a safe learning environment.

- **Summary:** Germany used regional flexibility for phased reopenings in spring 2020, with enhanced hygiene and digital programs. Challenges included resource disparities and digitalisation gaps.
- **Comparison:** Germany's decentralised approach contrasts with Ireland's centralized, cautious reopening. Digital readiness in Germany was also uneven, similar to Ireland.
- **Insight:** Highlights how regional flexibility can address local needs but also reveals the risks of uneven resource distribution.

3.6 Italy

Italian schools were closed in March 2020 following the announcement of the nationwide lockdown on March 9th. As in other European countries, schools remained open for the children of essential workers, including healthcare professionals and emergency service personnel. As vulnerable students, including those with disabilities or special educational needs, often require in-person support, schools made accommodations to ensure their educational needs were met during the

[30] Federal Ministry of Education and Research (2020) DigitalPakt Schule and Emergency Programs: Addressing the Digital Divide in Education. Available at: https://www.bmbf.de/en (Accessed: 9 October 2024)
[31] OECD (2021) Education and COVID-19: Adapting to a new normal. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/education/education-and-covid-19-adapting-to-a-new-normal.htm (Accessed: 9 October 2024)
[32] Federal Ministry of Education and Research (2021) Education and COVID-19: School reopening and vaccination efforts. Available at: https://www.bmbf.de/en (Accessed: 9 October 2024)
[33] https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en/news/react-eu-finland-germany-and-latvia
[34] https://www.digitalpaktschule.de/de/der-digitalpakt-und-die-corona-krise-1784.html

lockdown. [35] Although Italian schools reopened in September 2020, they closed again in the same month due to rising COVID-19 cases.

Throughout the autumn and winter of 2020, the country experienced significant surges in infections, leading to localised and national restrictions. In November 2020, Italy implemented a partial lockdown that included the closure of secondary schools in several regions, shifting to remote learning for older students. Primary schools generally remained open, but this varied by region depending on the local infection rates. As cases continued to rise, the situation prompted further closures in January 2021, when many schools transitioned to distance learning across the country.[35]

Analogous to Germany, the extent of the digital divide and limitations in the digitalisation of schools were also a concern in Italy. Many schools lacked technologies, and while government initiatives in the last two decades, such as the National Plan for Digital Schools,[36] focused on strengthening digital competencies among teachers and students, high numbers still lacked digital know-how.[37] Implementing the framework for digital teaching and learning was largely delegated to individual schools and teachers, and politicians, school leaders, and parents saw this as an opportunity to innovate and lessen the digital divide.

By early 2021, schools began to reopen again with strict safety measures in place. This included hybrid models of in-person and online learning, particularly in high schools, to accommodate social distancing requirements.[38] The government aimed to keep schools open as much as possible, recognising the importance of in-person education for students' well-being. Despite these efforts, the schools faced multiple challenges, such as a lack of adequate staffing and resources.[39] Italy implemented several funding initiatives to support school reopenings and address learning disruptions. The government allocated substantial resources to enhance digital infrastructure, provide hygiene supplies, and support educational staff. For instance, the "Digital School Plan" was expanded to accelerate the provision of digital devices and improve internet connectivity in schools.[40] Additionally, funds were directed towards implementing comprehensive hygiene measures, including regular testing and ventilation systems, to ensure a safe learning environment.[41]

- **Summary:** Schools reopened in September 2020 but faced recurring closures due to surges. Hybrid models and digitalization initiatives addressed learning loss but exposed gaps in infrastructure and resources.
- **Comparison:** Italy's hybrid models and periodic closures mirrored Ireland's approach, though digitalisation challenges were more pronounced in Italy.
- **Insight:** Highlights the challenges of managing hybrid models without comprehensive digital infrastructure and consistent funding.

[35] Ministero dell'Istruzione (2020) Misure per la gestione dell'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19 nel sistema educativo. Available at: https://www.miur.gov.it (Accessed: 9 October 2024)
[36] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2013) Review of the Italian Strategy for Digital Schools. Available at: http://www.oecd.org/education/ceri/Innovation%20Strategy%20Working%20 Paper%2090.pdf (accessed 1 September).
[37] Save the Children (2020b) Riscriviamo il futuro. L'impatto del coronavirus sulla povertà educativa [Let's rewrite the future. The impact of the coronavirus on educational poverty]. Available at: https:// s3.savethechildren.it/public/files/uploads/pubblicazioni/limpatto-del-coronavirus-sulla-poverta-educativa_0.pdf (accessed 1 September 2020)
[38] Ministero dell'Istruzione (2021) Guidelines for the Safe Reopening of Schools: School Year 2020-2021. Available at: https://www.miur.gov.it (Accessed: 9 October 2024)
[39] European Commission (2021) The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education: Insights from the European Commission. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/coronavirus (Accessed: 9 October 2024)
[40] https://education-profiles.org/europe-and-northern-america/italy/~technology
[41] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/coronavirus-response/supporting-jobs-and-economy-during-coronavirus-pandemic/state-aid-cases/italy_en

3.7 Scotland

While schools in Scotland closed at the same time as the rest of the UK, with the same exceptions for vulnerable students and those with healthcare working parents, they adopted a more cautious approach to reopening. Whereby schools did not fully reopen until August 2020. The Scottish government worked with education unions to ensure compliance with these measures, leading to a more uniform and controlled reopening. A phased return in Scotland began on August 11, 2020, based on a mix of in-school and remote learning, and a week later, every school was expected to be back full-time. The reopening strategy focused on gradually returning students to in-person learning while implementing a variety of health and safety measures. Key initiatives included reducing class sizes to allow for physical distancing, enhancing cleaning protocols, and promoting hygiene practices, such as regular handwashing. Masks were recommended for older students, particularly in secondary schools. Throughout the pandemic, Scotland successfully kept schools largely open, with localised closures implemented in response to specific COVID-19 outbreaks.

In 2021, the Scottish Government allocated over £450 million to education recovery efforts, including £90 million to local authorities to implement key mitigations.[42] These included enhanced hygiene measures, improved ventilation systems, and necessary logistical adjustments such as transportation changes. In August 2021, an additional £10 million was dedicated to ventilation, underlining a strengthened commitment to ensure that all schools and early learning settings had access to CO2 monitoring, whether through fixed or portable devices. Additionally, the Scottish Government committed £240 million to help local authorities recruit additional teachers and support staff, enabling schools to provide greater support to children and families. This funding facilitated the hiring of over 2,200 teachers and more than 500 support staff across Scotland.[42] Alongside this, a further £15 million was allocated for enhanced pupil support staffing in schools and £11 million to directly support pupils with complex additional support needs.[43]

To tackle the poverty-related attainment gap, the Scottish Government allocated £1 billion for education recovery over the current parliamentary cycle. The first instalment of £215 million was distributed in June 2021. This included a £20 million Pupil Equity Funding premium to address immediate education recovery needs for children most impacted by poverty.[42] The Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund contributed over £11.5 million in 2021/22, supporting initiatives such as tutoring and mentoring for vulnerable children, helping them and their families better engage with education.[44] In Scotland's most deprived communities, pupils benefitted from the targeted £215 million distributed through the Scottish Attainment Challenge. This investment included £147 million of Pupil Equity Funding, bolstered by a £20 million "COVID-premium" to address the new challenges posed by the pandemic.[42]

- **Summary:** Schools reopened cautiously in August 2020, with phased returns and significant investment in hygiene, ventilation, and teacher recruitment. Targeted funding supported vulnerable students and addressed the poverty-related attainment gap.
- **Comparison:** Scotland's cautious reopening aligns with Ireland's approach but included greater investment in ventilation and addressing educational inequality.
- **Insight:** Illustrates the importance of targeted investments to mitigate the pandemic's impact on disadvantaged groups.

[42] https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-recovery-key-actions-next-steps/pages/1/
[43] https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/24195371.asn-teachers-asn-pupil-rate-doubles-decade/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWhile%20it%20is%20for%20local,provision%20and%20%C2%A311%20million
[44] https://www.gov.scot/publications/care-experienced-children-and-young-people-fund-operational-guidance/

3.8 Spain

In March 2020, the Spanish government mandated nationwide school closures to curb the spread of COVID-19. While most schools reopened in September 2020, the strategies employed differed markedly by region: Catalonia implemented a "bubble group" strategy, where students were divided into fixed cohorts or bubbles.[45] This approach aimed to minimise interactions between different groups of students, thereby reducing the potential for virus transmission within schools. Conversely, Madrid adopted a hybrid learning model, combining in-person and remote learning. This model was adjusted based on local infection rates, allowing for flexibility in response to rising cases in specific areas. This regional autonomy allowed for tailored responses to localised outbreaks but resulted in inconsistency, with students in different regions receiving varying levels of in-person education.

Throughout the pandemic, Spain prioritised in-person learning, which stemmed from the economic importance of schools for working parents.[46] In addition, the Spanish government emphasised the importance of in-person education for children's social and emotional development and the potential negative effects of prolonged remote learning on students' academic performance and mental health. To facilitate the safe reopening of schools, they introduced comprehensive tracking and isolation systems for COVID-19 cases.[45] These included protocols for testing, contact tracing, and isolating affected individuals. Schools remained open after the initial reopening, though certain areas with surging cases had temporary closures, which was facilitated by regional autonomy.

To ensure safe learning environments, schools implemented enhanced hygiene protocols, including regular sanitation and the provision of PPE. Some institutions introduced additional fees to cover these costs; for instance, a Madrid-based concertado school applied a "health tax/sanitary fee" of €159.50 per student to fund necessary health measures.[47] Further, the Spanish government established a €16 billion COVID-19 fund to assist autonomous communities in managing pandemic-related expenses. Of this, €2 billion was allocated in September 2020 specifically for education, distributed based on the population aged 0 to 16 years (80%) and 17 to 24 years (20%).[48]

Throughout the pandemic, the Spanish government invested in digital infrastructure to facilitate remote learning and ensure students had access to necessary devices and internet connectivity.[49] This initiative aimed to bridge the digital divide and maintain educational continuity during school closures. In addition, recognising the disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations, Spain directed resources to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This included programs to reduce early school leaving and initiatives to provide additional support to students with special educational needs.[49]

- **Summary:** Spain prioritized in-person learning with regional autonomy for tailored responses. Strategies included "bubble groups," hybrid learning, and significant investments in digital infrastructure.
- **Comparison:** Spain's regional autonomy contrasts with Ireland's centralized approach. Its prioritization of in-person learning diverged from Ireland's cautious closures.
- **Insight:** Highlights the effectiveness of localized strategies and the importance of prioritizing social and emotional well-being in reopening plans.

[45] Spain: School reopening amid COVID-19." OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). Available at: OECD.
[46] Spanish Ministry of Education. "Protocol for the reopening of schools" (Protocolo para la reapertura de los centros educativos). Available at: Ministerio de Educación.
[47] https://as.com/diarioas/2020/06/02/actualidad/1591116818_244571.html
[48] https://as.com/diarioas/2020/07/22/actualidad/1595430738_641310.html
[49] Trujillo Sáez, F., 2021. The school year 2020-2021 in Spain during the pandemic.

3.9 Sweden

In contrast to other European countries, when the pandemic began in March 2020, Sweden implemented some restrictions but did not close schools for younger children. In mid-March 2020, online learning was introduced for upper secondary schools (ages 16-19), but this was seen as a temporary measure rather than a blanket policy.[50] The government emphasised that keeping schools open was crucial for children's mental health and social development. The decision was based on the belief that the negative impacts of school closures on education and well-being would outweigh the benefits in terms of reducing virus transmission.[51] The Swedish government believed that in-person schooling was essential for children's mental health and social development. Additionally, keeping schools open helped address concerns about educational equity, ensuring that all children, regardless of their home situation, had access to learning resources and support.[52]

In the autumn of 2020, schools returned to in-person learning, with measures in place to ensure safety. This included recommendations for physical distancing, improved hygiene practices, and the use of face masks in certain situations, particularly for older students in high-transmission areas.[53] However, these measures were less stringent than those implemented in many other countries, reflecting Sweden's overall strategy of avoiding strict lockdowns.[54] As such, it is difficult to compare the Swedish and Irish experiences due to diverging policy responses. Despite the approach of keeping schools open, Sweden faced criticism for its handling of the pandemic, particularly regarding the impact on vulnerable populations and the educational outcomes for older students who relied on remote learning.[55]

In 2020, the Swedish Teachers' Union (Lärarförbundet) conducted a survey revealing that 78% of teachers experienced high-stress levels due to increased workloads during the pandemic.[56] Additionally, 58% of early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers reported conflicts with parents stemming from unclear guidelines on access to ECEC services.[56] The union advocated for additional government funding to address these challenges. Regarding funding, the Swedish government allocated resources to enhance digital infrastructure, particularly for upper secondary schools that transitioned to remote learning.[57] This investment aimed to ensure students had access to necessary devices and internet connectivity. However, the overall response emphasised legislative frameworks and health and safety protocols over targeted financial support.

- **Summary:** Sweden kept schools for younger children open, emphasising in-person learning for mental health and social development. Measures included hygiene protocols and limited closures.
- **Comparison:** Sweden's minimal closures starkly contrast with Ireland's extended remote learning. The focus on mental health aligns with Ireland's later emphasis on social recovery.
- **Insight:** Demonstrates the benefits and risks of prioritising continuity over strict containment measures.

[50] Ludvigsson, J. F. (2020). "The relationship between school closure and transmission of COVID-19: A systematic review." Acta Paediatrica, 109(7), 1204-1210 DOI: 10.1111/apa.15336
[51] "Folkhälsomyndigheten - Covid-19: Information till skolor och förskolor" [Public Health Agency of Sweden - COVID-19: Information for Schools and Preschools].
[52] Sweden's approach to COVID-19: A lesson in public health." The Journal of Global Health, 2020. Available at: Journal of Global Health.
[53] Swedish Public Health Agency (Folkhälsomyndigheten). "Guidelines for schools and preschools during the COVID-19 pandemic.
[54] Sweden's Approach to COVID-19: A Lesson in Public Health." The Journal of Global Health, 2020
[55] A Year of COVID-19 in Sweden: Analyzing the Impact on Public Health and Education." BMJ Global Health, 2021. DOI: 10.1136/bmjgh-2020-003215
[56] https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2021/en/sweden.html
[57] OECD, 2023. *Country Digital Education Ecosystems and Governance: A Companion to Digital Education Outlook 2023*. OECD Publishing.

3.10 Wales

Schools across Wales were initially closed on March 20, 2020, coinciding with nationwide lockdown measures.[58] During the initial lockdown, exceptions were made to support vulnerable students and the children of key workers. Schools remained open for these groups, ensuring that children who needed additional support, such as those with special educational needs or those from disadvantaged backgrounds, could still access educational resources and services.[59] Schools reopened in late August 2020 with a blended learning approach that combined in-person and online classes to reduce the number of students in classrooms. This strategy allowed for greater social distancing. Mask-wearing was also introduced early on, alongside enhanced hygiene measures. Wales's approach reflected a more conservative stance than England's, prioritising health concerns over a faster return to full in-person learning.

The Welsh Government announced a phased reopening of schools beginning in June 2020. Primary schools gradually reopened for younger children, while secondary schools were set to return in a staggered fashion later in the summer. By September 2020, all students were expected to return to in-person learning with safety measures in place to minimise the risk of transmission. These measures included reduced class sizes, enhanced hygiene protocols, and the use of face masks in specific settings. Schools returned on September 1, 2020, with full capacity and limited social distancing.[60]

In July 2020, the Welsh Government announced a £29 million fund to recruit additional teaching staff and support learners in recovering from lost teaching time.[61] In September 2020, over £2.3 million was allocated to provide free face coverings for all learners in secondary schools and further education settings, enhancing safety measures.[62] In January 2022, £50 million was provided through the Sustainable Communities for Learning programme to help schools carry out capital repair and improvement work, focusing on health and safety measures such as improving ventilation.[63] An additional £45 million was allocated to support school budgets, assisting schools as they continued to deal with the pandemic's ongoing impacts and prepare for the new curriculum's requirements.[63]

- **Summary:** Wales adopted phased reopenings from June 2020, combining blended learning and targeted funding for ventilation, teacher recruitment, and digital tools.
- **Comparison:** Wales' blended learning model offered more continuity than Ireland's prolonged closures. Its focus on ventilation and teacher support was more robust.
- **Insight:** Highlights the advantages of blended learning and sustained investments in educational recovery.

3.11 Conclusion

Ireland's approach to school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic was characterised by some of the longest closures in Europe, with a focus on cautious and extended remote learning periods to mitigate virus spread. This contrasted with countries like Germany, England, and Sweden, which employed phased or localised reopenings with varying levels of regional flexibility and hybrid learning

[58] Welsh Government. "Schools in Wales to close in response to coronavirus." Available at: Welsh Government.
[59] Welsh Government. "Guidance for schools and settings: COVID-19." Available at: Welsh Government.
[60] Sano, H. and Sumiya, L.A., 2021. Variety of Strategies in Primary Education: The Responses of the Four UK Nations to the COVID-19 Crisis. *European Journal of Educational Management*, *4*(2), pp.127-139.
[61] https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-11/integrated-impact-assessment-assessing-the-impact-of-allowing-all-learners-to-return-to-schools-and-settings-in-september.pdf
[62] https://www.gov.wales/funding-for-face-coverings-for-secondary-school-and-further-education-learners
[63] https://www.gov.wales/over-100m-new-funding-will-help-make-schools-and-colleges-covid-secure

models. Many countries had a broad focus on digital infrastructure and hybrid approaches, enabling a more continuous in-person engagement despite challenges. While Irish teachers and students expressed satisfaction with safety measures and support during closures, the extended shutdowns led to concerns about learning loss and social isolation. In contrast, nations with earlier reopenings experienced ongoing challenges balancing health risks and educational continuity but benefitted from more sustained classroom interactions.

Countries that reopened schools earlier than Ireland often had significant structural and contextual advantages that allowed them to do so more effectively. For example, nations like Finland and Denmark already have well-established digital education systems and a culture of integrating digital tools into classrooms. This made their transition to hybrid or remote learning smoother, supporting their efforts to reopen schools safely. In contrast, Ireland faced challenges due to limited digital infrastructure and disparities in access to devices and connectivity, making prolonged closures and remote learning more difficult for students and staff, particularly in remote areas. Additionally, countries such as Germany and England employed phased or regionalised reopening strategies that allowed flexibility in addressing varying levels of COVID-19 transmission.

Cultural and social factors further influenced reopening strategies; countries like Sweden prioritised keeping younger children in school to support mental health and development, whereas Ireland's more cautious approach focused on virus containment. Decentralised systems in many countries allowed for faster region-specific decision-making. This combination of digital readiness, public health strategies, cultural priorities, and government flexibility explains why some nations reopened more quickly.

Surveys conducted in other European countries, such as Germany and Italy, indicated mixed responses. While there was positive feedback regarding safety measures, digital improvements, and efforts to maintain educational continuity, many teachers reported increased stress and challenges related to balancing in-person and remote learning. In countries like England, responses to government support and funding were more varied, with concerns about inconsistent safety measures and a need for more comprehensive digital support. Overall, while Ireland's approach was more cautious, the focused funding and safety protocols contributed to a positive reception among educators, especially compared to nations that experienced more abrupt shifts or inconsistencies in reopening strategies.

3.12 Summary of Key Findings

In this section, Ireland’s approach to public health restrictions was contrasted with a number of other European countries. A summary of the key findings of this section is as follows:

- Ireland adopted some of Europe's most prolonged and cautious school closures, in line with a nationally more cautious approach in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Countries varied in their approaches, with some, like Ireland, implementing long school closures. In contrast, others, such as Germany and England, used phased reopenings and regional flexibility to balance public health and educational needs.
- Substantial funding was allocated across Europe to implement hygiene protocols, enhance ventilation, and provide PPE. These measures were important for building confidence among students, staff, and parents for a safe return to in-person learning.

- Many governments expanded digital initiatives, providing devices, internet connectivity, and training to facilitate remote and hybrid learning.
- Most countries prioritised in-person education for vulnerable students and children of essential workers during closures, aiming to provide consistent support and minimise educational disruptions for these groups.
- Surveys revealed mixed reactions; teachers faced increased workloads, stress, and adaptation challenges, while students experienced both opportunities and difficulties with hybrid and online learning.
- Regional and localised strategies allowed for tailored responses to outbreaks, reflecting different levels of infection and community needs. However, this sometimes led to inconsistencies in educational experiences and resource availability across regions.
- These insights collectively underline the importance of a balanced, flexible, and well-resourced approach to managing school reopenings during crises.

Case Study: Loreto, Balbriggan		
School Type	Post-Primary	
Location	Balbriggan, North County Dublin	
Enrolment	1260 (2023/24)	
Gender	Female	
Governance	The school is under the trusteeship of the Sisters of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto Sisters). The trustees established an eight-person Board of Management in 1989 to oversee management and development of the school.	

Overall Experience

Reopening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic presented numerous challenges, balancing educational needs with health and safety concerns. Senior school management faced logistical hurdles, such as enforcing social distancing, ensuring proper ventilation, and implementing sanitation protocols. The risk of virus transmission creates anxiety. Adapting to hybrid learning models required significant investments in technology while addressing disparities in internet access and digital literacy highlighted existing inequalities. The need for mental health support grew as students and teachers coped with the stress created.

Greatest Challenges

- Admin system restructured to facilitate contact tracing. Continuous contact tracing became a labour-intensive task, requiring schools to monitor potential exposures and notify affected families, disrupting classroom routines. This was a relentless, 24/7 procedure, with no respite, even on Christmas day.
- Limited classroom capacity meant reconfiguring spaces or adopting hybrid and remote learning models.
- Addressing inequities in access to technology and stable internet connections was critical, especially for students from underserved communities.
- The senior management team and staff also anticipated learning gaps due to disruptions in routine, compounded by challenges in engaging students remotely.
- Supporting the mental well-being of students and staff, who were grappling with stress, isolation, and anxiety, emerged as a pressing concern, requiring schools to implement robust counselling and support.
- Parental opposition to mask mandates sparked tension, with some families refusing to comply, leading to conflicts and creating divisions. Vaccine hesitancy among some parents posed additional hurdles.

Physical changes to school buildings

- Classroom capacity was made smaller to accommodate social distancing.
- This then involved creating a 'pod' system for students who rotated between a classroom and a large communal space.
- Containers were rented to store excess furniture in order to create areas where 'pods' could attend remote teaching.
- Outside furniture had to be bought, and spaces were created to facilitate lunchtimes outdoors.
- The staffroom had to be remodelled to create a safe environment for staff.
- Screens had to be erected to protect office staff.
- A numbering system on desks was introduced in classrooms for roll calling to facilitate contact tracing.
- Sanitisers were erected throughout the school.
- Carbon monoxide monitors were installed in all classrooms, offices, staffrooms and communal areas.

Usefulness of Financial Supports

- The school employed extra supervisors to cover 'pods' during the school day, to cover morning, break and lunchtime supervision, ensuring social distancing.
- The school also employed extra cleaners to be on-site during the day.
- PPE equipment and cleaning supplies were purchased using the COVID-19 cleaning grant.
- Some of the grants were used to buy outdoor furniture and awnings to make outdoor lunch areas.
- Schools at times had to pay high prices for PPE equipment as they had to use government-approved suppliers when schools could have sourced equally good equipment more cheaply from other suppliers.

Source: Loretto

4 Allocation of Supports

4.1 Introduction

In this section, we discuss Ireland's model of capitation funding for primary and post-primary schools, focusing on how funds are allocated to cover day-to-day operational costs, support for students with special educational needs (SEN), and the role of ancillary grants. This section then examines how the funding model was adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic to facilitate enhanced allocations for health and safety measures supported by the REACT-EU program.

4.2 Ireland's Model of Annual Capitation Funding

Funding for primary and post-primary schools in Ireland follows a capitation model, with additional funds allocated to those with special or additional needs. Within primary and post-primary schools, there are mainstream and special schools. The former accommodates students with and without special educational needs (SEN), while the latter focuses on students with more significant and complex needs, including disabilities such as autism spectrum disorders (ASD), intellectual disabilities, physical impairments, and sensory challenges.

The two main grants the Department of Education provides to schools are the capitation and ancillary grants. Under the capitation grant, primary and post-primary schools receive a per-pupil amount to cover operational costs such as heating, maintenance, and other recurring expenses. A proportion of the grant is intended to be used by schools to assist with purchasing teaching materials and resources. The amount differs between primary and post-primary schools, with secondary schools typically more due to the higher costs associated with more specialised subjects and facilities. The standard rate of grant for the schools in the academic year 2019/20 was €179 per mainstream primary school pupil, effective 1 September 2019.[64] The standard rate per post-primary pupil was €309, less the contribution to teachers' salaries, effective 1 September 2019.[65] In the 2020/21 academic year, the standard rate of the Capitation grant was increased to €183 per pupil at the primary level and €316 per student for post-primary schools, less 80% of the School Salary Grant, which is the contribution to teachers' salaries with effect from 1 September 2020.[66] [67]

The second grant is the ancillary-related grant, under the School Services Support Fund Grants (SSSF), which covers the cost of employing ancillary staff such as school secretaries and caretakers. As in Circular 0082/2020, there are five grants, the SSSF, Secretary Grant / SSSF Secretary, and Caretaker Grant / SSSF Caretaker grant funding for Voluntary Secondary Schools in the Free Education Scheme.[68]In primary schools, the Ancillary Services Grant covers the cost of employing secretarial and caretaker staff. This grant is paid to schools that have not been provided with secretarial or caretaking assistance under the 1978/1979 schemes. In post-primary schools, the Secretarial and Caretaker Grants are intended to assist voluntary secondary schools that have not been provided with secretarial and caretaking assistance under the 1978/1979 schemes.[69] The grant is calculated based on the school's enrolment numbers as of September 30th each year. For primary schools, the grant

[64] https://circulars.gov.ie/pdf/circular/education/2019/34.pdf
[65] https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-06-26/section/114/
[66] https://assets.gov.ie/75266/912f9f85-683c-4a07-8e1d-865f499e5a46.pdf
[67] https://assets.gov.ie/83881/326e08a3-b07f-4d5c-8e05-b8de162a8810.pdf
[68] https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/5479f-revision-of-schools-support-staff-funding-grant-rates-for-voluntary-secondary-schools-in-the-free-education-scheme/
[69] https://www.fssu.ie/app/uploads/2021/09/Ancillary-grant-0017-2021.pdf

is subject to a minimum enrolment of 60 pupils and a maximum of 500 pupils. This means that primary schools with fewer than 60 pupils receive funding as if they had 60 pupils, and those with more than 500 pupils receive funding capped at the 500-pupil level.[70] In the 2019/20 academic year, the standard rate was €171 per pupil in primary schools and €223.5 per pupil in post-primary schools.[71]

Beyond enrolment numbers, the allocation of capitation in mainstream schools is also determined by the number of students with special needs. The additional capitation is provided through the Special Education Teachers (SET) allocation and the Special Needs Assistants (SNA) scheme. The SNA scheme provides non-teaching support for students with significant care needs. SNAs are allocated based on the specific care needs of individual students rather than a per-student capitation rate. The number of SNAs allocated to a school is determined through assessments conducted by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). Schools apply for SNA support based on the needs of individual students, and funding is provided to cover the SNA's salary and related employment costs.

The SET allocation provides additional teaching hours to support students with special educational needs in mainstream schools. This allocation is based on a school profile that considers the overall school size and enrolment numbers, the level of students with complex needs, and the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. DEIS[72] Schools also receive further support to address educational inequalities.

4.3 COVID-19 Model of Capitation

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Irish government introduced COVID-19 capitation allocations to assist schools with the increased costs of maintaining safe environments for students and staff, funded by REACT-EU. The allocations aimed to cover enhanced cleaning, hygiene supplies, personal protective equipment (PPE), and other necessary measures to mitigate the risk of infection. The Department of Education in Ireland was responsible for allocating and implementing the allocation funded by REACT-EU.

Funding followed the same approach as the regular capitation model in primary and post-primary schools, which was assessed based on recognised pupil enrolment on 30 September 2019. The grant paid to primary schools with an enrolment of equal to or less than 60 pupils was based on a minimum enrolment of 60 pupils. The grant paid to post-primary schools with an enrolment of equal to or less than 200 students was based on a minimum enrolment of 200 students. The funding for primary and post-primary schools, including mainstream schools with SEN students and special schools, was provided as a grant paid in instalments, the first of which was issued in mid-August to cover the period until December 2020. Further, the ancillary grant was raised to €173 and €224.5 per pupil for primary and post-primary schools, respectively, in the academic year 2020/21.

Similar to the non-COVID capitation grants, enhanced rates were payable in relation to students attending special classes attached to mainstream schools to assist with the extra costs of cleaning classrooms with a small number of students and the enhanced PPE due to the difficulties related to SNAs and SET socially distancing while teaching students with SENs. This approach ensured continuity in support for these students and extended the commitment to provide adequate resources, which had already been established before the pandemic. The capitation was provided at a per-pupil rate, including for students with SEN in mainstream and special schools.

[70] https://www.fssu.ie/app/uploads/2021/04/Financial-Guideline-P12-Grants-Payable-To-Primary-Schools-2.pdf
[71] https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2021-07-27/932/
[72] The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme aims to reduce educational disadvantage. Schools with the highest number of students at risk of educational disadvantage get extra resources.

In addition, a further grant was available for enhanced supervision for mainstream schools and schools with special classes/special schools. This additional supervision support was provided to manage and prevent the congregation of large groups of students and ensure the careful movement in a socially distant manner to classes for specialist subjects where it is neither practical nor possible to remain in the classroom. This grant was provided at a rate of €35 per pupil for all post-primary schools.

The table below presents the COVID-19 per pupil capitation rates for enhanced cleaning, PPE, and, for post-primary schools, enhanced supervision in the 2020/21 academic year. The first instalment of the PPE grant reflected the fact that schools faced several once-off costs and, therefore, the rate for Term 2 was revised accordingly. Within primary and post-primary schools, as in the non-COVID capitation, additional funding was provided to students with special needs, with the highest addition for PPE at an additional €45 and almost €5 per pupil for primary and post-primary schools, respectively.

Table 4.1: COVID-19 Capitation Grants 2020/21 Term 1, 2, and 3 Rates per Pupil

	Mainstream	Special Classes/Special School
Term 1		
Primary Schools		
Enhanced Cleaning	€21.00	€25.67
PPE	€25.00	€100.00
Post-Primary Schools		
Enhanced Cleaning	€11.00	€13.33
PPE	€40.00	€160.00
Enhanced Supervision	€35.00	€35.00
Terms 2 and 3		
Primary Schools		
Enhanced Cleaning	€21.00	€25.67
PPE	€15.00	€60.00
Post-Primary Schools		
Enhanced Cleaning	€11.00	€13.33
PPE	€24.00	€96.00
Enhanced Supervision	€35.00	€35.00

Source: The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
Note: Grants paid to schools with an enrolment of equal to or less than 60 (200) pupils in primary (post-primary) are based on a minimum enrolment of 60 pupils.

Regarding the 2021/22 school period, for term one, grant payments were calculated using the same per capita rates as applied for the 2020/21 school year and were based on recognised enrolments as of September 2020. To ensure schools were prepared for the enhanced costs associated with operating during COVID-19, the funding was issued to schools before the end of September. As shown in **Error! Reference source not found.**, the per pupil capitation rate for term one of 2021/22 was h igher for PPE in mainstream primary and post-primary schools compared to terms two and three of the 2020/21 academic year.

For term two, the grant payments were calculated using the same per capita rates as applied for term two of the 2020/21 school year and were based on recognised enrolments for September 2020. The

rate was adjusted to reflect that Term two is shorter than Term one. The per pupil capitation rate for PPE was lower for primary and post-primary schools across mainstream and special classes/schools.

Table 4.2: COVID-19 Capitation Grants 2020/21 Term 1, 2, and 3 Rates per Pupil		
	Mainstream	**Special Classes/Special School**
Term 1		
Primary Schools		
Enhanced Cleaning	€21.00	€25.67
PPE	€25.00	€80.00
Post-Primary Schools		
Enhanced Cleaning	€11.00	€13.33
PPE	€40.00	€28.00
Enhanced Supervision	€35.00	€35.00
Terms 2 and 3		
Primary Schools		
Enhanced Cleaning	€21.00	€25.67
PPE	€15.00	€60.00
Post-Primary Schools		
Enhanced Cleaning	€11.00	€13.33
PPE	€24.00	€96.00
Enhanced Supervision	€35.00	€35.00
Source: The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science ***Note: Grants paid to schools with an enrolment of equal to or less than 60 (200) pupils in primary (post-primary) are based on a minimum enrolment of 60 pupils.***		

Table 4.3 shows the rates per pupil for primary and post-primary schools for the 2022/2023 school year. The Enhanced Cleaning and PPE grant payments were combined into one payment at the same rate as Term 1 of 21/22 for Term 1 2022/23.

Table 4.3: COVID-19 Capitation Grants 2022/23 Term 1 - Rates per Pupil		
Primary Schools	**Mainstream**	**Special Classes/Special School**
Enhanced Cleaning and PEE	€41.00	€105.67
Post-Primary Schools		
Enhanced Cleaning and PEE	€43.00	€141.33
Source: The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science ***Note: Grants paid to schools with an enrolment of equal to or less than 60 (200) pupils in primary (post-primary) are based on a minimum enrolment of 60 pupils.***		

4.4 Employment of an Aide

Under the REACT-EU Fund grant, the department administered funding for schools to employ an aide(s), if required, to assist with the physical and logistical arrangements necessary for school reopening, including physical reconfiguration measures such as setting up hand sanitising stations, signage, training, engaging with parents and staff, etc. The daily rate payable was €143.32, which is based on the number of days an aide is required, determined by school size. The table below sets out

the number of days of funding the Department of Education provided. This funding was provided as a grant payment.

Table 4.4: Number of Days of Aide Employment to Assist with School Reopening	
Enrolment Range	**Number of Days**
<300	2
301-600	5
>600	10
All Special Schools	10
Source: *The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science*	

4.5 Fund Administration and Oversight

The allocation of funds was coordinated between the European Union and the Irish government. Ireland received its share of the REACT-EU funding as specified the REACT-EU Regulation (2221 of 2020), which introduced a new Annex VIIa to the CPR (Reg 1303/2013). The allocation was based on the latest available objective statistical data concerning Ireland's relative prosperity and the extent of the effect of the COVID-19 crisis on their economies and societies GDP, unemployment and youth unemployment.[73] [74]The ESF Managing Authority (MA) within the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is responsible for the efficient and compliant management of the PEIL programme. The Department of Education was designated as the Beneficiary of the support for school re-opening. A system of monitoring and evaluation was put in place to oversee the expenditure through school inspections. The results of the inspections are presented in Section 5.2.

4.6 Summary of Key Findings

- Ireland's capitation system allocates funds on a per-pupil basis for both primary and post-primary schools, covering operational costs and additional support for SEN students.
- The funding introduced enhanced capitation funding to cover health and safety measures, supported in part by the REACT-EU program. This funding included allocations for personal protective equipment (PPE), enhanced cleaning, and additional supervision to ensure compliance with public health guidelines.
- Additional funding was provided for students with special educational needs (SEN) through initiatives such as the Special Needs Assistants (SNA) and Special Education Teachers (SET) allocations, ensuring tailored support to meet these students' complex needs.
- Schools received grants to employ essential support staff, with rates varying based on school size and enrolment.

[73] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020R2221
[74] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/eur/2020/2221/annexes

5 Effectiveness of the Fund

5.1 Introduction

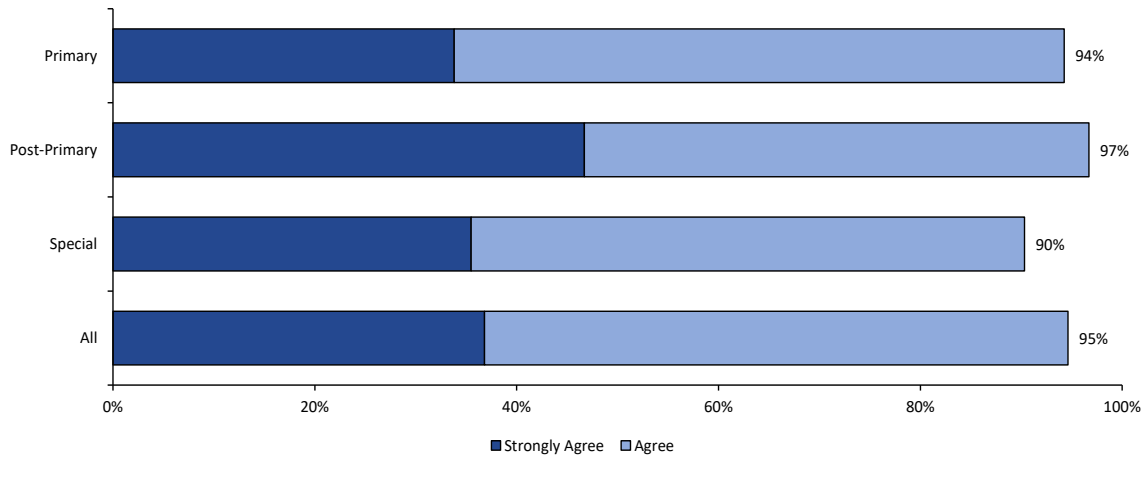
This section explores the effectiveness of the fund in meeting its primary goal of safely reopening schools in Ireland for the 2021/22 academic year amidst the ongoing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The reopening followed government guidelines, including measures such as ventilation improvements, mandatory mask usage, and the deployment of CO2 monitors to maintain a low-risk environment for students and staff. Schools relied heavily on state funding, with significant contributions from the REACT-EU fund, to cover the additional expenses necessary for implementing these safety measures.

5.2 Schools' Views of Effectiveness

Schools in Ireland began reopening for the 2020/21 academic year in late August and early September, following government guidelines aimed at ensuring safe operation during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The reopening process included implementing public health measures such as ventilation, mask mandates, and CO2 monitors to ensure a low-risk environment for students and staff. The government confirmed that schools were expected to open fully for the 2021/22 academic year, with no significant delays reported.[75] [76]

In the Indecon survey, schools strongly agreed that the support provided through the fund achieved the goal of reopening schools. Figure 5.1 shows the view of schools on the effectiveness of the support in achieving their planned aim to allow for the reopening of the school. Across all school types, there was high agreement that the fund was successfully leveraged to reopen the schools.

Figure 5.1: Survey Responses on the Effectiveness of the Support in Achieving Their Planned Aim to Allow for the Reopening of the School



Source: Indecon Analysis of Survey of Schools

[75] https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/93979-update-on-reopening-our-schools-the-roadmap-for-the-full-return-to-school/
[76] https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/87b08-minister-foley-confirms-plans-for-full-reopening-of-schools-for-the-new-school-year/

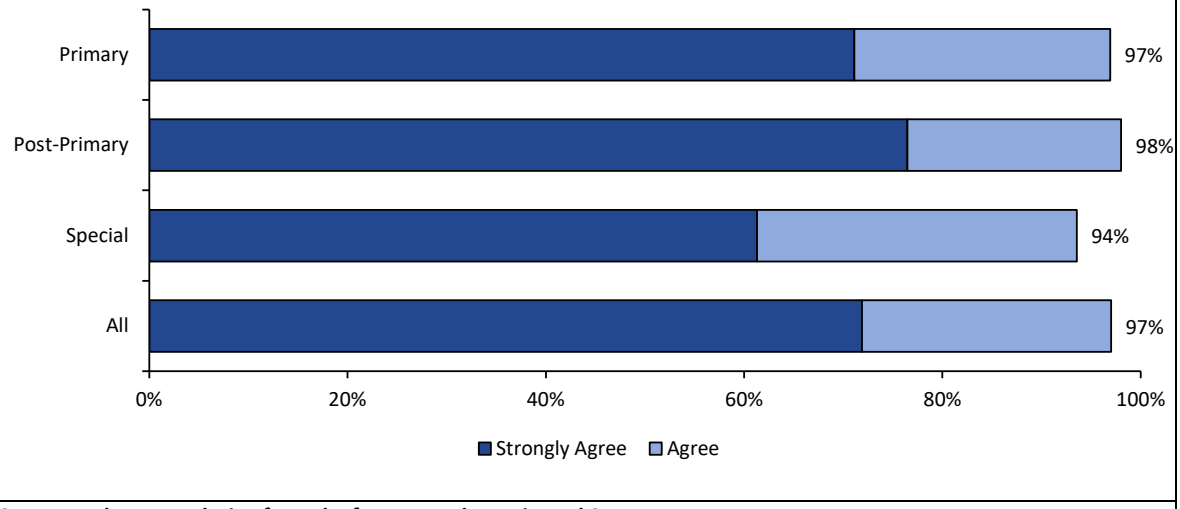
Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to explain their opinions regarding the effectiveness of the support. The next table shows a small, representative sample of quotes from schools. The support provided during the pandemic had a significant impact on schools, with respondents noting that the funding enabled them to carry out necessary works and purchase essential equipment, which were crucial for implementing health and safety measures. This support not only helped to create safer school environments but also reassured parents and staff that steps were being taken to maintain cleanliness and prevent the spread of COVID-19. The financial assistance played an important role in helping schools normalise infection control practices, such as mask usage, which in turn contributed to reducing the spread of the virus within the school community and beyond. Additionally, many respondents recognised that, although some aspects of the response could be critiqued with the benefit of hindsight, the efforts of the government and school management were important in navigating the challenges of an uncertain and rapidly evolving situation.

Table 5.1: Open-ended Comment on the Effectiveness of Supports
"We found the support invaluable, and it was an enormous relief to have access to adequate and relevant funding to support the completion of any necessary works and purchase of new types of equipment/ supplies in order to enable us to implement the necessary measures."
"I believe that the education schools gave on infection control to children and by 'normalising' the use of masks by staff helped wider society by helping reduce the spread of COVID by children in school but also in the wider community."
"The resources and financial supports given were very important in terms of giving reassurance to parents and staff members that all possible steps were taken to have a clean, sanitised and safe school environment."'
"Ar an iomlán sílim gur éirigh leis an rialtas agus bainistíocht scoile an iarracht a dhéanamh ar threimhse a bhí an dúshlánach go deo. Tá se éasca ag breathnú siar anois a bheith criticúil maidir le gneithe áirithe ach ní raibh cursaí chomh soiléir sin ag an am." [Translated] "On the whole, I think that the government and school management have succeeded in making an effort during a period that has always been challenging. It's easy looking back now to be critical of certain aspects, but things were not so clear at the time."
Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

Indecon's consultation with school representative bodies showed a broad agreement that the financial supports received were necessary and sufficient for the purchase of the relevant equipment for the safe reopening of schools. Some issues were raised regarding procurement such as the time and effort to acquire resources, though most of the problems that schools reported from the time relate to the efforts that were required to make the school premises, teachers and students prepared for a return to in-school learning. As identified in Section 5.3, the compliance with control measures was high.

Figure 5.2 presents survey responses on the importance of support in repairing the social consequences of COVID-19. Respondents demonstrated high agreement, indicating that the support was indeed a key proponent of the return to social normality for students. Across all schools, 97% indicated that support was essential for repairing the social consequences, with the highest rate in post-primary (98%) and primary (97%).

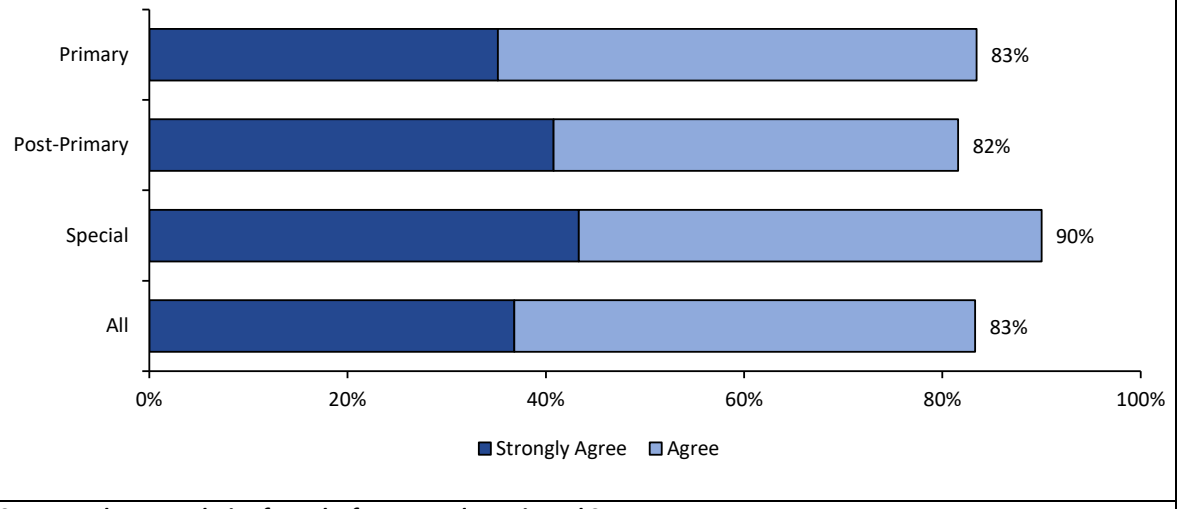
Figure 5.2: Survey Responses on the Importance of the Supports in Repairing the Social Consequences of COVID-19



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

Figure 5.3 presents survey responses on the importance of reopening schools as soon as possible for the long-term benefit of children. As shown below, respondents again demonstrated high agreement across all school types. Eighty-three per cent of students and staff indicated that the support was important for the long-run benefit of children, with the highest rate in special schools.

Figure 5.3: Survey Responses on the Importance of Reopening Schools as Soon as Possible for the Long-run Benefit of Children



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide more explanations for their opinions regarding the effectiveness of support in repairing the social consequences of school closures. The next table shows a small, representative sample of quotes from schools. The social consequences of school closures during the pandemic were a significant concern, as highlighted by respondents. While many noted that efforts were made to ensure a safe reopening and allow children to return to the classroom and reconnect with friends, others emphasised the long-term impact of closures on students' social and emotional development. Teachers reported ongoing challenges in addressing these issues, struggling to balance post-pandemic academic demands with the need to nurture social growth.

Additionally, concerns were raised about the insufficient psychological support provided to both staff and students to address the challenges brought on by the pandemic. Respondents highlighted the need for greater resources, especially as the lingering effects of school closures continue to impact certain cohorts, who experienced significant disruption to both their academic and social skill development. These comments underline the importance of prioritising emotional and social recovery alongside academic progress in the post-pandemic period.

Table 5.2: Open-ended Comment on the Supports' Impact on Repairing Social Consequences
"I feel every effort was made to enhance a safe reopening of schools. The children needed to get back to class to be with their friends."
"Although schools were prepared physically for the reopening, we were not prepared for the social and emotional consequences of school closures. We as teachers continue to see the ill effects on the physical, social and emotional development of children."
"Teachers, already overwhelmed with the demands of post-pandemic learning, struggle to dedicate time to nurturing social development alongside academics."
"Ní dóigh liom gur tugadh go leor tacaíochtaí do scoileanna ó thaobh na dúshláin siceolaíochta a bhí ag dataí agus foireann de bharr Covid. Tá níós mó tacaíocht de dhíth fiú amháin anois chun dul i ngleic leo." "[Translated] I don't think that enough supports were given to schools in terms of the psychological challenges faced by staff due to Covid. These challenges remain to be seen [and] even more support is needed to fight them now."
"Feictear anois i Rang 4, an grupa is mó a d'fhulaing maidir le dúnadh na scoileanna. Is léir gur chaill siad amach ar thréimhse an tabhachtach ó thaobh fhorbairt agus ghnóthachtáil scileanna idir scileanna sóisialta agus scileanna acadúla." [Translated] It is now seen in Class 4, the group that suffered the most in relation to the closure of the schools. It is clear that they missed out on the period of the contribution in terms of developing and acquiring skills between social skills and academic skills."
Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

5.3 Evidence from Inspection Reports

The Department of Education issued detailed guidance to schools to support the provision of safe learning and working environments in schools. The guidance issued key messages to minimise the risk of COVID–19 for staff, learners, families and the wider community. To assure the public that the Department's guidelines were being implemented and to support schools in implementing them, the inspectorate carried out a programme called Safe Provision of Schooling (SSPS) visits to schools and centres for education. These inspection reports covered four areas:

- Planning
- Appointment of a lead worker representative
- Provision for staff training
- Control measures

This section summarises the outcomes of a random sample of 52 inspection reports and shows a very high degree of compliance. A sample of 26 primary schools (one per county) and 26 post-primary schools (one per county) was analysed.

The most relevant area to the REACT-EU supports is Area 4 which examines the response and preparedness to COVID-19. Primary schools fully implemented all guidance concerning control measures six to seven, as can be seen in the table below. Post-primary schools complied fully with several control measures. Post-primary schools fell slightly short of full compliance with the control measures relating to displaying posters and other signage to prevent the introduction and spread of COVID-19 (96%) and visual evidence of posters and signage throughout the school (96%).

Table 5.3: School Inspection Reports – Area 4: CONTROL MEASURES (6-7)

	Primary	Post-Primary
6. The school has procedures in place for dealing with a suspected case of COVID-19 in line with the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable opening of schools	100%	100%
6a. The school principal and the LWR are aware of the procedures for dealing with a suspected case	100%	100%
6b. An isolation area is ready	100%	100%
6c. Contact telephone numbers for parents are available	100%	100%
6d. The school has a supply of PPE available	100%	100%
7. The school has displayed posters and other signage to prevent the introduction and spread of COVID-19	100%	96%
7a. There is visual evidence of posters and signage throughout the school	100%	96%

Source: Indecon Analysis of school inspection reports

Control measures eight to ten within the Area Four: Control Measures of the school inspection reports recorded full compliance in both primary and post-primary schools, as shown in the table below.

Table 5.4: School Inspection Reports – Area 4: CONTROL MEASURES (8-10)		
	Primary	**Post-Primary**
8. The school has made changes to the school and classroom layout to support physical distancing and to facilitate ongoing cleaning of the school in line with section 5.4 of the Department guidelines	100%	100%
8a. There is visual evidence of reconfigured classrooms that take account of the minimum physical distancing requirements	100%	100%
8b. A sanitising station is available at the main entry and exit points to the school	100%	100%
8c. Sanitising stations are available at regular intervals throughout the school	100%	100%
8d. Teachers and other staff wear face coverings in line with current DE guidance/requirements	100%	100%
8e. Visitors to the school are requested to wear face coverings	100%	100%
8f. The school has measures in place to decrease interaction and increase physical distancing outside of classrooms	100%	100%
8g. Arrangements are in place to facilitate physical distancing in the staff room	100%	100%
Eight h. There are measures in place for good ventilation that take account of current DE guidelines/requirements.	100%	100%
9. The school has made necessary arrangements to limit access to the school to necessary visitors and maintain records of contacts to the school	100%	100%
9a. A contact log is maintained for visitors	100%	100%
10. The school principal confirmed that enhanced cleaning arrangements that reflect the Department's guidance are in place	100%	100%
Source: Indecon Analysis of school inspection reports		

Table 5.5 below shows that primary schools demonstrated full compliance with and implementation of guidance in Area 1: Planning. Post-primary schools demonstrated full compliance and close to full compliance across the guidelines concerning planning.

Table 5.5: School Inspection Reports – Area 1: PLANNING		
	Primary	**Post-Primary**
1. The school has a COVID-19 policy in place	**100%**	**96%**
1a. The policy contains, at a minimum, the commitments set out in Appendix 1 of the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable opening of schools	100%	96%
1b. There is evidence that the policy was shared with staff, pupils/students and parents	100%	96%
1c. The school principal and Lead Worker Representative (LWR) confirm that they are familiar with the revised COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable operation of Post-Primary / Primary and Special Schools	100%	100%
2. The school has updated its health and safety risk assessment to identify the hazards and outline the relevant control measures associated with COVID-19	**100%**	**96%**
2a. The school's risk assessment includes COVID-19 as a risk and identifies associated control measures	100%	96%
Source: Indecon Analysis of school inspection reports		

The table below shows that primary schools in the sample examined implemented all guidance regarding the appointment of a lead worker representative. The only guidance that post-primary schools did not achieve 100% compliance on was guidance 3b: The members of school staff who were spoken to during the visit were aware of the identity of the LWR (96%).

Table 5.6: School Inspection Reports – Area 2: APPOINTMENT OF A LEAD WORKER REPRESENTATIVE		
	Primary	**Post-Primary**
3. The school has appointed a Lead Worker Representative	**100%**	**100%**
3a. The name of LWR(s) is available	100%	100%
3b. The members of school staff that were spoken to during the visit were aware of the identity of the LWR	100%	96%
3c. A discussion with LWR(s) shows that they are aware of the role and responsibilities of a LWR(s) as outlined in Appendix 8 of the COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable opening of schools	100%	100%
3d. The LWR(s) confirms that they have completed training for LWRs	100%	100%
3e. The LWR confirmed that (s)he receives protected time, in line with DE guidelines, to enable them to carry out their duties in that role	100%	100%
Source: Indecon Analysis of school inspection reports		

The table below shows that school inspection reports from both primary and post-primary schools regarding the provision of staff training were fully compliant (100%).

Table 5.7: School Inspection Reports – Area 3: PROVISION FOR STAFF TRAINING		
	Primary	**Post-Primary**
4. The school has ensured that staff have reviewed the training materials provided by the Department of Education	100%	100%
4a. The members of school staff that were spoken to during the visit confirm that they have completed relevant training	100%	100%
5. All staff have completed a Return to Work (RTW) form	100%	100%
5a. The principal confirmed that all staff have completed a RTW form	100%	100%
5b. The members of school staff that were spoken to during the visit confirmed that they completed a RTW form	100%	100%
Source: Indecon Analysis of school inspection reports		

5.4 Summary of Key Findings

This section examined the effectiveness of the fund in meeting the need for school reopening. A summary of the key findings of this section is as follows:

- The Indecon-issued survey showed that across all school types, 95% agreed/strongly agreed that the financial support was successfully used to enable schools to reopen safely, with post-primary schools showing slightly higher agreement at 97%.
- The Indecon-issued survey revealed that 97% of respondents across all school types viewed the support as essential in addressing the social consequences of COVID-19.
- Respondents demonstrated a high level of agreement (83%) on the importance of reopening schools as quickly as possible to benefit children in the long term. This was particularly significant for special schools, where the negative impact of closures on students with special educational needs (SEN) or additional requirements was most pronounced.
- A sample of school inspection reports examined indicates a very high rate of school compliance with health-related measures introduced.

Case Study: St. Olivers, Killarney		
School Type	Primary	
Location	Ballycasheen, Killarney, Co. Kerry	
Enrolment	642 (2023/24)	
Gender	Co-ed	
Ethos	St. Oliver's Primary School has 642 pupils with a teaching staff of 61 teachers aided by 26 classroom assistants. The school also has two secretaries and a full-time caretaker. It has a Catholic ethos but welcomes children from a wide variety of religious and social backgrounds.	

Overall Experience

Reopening St. Olivers during COVID-19 was very challenging. The school faced a number of unforeseen challenges, though reopened on time and in line with Government mandates. The financial supports provided by the Government were very welcome and necessary, and safe reopening would not have been possible without them. Overall, the school approached the management of the crisis with an "abundance of caution".

Greatest Challenges

- The greatest single challenge was managing the physical space of the school, in particular the challenges associated with accommodating 800 people safely within the confines of a restricted physical area.
- The school used financial support to make physical alterations within the school to allow for smaller groups of students. They have since kept these alterations which are proving to be of on-going use to the school.
- There were particular challenges in managing special classes which are, in effect, "a school within a school", and which operate within the context of a mainstream school. These students had additional needs and challenges during the pandemic, including medical needs.

Other issues

- The school didn't report particular issues with non-compliance among parents or students, though compliance did start to wane near the end of the pandemic.
- Procurement was not a major issue, and there were enough local companies who were able to provide the school with what they needed.
- The issue of the lack of socialisation was raised by some parents, though on the whole the school feels that they were able to ensure children had good opportunities for socialisation, albeit within smaller groups.
- The older children in the school were also able to help in the school.

Usefulness of Financial Supports

- Financial supports were critical to the reopening of the school, which would not have been able to open without them.
- The school found that the supports were adequate, though that they still had to "cut their cloth" given the resources at their disposal.
- One consequence of this was that some local schools were able to afford certain purchases (such as purifiers) that St. Olivers was not. This created some pressure from parents who asked why some schools had these, which others did not.
- Frustration though that certain standards, particularly regarding cleaning, have not been able to be continued because of a lack of funding.

Source: St. Olivers

6 Efficiency of the Fund

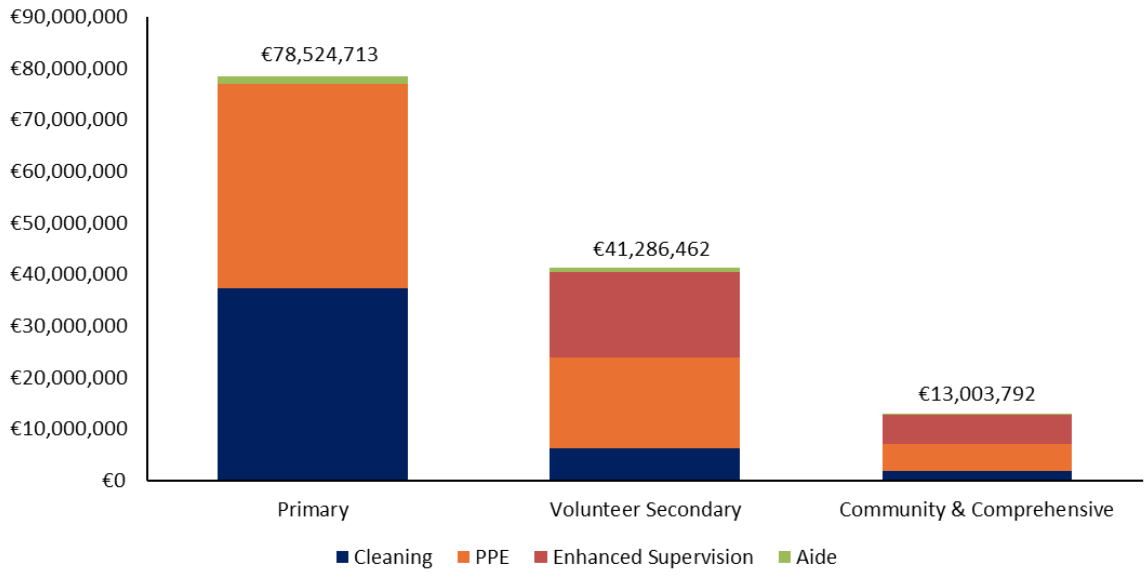
6.1 Introduction

This section examines the relationship between the resources allocated to schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and the outcomes generated from these investments. It outlines how COVID-19 funding from the REACT-EU fund was distributed among primary, post-primary, community, and comprehensive schools over various academic years, focusing on key spending areas such as PPE, enhanced cleaning, and supervision. Additionally, it evaluates the cost-efficiency and timeliness of the supports, their alignment with specific school needs, and their effectiveness in facilitating a safe return to in-person learning, especially for schools with particular challenges, such as those serving students with special needs.

6.2 Relationship between Resources Used and Changes Generated

We first examine the resources allocated to schools in aggregate. Figure 6.1 provides the total COVID-19 funding to primary, post-primary, community and comprehensive schools for the academic year 2020/21. In both primary and post-primary schools, the largest amount of funding was allocated to PPE, followed by enhanced supervision and cleaning, with a smaller proportion allocated to the employment of aide(s).

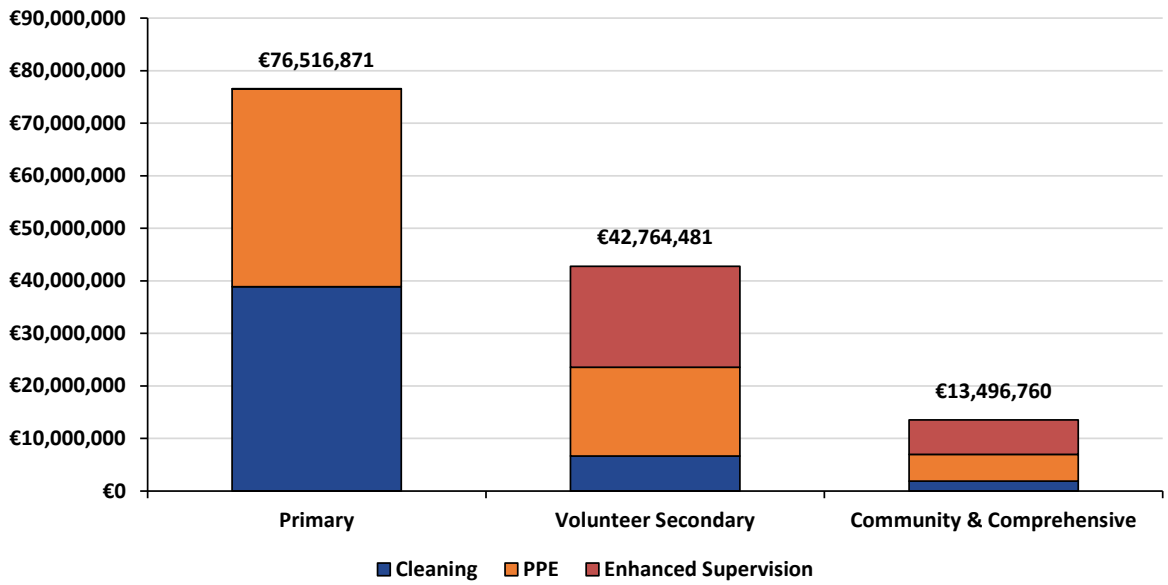
Figure 6.1: Total COVID-19 Grant Funding Provided by REACT-EU Fund for the 20/21 School Year



Source: The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Figure 6.2 presents the total COVID-19 funding for the 2021/22 academic year. Total allocations for the COVID-19 grants were lower in primary schools compared to the previous year, while the reverse is true for post-primary schools. The total allocation of grants was highest in primary schools at €76.5 million, followed by volunteer secondary schools (€42.8 million) and community and comprehensive schools (€13.5 million).

Figure 6.2: Total COVID-19 Grant Funding Provided by REACT-EU Fund for the 21/22 School Year



Source: The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

In the academic term 2022/23 school year, the funding was entirely dedicated to cleaning and PPE as a combined payment. For primary schools, the funding was €52 million; for volunteer secondary, €16 million; and €4.9 million for community and comprehensive schools, for a total of €73.6 million.

The cost of safely returning students can also be expressed as a per-student rate, which was €0.66 per school day in mainstream primary schools and €1.26 for mainstream post-primary, when measured across all terms. This is shown in the next table.

Table 6.1: Average Cost per Pupil per Term, 2020-2023		
	Mainstream Schools	
Primary	**Per Term**	**Per Day**
Enhanced Cleaning	€21.00	€0.35
PPE	€18.33	€0.31
Total	**€39.33**	**€0.66**
Post-primary		
Enhanced Cleaning	€11.00	€0.18
PPE	€29.33	€0.49
Enhanced Supervision	€35.00	€0.58
Total	**€75.33**	**€1.26**
Source: *Indecon Analysis and The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Per-day figure calculated based on a 60-day term.*		

The cost of measures to support school re-opening can be considered alongside the impact of school closures on various aspects of child welfare. To estimate the impact of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, Indecon has conducted a review of existing research to determine the effect on learning outcomes, including education disparities, social development, and mental and physical health. Indecon also considers the effects of the school closures on those with additional needs, a vulnerable group disproportionately impacted by the shift from their routine.[77]

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic affected primary and secondary schooling worldwide. The temporary closure of over 90% of schools worldwide since March 2020 was reported as governments tried to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. School closures are driven by physical distancing policies in which children were considered a vulnerable group for morbidity and played a major role in the spread of the infection. With physical school closures, shifting to remote learning became the new education norm in many countries worldwide. Although school closures during the summer period are associated with positive impacts such as rest and recovery from the school year, the change from the structure of the school year has been associated with negative outcomes such as engaging in sedentary activities, as well as spending excessive time on screens or social media and oversleeping, impacting their mental and physical health, including unhealthy weight gain, and an increase in the prevalence of overweight and obesity.[78] [79] [80]

Research shows that school closures in summer are associated with learning loss; a US study reported a loss of 1.8 months of progress in mathematical skills and four months of spelling skills during

[77] Grooms, A.A. and Childs, J., 2021. "We need to do better by kids": Changing routines in US schools in response to COVID-19 school closures. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, *26*(2), pp.135-156.
[78] von Hippel, P.T. and Workman, J., 2016. From kindergarten through second grade, US children's obesity prevalence grows only during summer vacations. *Obesity*, *24*(11), pp.2296-2300.
[79] Franckle, R., Adler, R. and Davison, K., 2014. Peer reviewed: accelerated weight gain among children during summer versus school year and related racial/ethnic disparities: a systematic review. Preventing chronic disease, 11.
[80] Wang, Y.C., Vine, S., Hsiao, A., Rundle, A. and Goldsmith, J., 2015. Weight-related behaviors when children are in school versus on summer breaks: does income matter?. *Journal of school health*, *85*(7), pp.458-466.

summer school holidays under normal circumstances among students of all socioeconomic status.[81] However, students of low socioeconomic status faced the greatest learning deficit regarding reading comprehension. The summer period can often be a lonely period for students, with increased levels of anxiety and depression due to the lack of socialisation and increased virtual engagement.[82] The research on student absenteeism also illustrates the relationship between learning and instructional time. The evidence indicates that the negative relationship between absenteeism and student outcomes becomes more intense the more school days a student misses.[83]

The school lockdowns that started in the spring of 2020 reduced instructional and learning time, which is known to impede student performance. These lockdowns had disparate impacts on different groups of students.[77] [84] [85] Academic learning loss was one of the most immediate and noticeable effects of school closures during the pandemic. With the sudden shift to remote learning, many students struggled to keep up with their studies, particularly due to the lack of regular guidance, immediate feedback, and hands-on support that in-person learning provides.[86] Research has also identified that remotely teaching all curricula is not feasible.[87]

Focusing on the foundation studies, mathematics and reading, according to a 2021 study by Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), students in Grades 3–8 scored 5-10 percentile points lower in math compared to students in the previous academic year, indicating that they learned only about 50% of the typical learning gains in maths during the pandemic.[88] Further, the study found that reading outcomes were less affected than maths but still significant, with students experiencing a 30% reduction in learning gains compared to a normal school year. In their 2021 study, McKinsey & Company reported that, on average, students globally were about five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading by the end of the 2020-2021 academic year compared to typical learning progress.[89]

Researchers in the US projected the effects of closures on student achievement trends. The results indicated that under all COVID-19 projections, compared with a typical academic year, students would likely not learn as much over the academic year and would likely lose more of those gains due to extended time out of school.[90] Further, students who did not receive remote instruction in the spring would begin the following autumn with approximately 63% to 68% of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year and with 37% to 50% of the learning gains in mathematics.[90]

While remote learning presents a challenge for all families, those in poorer households are at a greater disadvantage (lack of support due to parents' limited availability or resources, lack of access

[81] Stewart, H., Watson, N. and Campbell, M., 2018. The cost of school holidays for children from low income families. *Childhood*, *25*(4), pp.516-529.
[82] Twenge, J.M., Spitzberg, B.H. and Campbell, W.K., 2019. Less in-person social interaction with peers among US adolescents in the 21st century and links to loneliness. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 36(6), pp.1892-1913.
[83] Garcia, E. and Weiss, E., 2018. Student absenteeism: who misses school and how missing school matters for performance. Economic Policy Institute.
[84] Rajmil, L., Hjern, A., Boran, P., Gunnlaugsson, G., De Camargo, O.K. and Raman, S., 2021. Impact of lockdown and school closure on children's health and well-being during the first wave of COVID-19: a narrative review. *BMJ paediatrics open*, *5*(1).
[85] Vogelbacher, M. and Attig, M., 2022. Carrying the burden into the pandemic–Effects of social disparities on elementary students' parents' perception of supporting abilities and emotional stress during the COVID-19 Lockdown. *Frontiers in psychology*, *12*, p.750605.
[86] Kuntz, J. and Manokore, V., 2022. "I Did Not Sign Up For This": Student Experiences of the Rapid Shift from In-person to Emergency Virtual Remote Learning During the COVID Pandemic. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, *12*, p.6.
[87] Jolie, A. and Azoulay, A., 2020. Closing Schools Has Derailed the Lives of Kids All Over the World. Here's How We Can Help Them Keep Learning.
[88] Kuhfeld, M., Tarasawa, B., Johnson, A., Ruzek, E. and Lewis, K., 2020. Learning during COVID-19: Initial Findings on Students' Reading and Math Achievement and Growth. Brief. NWEA.
[89] Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J. and Viruleg, E., 2021. COVID-19 and education: An emerging K-shaped recovery. *McKinsey & Company*, *14*.
[90] Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., Tarasawa, B., Johnson, A., Ruzek, E. and Liu, J., 2020. Projecting the potential impact of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement. Educational Researcher, 49(8), pp.549-565.

to reliable internet, digital disparities, and lack of access to computer technology) and therefore at increased risk of falling further behind in school due to widening educational disparities.[91] [92] Students from lower-income families often lack access to reliable internet, computers, or quiet spaces conducive to studying, making it difficult for them to participate fully in remote lessons.[93] [94] The educational background and time available to assist their children with their education would vary significantly, with significant disparities evident in low-income families.[95] [96] [97]

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's (IEA) Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) data, an international study of reading (comprehension) achievement in 9-10 year olds, show that in 2016, 9% of 4th graders in all European countries did not have internet access, though this would likely have been less by 2020.[98] Further, 25% of children in the 21 European countries miss out on a quiet learning environment, ranging from 9% in Denmark to 49% in Italy. During school closures, however, between 2% (Finland) and 17% (Bulgaria) of 10-year-olds have fewer than 26 children's books to read and no access to reading with a digital device. During lockdown and for all European countries studied, just 6% of advantaged students lack sufficient access to reading material. In contrast, in 16 of the 21 countries examined, at least 10% and up to 24% of disadvantaged children lack access to suitable reading material.[98]

Furthermore, research suggests that any impacts of inequalities in time spent learning between poorer and richer children are likely to be compounded by disparities in learning resources available at home and those provided by schools.[95] In addition, children with disabilities face more problems with online learning because they require individualised education and personal care, which the schools may not be able to provide virtually, leading to added pressure for parents.[99] [100] The research identified that children with more severe developmental disabilities joined less than two hours of remote learning per day and had a decrease in their therapeutic services.[101]

In Ireland, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) published a report in 2024 on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children with special educational needs. The report found that the pandemic significantly disrupted these children's education, leading to challenges in accessing remote learning, reduced social interaction, and delays in skill development.[102] The lack of routine and support during school closures exacerbated difficulties for many students. Consequently, the

[91] Ijadi-Maghsoodi, R., Harrison, D., Kelman, A., Kataoka, S., Langley, A.K., Ramos, N., Cugley, G.M., Alquijay, M.A., Tate, K., Lester, P. and Mogil, C., 2020. Leveraging a public–public partnership in Los Angeles County to address COVID-19 for children, youth, and families in underresourced communities. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, *12*(5), p.457.
[92] Masonbrink, A.R. and Hurley, E., 2020. Advocating for children during the COVID-19 school closures. Pediatrics, 146(3).
[93] Basch, S., Covarrubias, R. and Wang, S.H., 2022. Minoritised students' experiences with pandemic-era remote learning inform ways of expanding access. Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology.
[94] Means, B., Peters, V., Neisler, J., Wiley, K. and Griffiths, R., 2021. Lessons from Remote Learning during COVID-19. Digital Promise.
[95] Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Costa Dias, M., Farquharson, C., Kraftman, L., Krutikova, S., Phimister, A. and Sevilla, A., 2020. Inequalities in children's experiences of home learning during the COVID-19 lockdown in England. Fiscal studies, 41(3), pp.653-683.
[96] Haderlein, S.K., Saavedra, A.R., Polikoff, M.S., Silver, D., Rapaport, A. and Garland, M., 2021. Disparities in educational access in the time of COVID: Evidence from a nationally representative panel of American families. *AERA open*, *7*, p.23328584211041350.
[97] Chen, C.Y.C., Byrne, E. and Vélez, T., 2022. Impact of the 2020 pandemic of COVID-19 on Families with School-aged Children in the United States: Roles of Income Level and Race. Journal of Family Issues, 43(3), pp.719-740.
[98] Blaskó, Z. and Schnepf, S.V., 2020. Educational inequalities in Europe and physical school closures during Covid-19. Fairness Policy Brief Series, 4, p.2020.
[99] Valicenti-McDermott, M., O'Neil, M., Morales-Lara, A., Seijo, R., Fried, T. and Shulman, L., 2022. Remote learning experience for children with developmental disabilities during COVID-19 pandemic in an ethnically diverse community. *Journal of Child Neurology*, *37*(1), pp.50-55.
[100] Dickinson, H., Smith, C., Yates, S. and Tani, M., 2023. The importance of social supports in education: survey findings from students with disability and their families during COVID-19. *Disability & Society*, *38*(8), pp.1304-1326.
[101] Valicenti-McDermott, M., O'Neil, M., Morales-Lara, A., Seijo, R., Fried, T. and Shulman, L., 2022. Remote learning experience for children with developmental disabilities during COVID-19 pandemic in an ethnically diverse community. *Journal of Child Neurology*, *37*(1), pp.50-55.
[102] Blundell, R., Cribb, J., McNally, S., Warwick, R. and Xu, X., 2021. Inequalities in education, skills, and incomes in the UK: The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Institute for Fiscal Studies*, pp.1-42.

pandemic may have deepened educational inequalities, with some students advancing while others were left behind.[103]

In addition to providing knowledge and skills, schools offer an environment to promote healthy functioning and well-being among children and adolescents.[104] Schools offer a setting away from home for students to acquire social and emotional skills and behaviours that translate into positive real-life health and personal outcomes.[105] School closure and home quarantine during the pandemic were identified as causes of anxiety and loneliness among the young. They had a negative effect on children's behaviour (e.g., sleep timing and quality) and psychological well-being (e.g., emotion regulation and self-regulation capacity), with some variation according to the mothers' working status.[106]

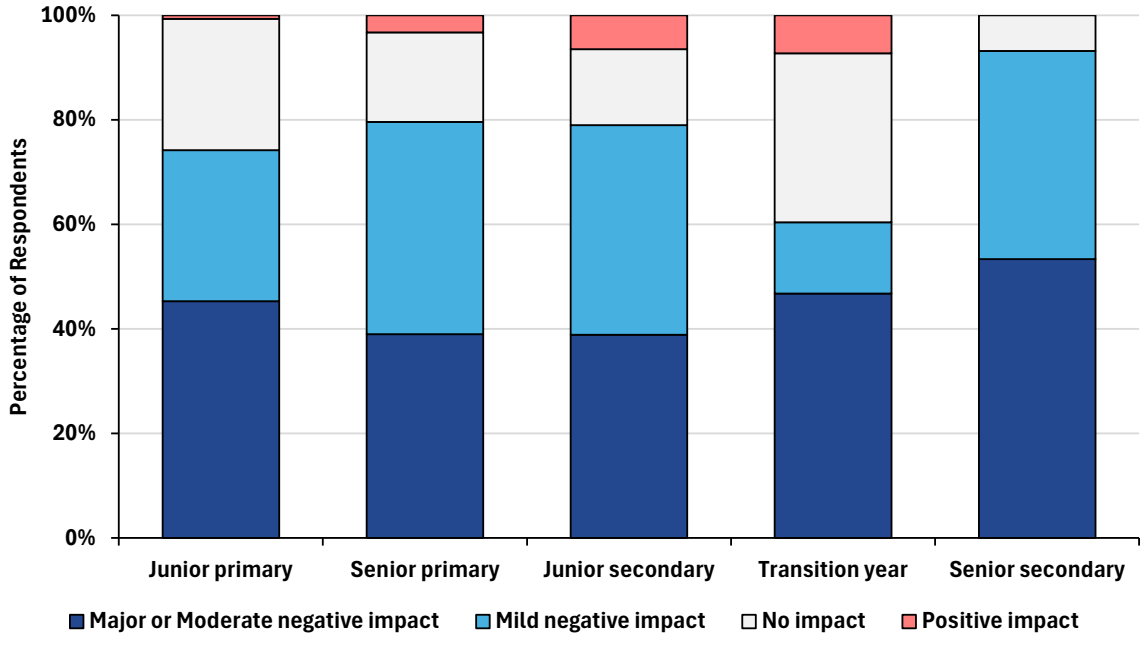
School closures also contributed to increased anxiety among children and loneliness in young people, along with a significant increase in symptoms of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), stress, insomnia, emotional disturbance, irritability, sleep and appetite disturbance child stress, sadness, frustration, indiscipline, and hyperactivity.[107] [108] Further, schools play an active role in promoting health-conscious behaviour among children and adolescents.[109] The COVID-19-related school closure and lockdown for several months resulted in children and adolescents restricting their movement, which may have led to increased physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour, which was contributed by an increase in daily screen time.[110]

6.3 CSO Impact of School Closures on Social Development and Learning

The CSO asked responding adults with children in primary and secondary school to rate the impact (if any) that being away from school since March has had on their child's learning and social development. Based on the data for 2020, the figure below indicates that school closures had a significant negative impact on social development, particularly for older students. The Senior Secondary level experienced the most substantial negative effect, with 53.3% reporting a major or moderate negative impact. Transition-year students also felt a considerable impact, with 46.7% experiencing major or moderate negative effects. Junior and Senior Primary school students also experienced a negative impact, with 45.3% and 39.0%, respectively, reporting a major or moderate negative impact.

[103] Blundell, R., Cribb, J., McNally, S., Warwick, R. and Xu, X., 2021. Inequalities in education, skills, and incomes in the UK: The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Institute for Fiscal Studies*, pp.1-42.
[104] Pulimeno, M., Piscitelli, P., Colazzo, S., Colao, A. and Miani, A., 2020. School is an ideal setting to promote health and well-being among young people. *Health promotion perspectives*, *10*(4), p.316.
[105] Frey, N., Fisher, D. and Smith, D., 2019. *All learning is social and emotional: Helping students develop essential skills for the classroom and beyond*. Ascd.
[106] Di Giorgio, E., Di Riso, D., Mioni, G. and Cellini, N., 2021. The interplay between mothers' and children's behavioural and psychological factors during COVID-19: An Italian study. *European child & adolescent psychiatry*, *30*(9), pp.1401-1412.
[107] Petretto, D.R., Masala, I. and Masala, C., 2020. School closure and children in the outbreak of COVID-19. Clinical practice and epidemiology in mental health: CP & EMH, 16, p.189.
[108] Loades, M.E., Chatburn, E., Higson-Sweeney, N., Reynolds, S., Shafran, R., Brigden, A., Linney, C., McManus, M.N., Borwick, C. and Crawley, E., 2020. Rapid systematic review: the impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents in the context of COVID-19. Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 59(11), pp.1218-1239.
[109] Pulimeno, M., Piscitelli, P., Colazzo, S., Colao, A. and Miani, A., 2020. School as ideal setting to promote health and wellbeing among young people. *Health promotion perspectives*, *10*(4), p.316.
[110] Margaritis, I., Houdart, S., El Ouadrhiri, Y., Bigard, X., Vuillemin, A. and Duché, P., 2020. How to deal with COVID-19 epidemic-related lockdown physical inactivity and sedentary increase in youth? Adaptation of Anses' benchmarks. Archives of public health, 78, pp.1-6.

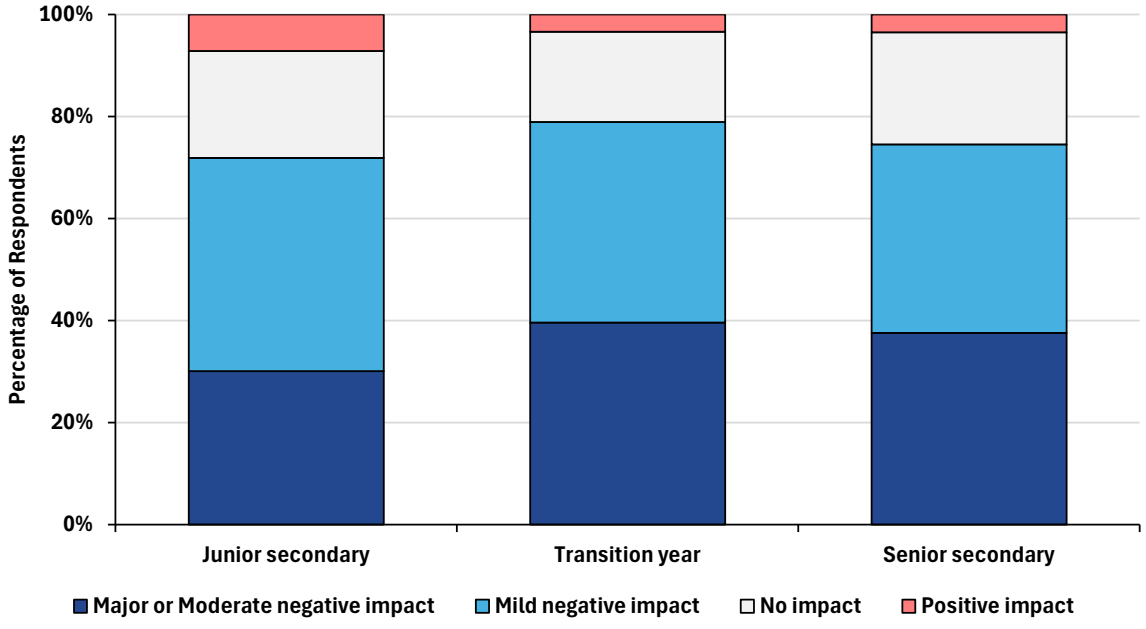
Figure 6.3: The Social Impact of Enforced School Closures, 2020



Source: Central Statistics Office

Figure 6.4 illustrates the social impact of enforced school closures for 2021, although the data is only available for secondary school students. Compared to 2020, students in 2021 experienced more mild negative impacts, although over 70% of students identified negative impacts (ranging from major to mild) over the period. Major negative impacts were highest for the transition year cohort. Transition year is often marketed as a year of key social development for students, including work experience and team-building experiences.

Figure 6.4: The Social Impact of Enforced School Closures, 2021

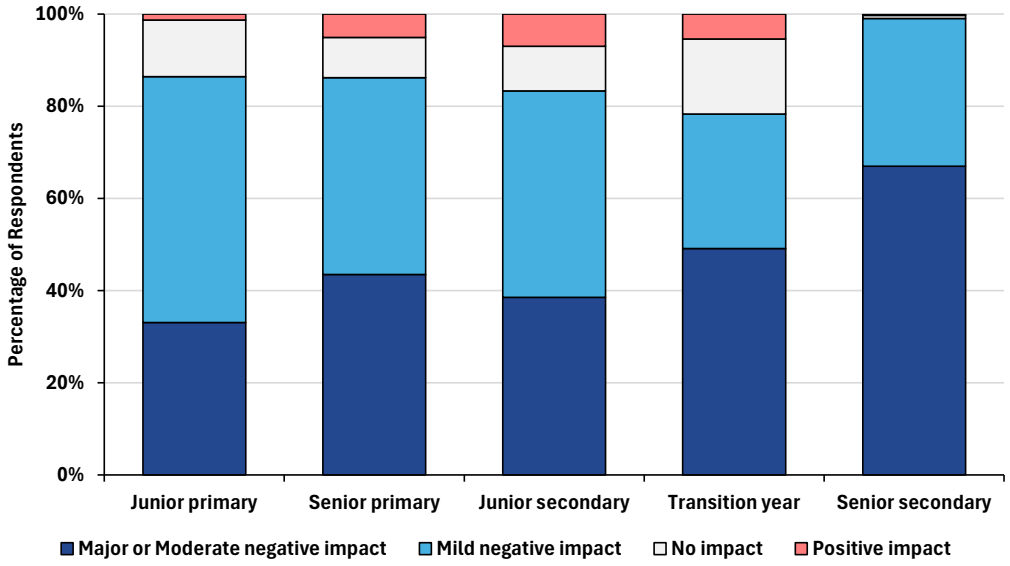


Source: Central Statistics Office

Learning Development

Across all student types, there were significant major and moderate negative impacts on student's learning. Figure 6.5 illustrates the impact of school closures on students' learning, as identified by parents. Over two-thirds of students in the senior secondary cycle, i.e. in the leaving certificate cycle, experienced major or moderate negative learning impacts, and almost a third experienced mild negative impacts. Similarly, almost half of students in transition year cited the same, most likely due to missed opportunities for work experience in conjunction with school learning. For junior secondary students, 45% experienced mild negative impacts, with this cohort incorporating students from the 1st - 3rd year, i.e. the junior certificate cycle. Within primary schools, 44% of senior students cited major or moderate negative learning impacts, indicating significant adverse impacts for younger students.

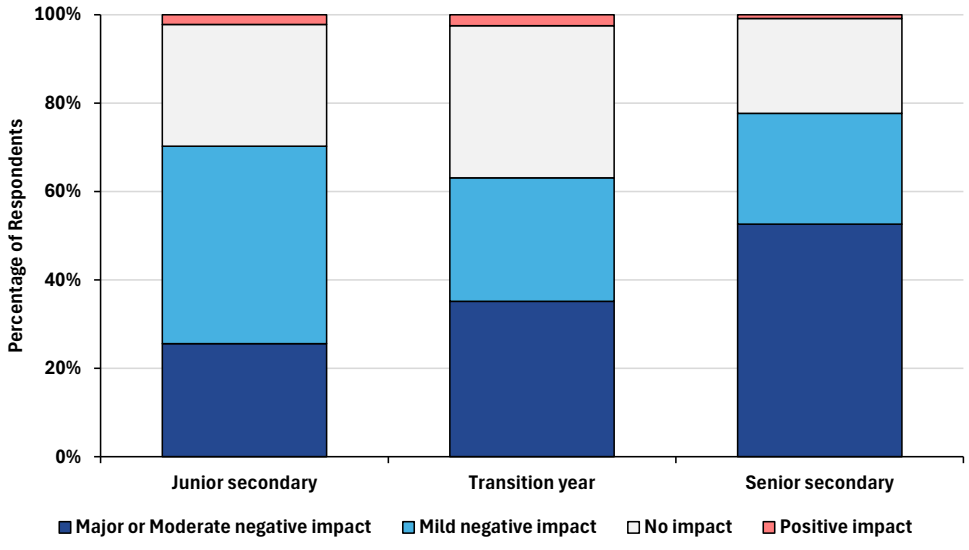
Figure 6.5: The Learning Impact of Enforced School Closures, 2020



Source: Central Statistics Office

Compared to 2020, fewer students across secondary schools cited major or moderate negative impacts in 2021. Figure 6.6 presents the results of the school closures on students' learning in 2021. For junior secondary school, the majority of students (44%) cited a mild negative impact, followed by no impact or a major negative impact.

Figure 6.6: The Learning Impact of Enforced School Closures, 2021



Source: Central Statistics Office

As the research cited above shows, the cost of the non-opening of schools, in terms of various aspects of student welfare, is very significant. This should be compared with the cost per day of the support, which averaged around €1 per student per day. An alternative option would have been to reopen schools without providing sufficient funding for safe reopening. It is beyond the scope of this evaluation to consider the full epidemiological impact of reopening schools with lower levels of investment in sanitation and distancing supports. However, it can be reasonably supposed that this would have had a significant impact on the spread of COVID-19, with resultant increases in mortality and illness impacts, including on students themselves.

6.4 Extent to Which Supports Reflected Needs

Given the nature of the intervention, the provision of support on a per-student basis reflected the fact that the requirement for social distancing and sanitary measures was uniform across students. A higher capitation rate was applied for students with SEN for enhanced cleaning and PPE, which aligned with best practice recommendations. This enhanced rate was implemented for several reasons:

i. Due to their specific needs, students in special classes often require more support and closer supervision. The increased risk of transmission in these settings, where students may have complex medical conditions or require direct physical assistance, justified higher funding for personal protective equipment (PPE) and hygiene supplies.

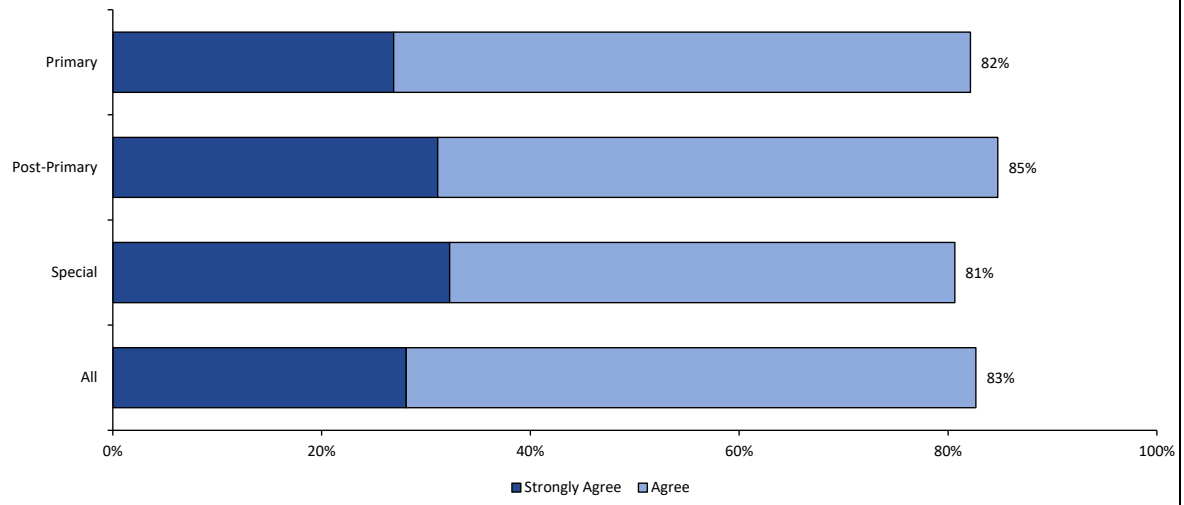
ii. Special classes typically have smaller student-to-teacher ratios and require additional staff, including Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). With increased health and safety measures during COVID-19, schools must ensure sufficient staffing levels to maintain safe practices, including PPE.

iii. Students with SEN are often more vulnerable to the impacts of disruptions in education, especially during crises like a pandemic. The decision to provide higher capitation for special classes was also rooted in a commitment to inclusivity and ensuring that these students had access to education and support during a challenging time. The increased funding aimed to mitigate educational disadvantages due to the pandemic, allowing special classes to maintain operations and provide essential services.

iv. The higher capitation for special classes during the pandemic aligned with existing funding frameworks that recognised the additional needs of students with SEN. This approach ensured continuity in support for these students and extended the commitment to provide adequate resources, which had already been established prior to the pandemic.

Figure 6.7 identified survey respondents' views when asked if the allocation of resources to their school reflected their school's needs. The survey data indicates a positive perception of resource allocation across different school types, with high levels of approval of the supports in reflecting needs. Post-primary schools agreed the most that the supports reflected their needs, with 85% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that resources reflected their needs. This is closely followed by Primary schools at 82% and Special schools at 81%.

Figure 6.7: Survey Responses Detailing the Extent to Which Supports Reflected Needs



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

Indecon's consultation with school representative bodies also reported that the supports were needed based on needs. Many reported that it revealed more long-run, deep seated needs which are at risk of remerging now that school COVID-19 supports are removed. For example, a number of representative bodies reported that the REACT-EU supports sustained much more regular and deeper school cleaning, though that there was now a risk of reversion to the previous standards which were seen as inadequate.

6.5 Cost-effectiveness of supports

An important aspect of this evaluation is to consider the cost-effectiveness of the support provided. It is important to understand the extent to which the programme was typified by deadweight. As set out in the public spending code, deadweight occurs when public expenditure is incurred to achieve benefits that would have been achieved in the absence of the project scheme being funded.

To arrive at an assessment of deadweight, it is helpful to understand the financial position of schools in Ireland and their ability to fund the materials needed to re-open schools safely from their own resources. In Ireland, the Department of Education provides primary funding for schools' operational costs, including teacher salaries and essential services, as well as capital projects. This state funding is the main source of income for most schools, with the majority being publicly funded and falling under various forms of patronage, such as the Catholic Church or Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Despite this, schools largely rely on state funding to cover their operating budgets.

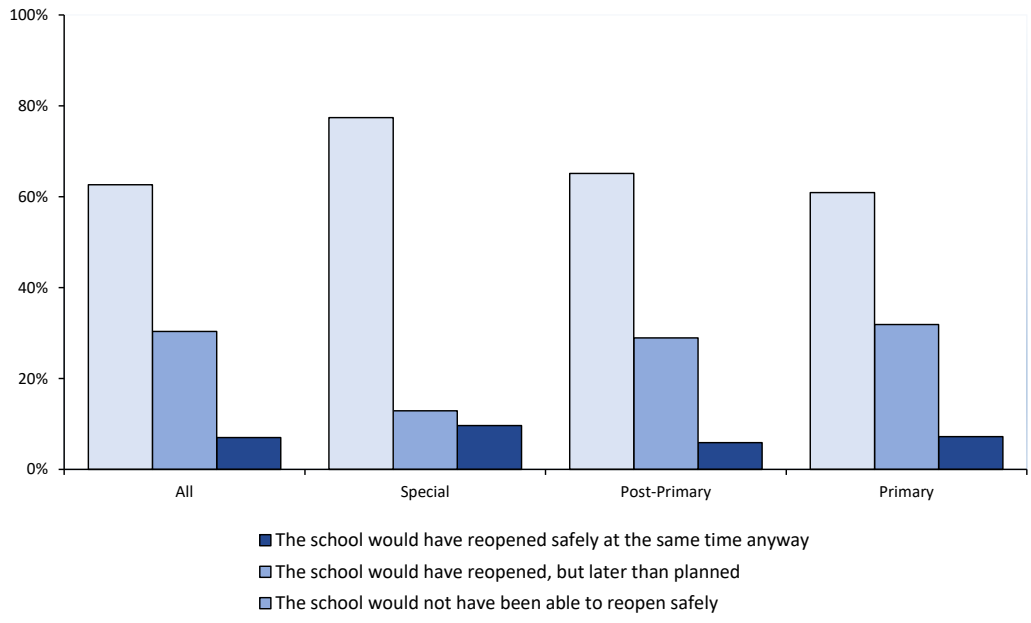
In addition to government support, many schools seek voluntary contributions from parents to help cover shortfalls, especially for day-to-day operational expenses. The extent and necessity of these contributions vary depending on factors like location, school size, and the socio-economic status (SES) of the student body. According to research from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), 87% of voluntary secondary schools rely on parental contributions, which are typically used to fund

essential operational costs. However, schools under community, comprehensive, or vocational patronage tend to receive more centralised state support. Education expenditure in 2021 as a percentage of GNI* stood at 5.2%, which is higher than the OECD average of 4.9%.

Despite this, funding remains an issue for many schools. Irish schools generally lack significant alternative revenue streams, leaving them with limited reserves. Fundraising activities are often inconsistent and modest, relying heavily on local community support and volunteer efforts. Only a small number of private or semi-private schools in Ireland receive less state funding, and many of these also operate on restrictive budgets with little room for flexibility or savings. Financial reports from representative bodies, such as the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the Joint Managerial Body (JMB) for secondary schools, highlight the difficulties faced by schools in balancing their budgets without incurring debts. Given the limitations of their funding sources, any reserves that do exist are generally modest and earmarked for immediate contingencies.

Survey evidence supports the contention that deadweight was likely to have been very low in the case of these supports. Figure 6.8 identifies survey responses indicating what staff and students believe would have happened in the absence of support from the REACT-EU fund. The majority of respondents stated that the school would not have been able to reopen safely, with the highest rate for special schools (77%).

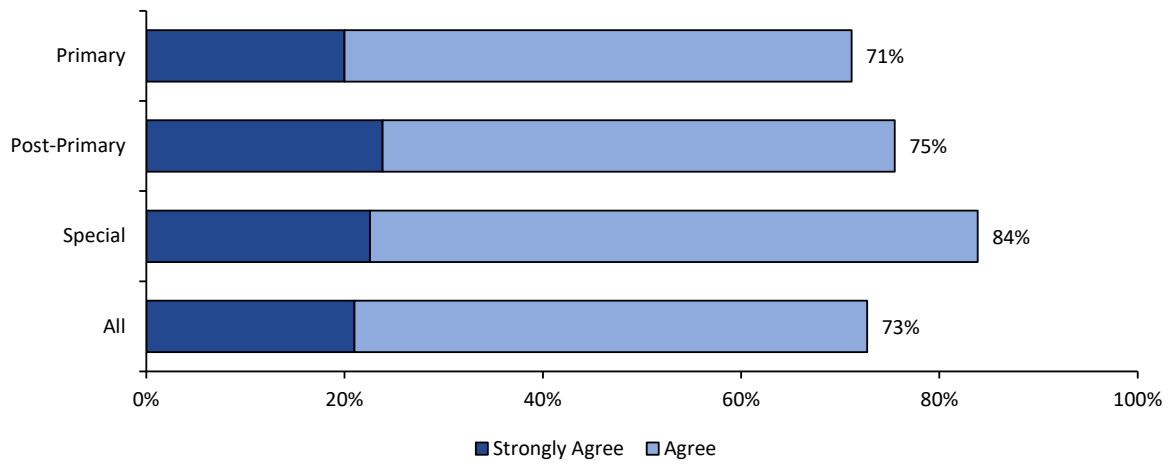
Figure 6.8: Deadweight of the REACT-EU Fund



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

Schools were also asked about the cost-effectiveness of the support provided (see Figure 6.9). Across all school types, 73% of schools identified that the supports were cost-effective, with the highest level of agreement within special schools.

Figure 6.9: Survey Responses Detailing the Cost-effectiveness of Supports



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to explain their opinions regarding the cost-effectiveness of the support in more detail. The next table shows a small, representative sample of quotes from schools. The financial support provided to schools during the pandemic was important in creating safe environments, as it allowed schools to cover the costs of essential items such as hand sanitisers, masks, screens, air filters, and additional cleaning services. Respondents noted that these grants alleviated financial worries, enabling schools to focus on implementing health and safety measures effectively. However, several challenges were highlighted in the procurement process, with concerns raised about the overpricing of PPE and inefficiencies that led to wasted expenditure.

Some respondents emphasised that the decentralised procurement process added to the workload and stress on schools, suggesting that centralised sourcing by the Department of Education could have reduced costs and streamlined operations. Additionally, schools noted that as they became familiar with procurement, they found better and more cost-effective solutions independently. These reflections highlight both the value of financial support in ensuring safety and the need for improved efficiency and oversight in resource allocation during crises.

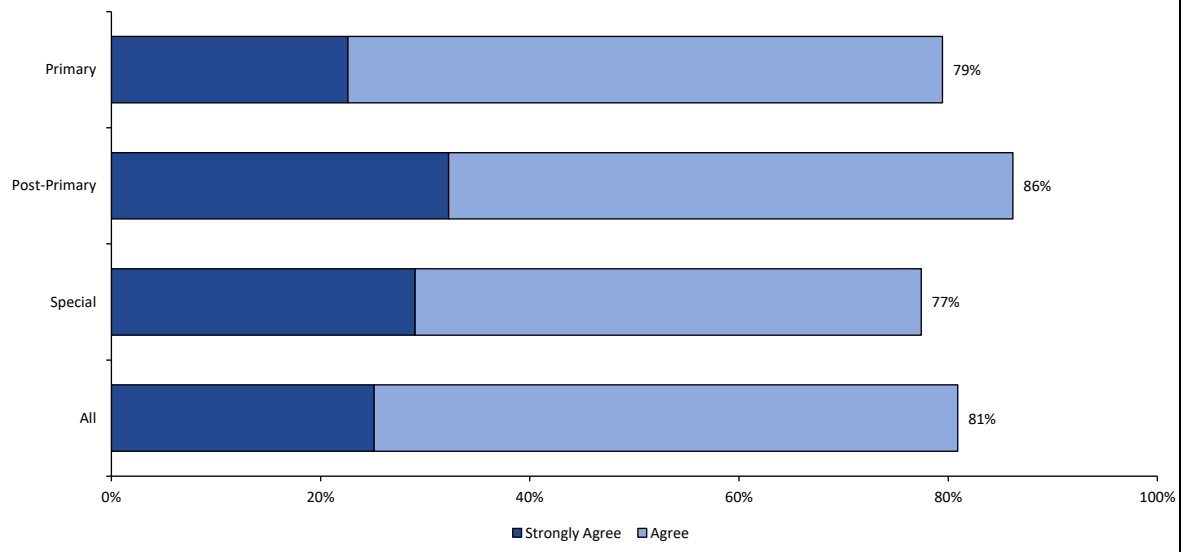
Table 6.2: Open-ended Comment on The Cost-effectiveness of the Supports
"There was a lot of over buying of PPE and overpricing of PPE, and this did not result in value for money for the Government."
"The Covid grants provided the security of not being worried about enough school finances to cover costs, and therefore, the emphasis could be put on creating a safe environment for the school community."
"The procurement process was burdensome, and once we had become familiar with what we were doing, we found better and cheaper products elsewhere."
"Schools needed the additional funding to cover the costs of hand sanitiser, masks, screens, air filters and the additional cleaning required. Without the funding, schools would not have been safe places to work or safe places for children."
"The cost of supports was inflated due to demand. Supports should have been sourced and distributed by DE instead of individual schools all having to do the same thing. It would have lessened the workload and stress."
Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

6.6 Timeliness of Supports

All grant payments were made before the school year commenced to allow funds to be available for schools. The grants for enhanced cleaning, PPE, and enhanced supervision were in instalments during the school year, based on each school term. The first of the capitation grants was issued in mid-August 2020 to cover the period to December 2020. As the first instalment of the 2020/21 academic year was provided before the start of the term, the timing ensured that adequate time was given for schools to source PPE, enhanced cleaning protection, including increased cleaning staff, and enhanced supervision, again including additional staffing resources. A further round of capitation funding was provided in early January each academic year to support schools in continuing to operate safely and minimise the risk of the spread of COVID-19 during Term two. Finally, the capitation was provided in the middle of June for the third term of the academic year.

The figure below identifies survey respondents' views on the timeliness of support. As shown, across all school types, 81% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the support was timely, with the highest rate of agreement in post-primary and primary schools.

Figure 6.10: Survey Reponses on the Timeliness of Supports



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to explain their opinions regarding the timeliness of the support. The next table shows a small, representative sample of quotes from schools. Many respondents acknowledged that the financial and logistical support ultimately helped ensure a safe reopening, with some describing the assistance as timely, necessary, and well-targeted. These supports were particularly crucial for schools with vulnerable pupils, as they enabled improved hygiene standards and allowed schools to prioritise the health and safety of their communities.

However, several respondents expressed concerns about delays in the initial deployment of support, which placed significant strain on schools. Late communication of plans, often during summer holidays, added to the challenges faced by principals, who were frequently left to manage responsibilities and planning in isolation. This lack of timely support increased stress for school leaders, particularly in addressing the fears and anxieties of staff, parents, and pupils. While the efforts of the Department of Education were recognised and appreciated, the feedback highlights the need for the proactive and streamlined delivery of support in future crises.

Table 6.3: Open-ended Comment on Timeliness of Supports
"While the later supports arrived in a timely manner, the initial deployment was late and caused a large amount of panic. While I understand the government had to allocate funds to schools at the same time, the delay resulted in a large amount of funding for all schools looking for resources within a very short window before school reopened."
"The Circulars/plans often came out late or in the middle of the summer holidays, and this greatly contributed to the difficulty faced by Principals at the time."
"I feel the support provided to reopen schools was excellent, timely, and well-targeted by all schools."
"The health and safety of our pupils was of paramount importance during our reopening periods, especially as we have a number of pupils who have extremely compromised immune systems. Our school simply could not have reopened without the timely financial support received."
"The supports were not always given in a timely or well-thought-out manner. Much of the responsibility and planning was left to the individual school, and given the context of isolation that existed, that usually meant one person, the principal, bearing the majority of the burden."
"The supports were timely and necessary. They helped improve hygiene levels in the school with every [class] getting cleaned each evening."
"Principals had to deal with the anxiety and fear of staff, parents & pupils, and the support that came from the DES was not enough or timely."
"As a school leader, I have always acknowledged the support, financial and otherwise, which was provided in a timely manner by the Dept to meet the needs of a crisis which has so many imponderables."
Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

6.7 Summary of Key Findings

This section reviewed the efficiency of the fund. A summary of the key findings of this section is as follows:

- The largest portion of COVID-19 funding was directed towards PPE, followed by enhanced cleaning and supervision. Primary schools received the largest share of total funding, with allocations in 2020/21 (2021/22) amounting to €78.5 (€76.5) million compared to €41.3 (€42.8) million for voluntary post-primary schools and €13 (€13.5) million for community and comprehensive schools.
- The average cost of safely reopening was calculated at €0.66 per school day for primary schools and €1.26 for post-primary schools, illustrating resource distribution based on operational needs and school-specific structures.
- Survey results showed high satisfaction with how resources matched schools' needs, with 85% agreement in post-primary schools, 82% in primary schools, and 81% in special schools. The slightly lower agreement among special schools indicates unique challenges due to complex needs.
- Schools in Ireland generally have limited resources and rely heavily on state funding for day-to-day costs, and they usually have very limited reserves. Schools, especially special schools

(77%), expressed that reopening would not have been possible without the support of the REACT-EU fund, underscoring low levels of deadweight.

— Across school types, 81% of respondents agreed that the timing of funding was effective, with grants provided ahead of each school term to ensure preparedness with necessary safety measures.

— There is a large body of academic research which indicates a range of damages to students from extended periods of school closure. Generally, these studies show that students of low socioeconomic status face the greatest learning deficit.

— School closure and home quarantine during the pandemic were identified as causes of anxiety and loneliness among the young. They had a negative effect on children's behaviour and psychological well-being, with some variation according to the mothers' working status.

— School closures also contributed to increased anxiety among children and loneliness in young people, along with a significant increase in symptoms of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), stress, insomnia, emotional disturbance, irritability, sleep and appetite disturbance child stress, sadness, frustration, indiscipline, and hyperactivity.

7 Impact of the Fund

7.1 Introduction

Section seven examines the fund's impact, including whether the supports have an impact on school reopenings, how and why this occurred, and how other factors may have contributed. Indecon also explored variations in perceptions across provinces, DEIS and non-DEIS schools, and different school types (primary, post-primary, and special schools), identifying key contextual factors that influenced the efficiency and effectiveness of the supports. This chapter presents both the statistical findings and representative qualitative comments, offering a holistic understanding of the role the fund played in the reopening of schools.

7.2 Schools' Views on the Impact of the Fund

Indecon's consultation with school representative bodies indicated that the fund had a substantial impact on schools' ability to reopen, and emphasised that it would not have been possible without the support received. The direct survey of schools (as shown in Figure 5.1), across all schools, 95% of respondents identified that the support achieved the planned aim of allowing for the reopening of the schools. Thus, the survey identified the significant positive impact of the fund on school reopenings. Further, survey respondents were also asked to explain their opinion regarding the impact of support on school reopenings. The next table shows a small, representative sample of quotes from schools.

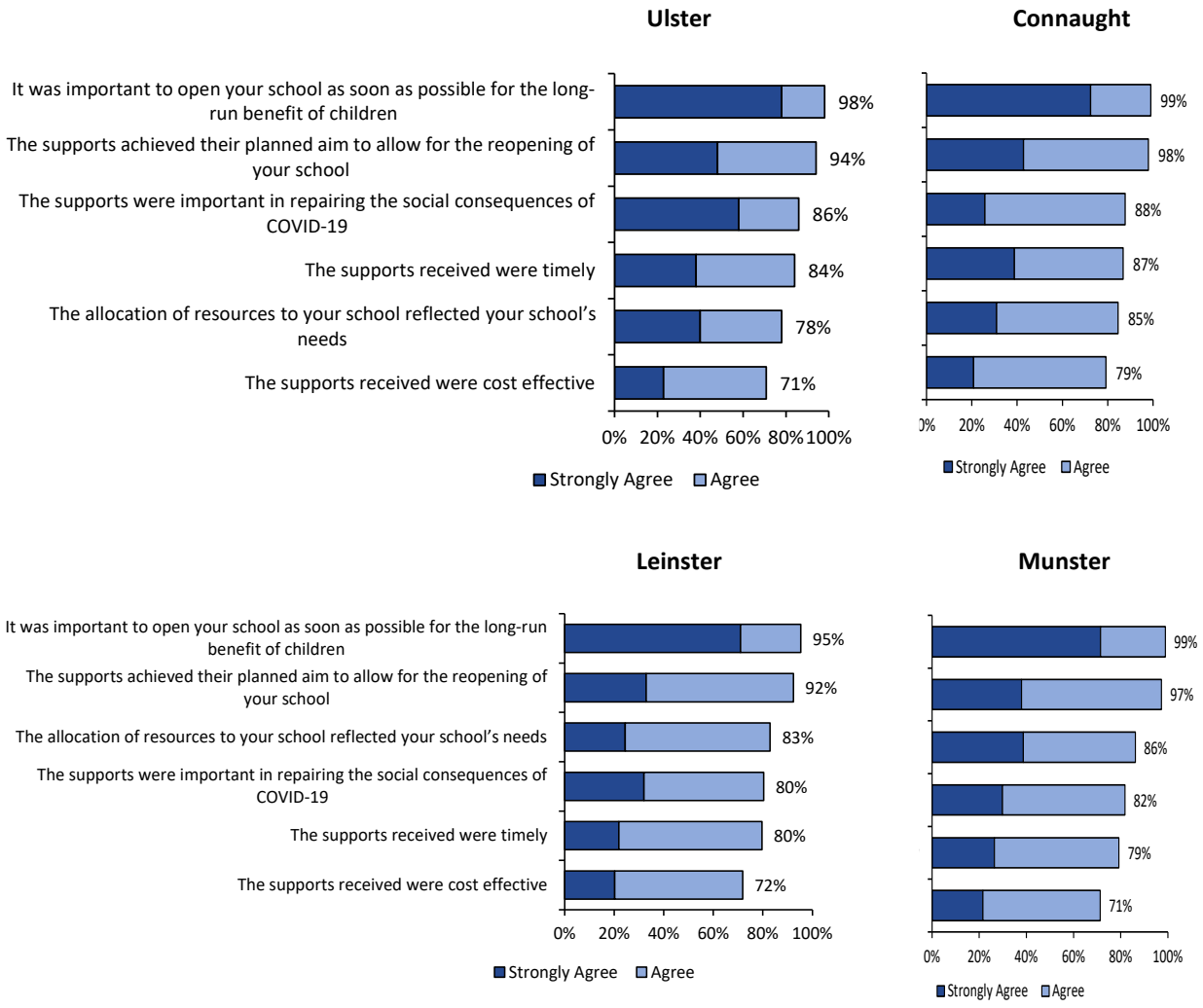
The COVID capital grants provided to schools were widely regarded as essential in enabling safe reopening during the pandemic. Schools used these grants for significant projects, such as creating new teaching spaces that adhered to social distancing requirements. Additional resources for constant heating and ventilation ensured students remained warm despite open windows, a measure critical for maintaining safety. Enhanced cleaning measures were also highlighted as important, with many respondents emphasising that such high levels of cleanliness should be maintained. The grants not only facilitated the reopening of schools but also supported their continued operation during subsequent lockdowns, helping to safeguard both students and staff.

Table 7.1: Open-ended Comment on the Impact of Supports
"Covid capital grants were hugely helpful in reopening the schools, allowing for large scale projects to adjust/partition/create new teaching spaces that were suitable for social distancing."
"With the procedures in place then, when a school did reopen, it helped people to feel safer. "
"The enhanced cleaning was essential to the re-opening of schools. This level of cleanliness should be maintained in schools; however, we are not in a position to do so as the enhanced cleaning grant has been withdrawn."
"I believe that the grants were essential and were used in our school to equip us very well to help keep children and staff as safe as possible. Schools in Ireland continued to work through the second lockdown when the rest of the country (apart from essential services) were in lock-down safely at home."
"The resources were so important to reopen schools and equally important to keep them open. These resources were very much appreciated. The extra resources afforded during Covid for constant heating and ventilation were really important as they ensured that students were warm despite the social distance and the open windows."
Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

Differences in the geographical makeup of regions could potentially result in differences in the impact of support. In rural provinces like Connacht and parts of Ulster, schools may have faced greater logistical challenges in implementing support, such as hiring additional staff for cleaning or accessing sufficient quantities of sanitisers and personal protective equipment. These challenges may have affected how effective and timely the supports were perceived in these areas. In contrast, schools in more urbanised provinces like Leinster and Munster may have had better access to resources and infrastructure to implement reopening plans efficiently. Urban schools often benefit from economies of scale, proximity to suppliers, and established support networks, which could lead to higher satisfaction with the support received. Additionally, provincial variations in the impact of the pandemic, such as differences in infection rates and the social consequences of closures, may have shaped how the effectiveness of support was judged. For example, provinces with a greater reliance on in-person schooling due to weaker remote learning infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, may have placed higher importance on the timeliness and adequacy of reopening supports.

However, Indecon's survey indicates only minor differences in the responses given by region (as shown in Figure 7.1). Further, when the highest level of agreement orders the responses, the same structure is followed across all provinces, with the highest agreement for the statements "it was important to open your school as soon as possible for the long-run benefit of children" and "the supports achieved their planned aim to allow for the reopening of your school."

Figure 7.1: Survey Responses on the Effectiveness and Efficiency of Supports to Reopen Schools By Province



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

7.3 Ireland's Response to COVID-19 in the EU Context

Focusing on the broader EU context, respondents were asked to describe Ireland's COVID-19 response in the context of other European countries. As shown in Table 7.2, survey results varied by school type, reflecting the different priorities and challenges faced by each sector. Post-primary schools had the highest proportion of respondents (31%) perceiving that Ireland was more focused on reopening compared to the rest of Europe.

Table 7.2: Perceptions of Ireland's Focus on School Reopening Compared to Europe by School Type				
	Primary	**Post-Primary**	**Special**	**All**
Ireland had less focus on reopening schools than the rest of Europe	7%	5%	0%	7%
Ireland had the same focus on reopening schools as the rest of Europe	36%	37%	33%	36%
Ireland was more focused on reopening schools than the rest of Europe	19%	31%	23%	22%
I don't know	37%	26%	43%	35%
Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey				

Focusing on the importance of context, Indecon presents respondents' views on the same question across DEIS and non-DEIS schools (Table 7.3) and across provinces (Table 7.4). As identified in Table 7.3, there were only small differences in perceptions of Ireland's focus on school reopening between respondents associated with DEIS and non-DEIS schools.

Table 7.3: Perceptions of Ireland's Focus on School Reopening Compared to Europe by DEIS Indicator		
	DEIS	**Non-DEIS**
Ireland had less focus on reopening schools than the rest of Europe	7%	6%
Ireland had the same focus on reopening schools as the rest of Europe	32%	38%
Ireland was more focused on reopening schools than the rest of Europe	25%	21%
I don't know	37%	35%
Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey		

Table 7.4 highlights regional differences in perceptions of Ireland's focus on reopening schools compared to the rest of Europe. A very small proportion of respondents across provinces felt that Ireland had less focus on reopening schools than Europe. This consistency across regions suggests broad agreement that Ireland's focus was not significantly less than that of Europe.

Table 7.4: Perceptions of Ireland's Focus on School Reopening Compared to Europe, by Province				
	Ulster	**Connacht**	**Leinster**	**Munster**
Ireland had less focus on reopening schools than the rest of Europe	6%	8%	6%	6%
Ireland had the same focus on reopening schools as the rest of Europe	36%	35%	38%	37%
Ireland was more focused on reopening schools than the rest of Europe	20%	20%	21%	22%
I don't know	38%	37%	35%	35%
Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey				

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to explain their opinions regarding how/why changes occurred and whether the Irish context made a difference. Survey respondents highlighted a range of factors influencing perceptions of Ireland's approach to school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many praised Ireland's cautious and safety-focused approach, emphasising that although schools may have reopened slower than in other countries, the measures ensured safety and were ultimately effective. Respondents noted the importance of additional funding provided during the crisis, particularly for cleaning, supervision, and learning resources, which were deemed critical in ensuring a safe return to classrooms.

However, challenges were also identified, such as Ireland's high teacher-to-student ratio, which complicated efforts to reopen safely, and the lack of reliable broadband in rural areas, which heightened the need for schools to reopen physically. While some believed reopening should have occurred sooner, others commended the government and the Department of Education for their preparation and support, describing Ireland's response as reasonable and effective under difficult and unprecedented circumstances. Overall, the funding and support provided during the pandemic were widely appreciated despite some logistical and infrastructural challenges.

Table 7.5: Open-ended Comment on the Importance of the Context for the Impact of the Fund
"Ireland may have opened slower than other countries, but it did do it safely, and this is very important. I think we actually did a great job of it."
"Ireland took the COVID-19 crisis very seriously and took every precaution to keep vulnerable people safe. The COVID crisis was the first time that schools actually received the kind of funding that they needed in Ireland, and it was great to have money to spend on safety and learning resources for the first time."
"Classroom Teacher: Student Ratio one of the highest in the EU, hugely affecting the safe return to classrooms in comparison to other countries."
"In a small rural 3-teacher school, the space to provide an isolation room/area was non-existent, small temporary rental or purchased sheds/portacabins or similar emergency accommodation would have been a valuable help in the circumstances."
"The additional funding towards sanitiser/cleaning was very important and appreciated, it did not always cover the spend, particularly with respect to cleaning."
"The extra funding for cleaning and supervision made the greatest difference in keeping people safe."
"I think in Ireland we should have re-opened even part-time in May or June 2020 and get kids back to school sooner. It is easy to know this now."
"The absence of high-quality broadband fibre in rural Ireland was also a huge factor in the necessity for us, as a school, to reopen."
"I would be of the opinion that Ireland acted in a reasonable [manner] when it came to reopening schools and that the supports provided helped with the process."
"The support of the department and preparation by the Irish Government were excellent. Ireland did a great job in very difficult and new circumstances for all."
Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

7.4 Summary of Key Findings

This section examined the impact of the supports. A summary of the key findings are as follows:

- 95% of survey respondents agreed that the supports achieved their planned aim of allowing schools to reopen safely, highlighting the fund's success in addressing reopening challenges.
- Respondents appreciated grants for enhanced cleaning, ventilation, and capital projects, which created safer environments and provided long-term benefits for schools.
- Special schools catering to more vulnerable populations placed greater importance on reopening and were more likely to perceive Ireland as prioritising schools compared to Europe.
- Respondents emphasised the importance of maintaining funding levels for cleaning and safety measures, highlighting concerns about the withdrawal of grants.
- While some respondents believed reopening could have been faster, many praised Ireland's cautious and safety-focused approach as well as the government's preparation and support under unprecedented circumstances.

8 Inclusiveness and Non-discrimination

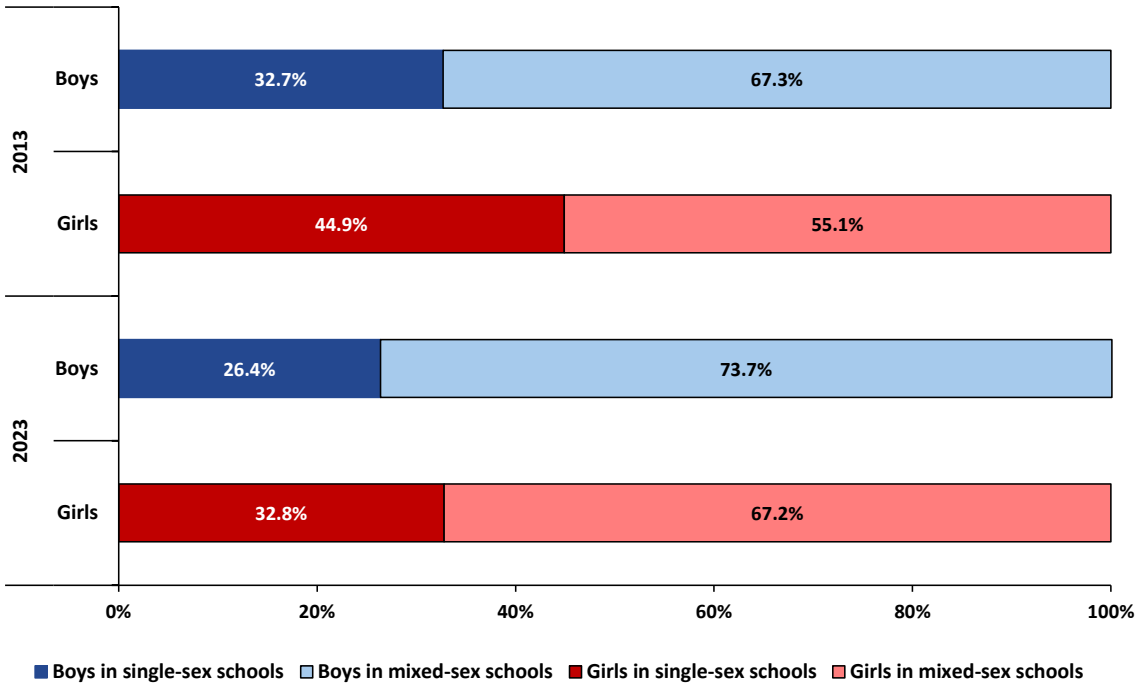
8.1 Introduction

Article 1(12) of the REACT-EU Regulation mandates that evaluations of the use of REACT-EU resources must, assess inclusiveness and non-discrimination, including from a gender perspective. This section examines how the supports provided under this framework addressed inclusiveness and non-discrimination, particularly in relation to gender, disadvantaged schools, and students with special educational needs (SEN). By analysing survey responses, statistical data, and qualitative feedback, this review highlights the impacts of these supports and the extent to which they met the goals of fostering equity and access in education.

8.2 Gender

The majority of Irish schools are co-ed, and, as such, financial support for the safe re-opening of schools can be expected to have been aimed at both genders equally. The percentage of girls and boys attending same-sex post-primary schools has decreased in the last 10 years—in 2013/14, 44.9% of girls and 32.7% of boys were in same-sex schools, though this has now fallen to 32.8% and 26.3%, respectively. This is shown in the figure below.

Figure 8.1: Post-primary enrolments by school type, by sex, 2013/14 and 2023/24

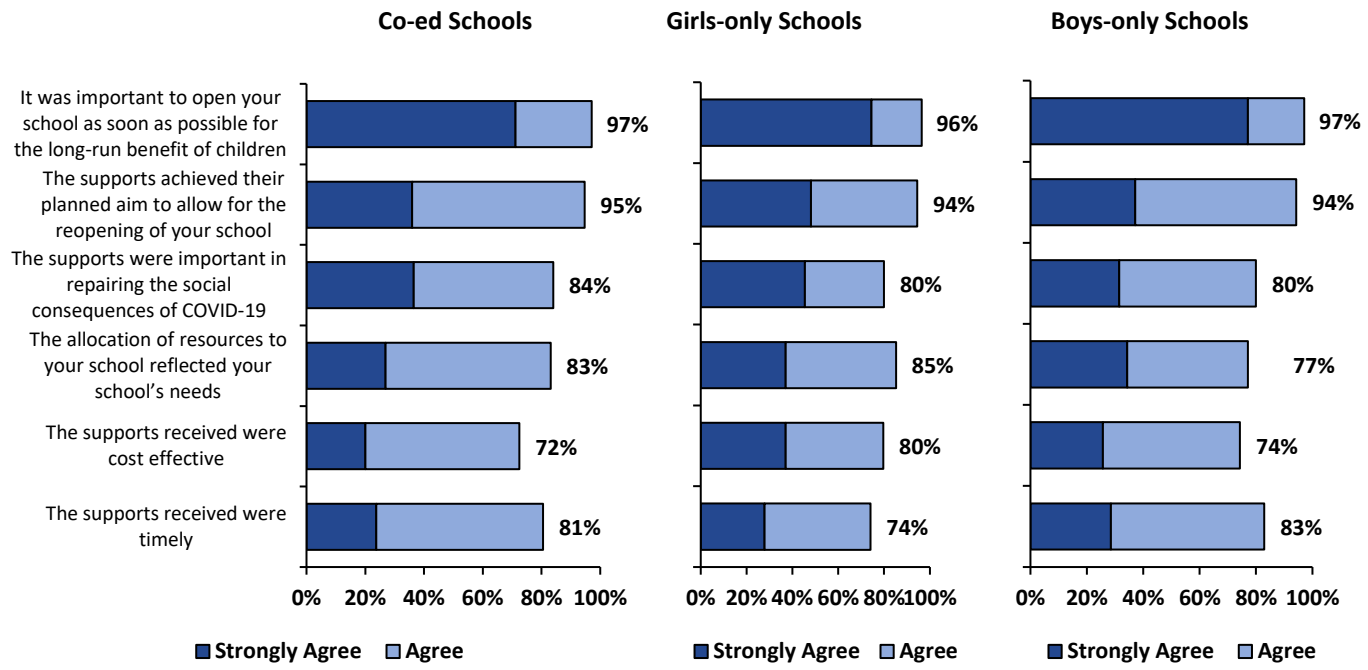


Source: Department of Education Statistical Bulletin August 2024. https://assets.gov.ie/302847/680bf2d0-b00f-4139-853f-246e198e706d.pdf

The gender impact (if any) can also be gauged from the differential responses given by schools of different types in the Indecon survey, as shown in the next figure. The responses to each of the questions were very similar in terms of the importance of reopening as soon as possible for the long-run benefit of children; that the support achieved the aim to reopen schools; and that they were important in repairing social consequences. This indicates that there is no evidence of a significant differential impact by gender. However, for the statement "the allocation of resources to your school reflected school needs", there was a notable difference for boys-only schools (77%) compared to co-ed (83%) and girls-only schools (85%). Boys-only schools may have faced unique challenges or needs that were not fully addressed, such as differences in supervision, infrastructure requirements, or specific priorities. However, an explanation was not provided in the longer-form responses.

Similarly, for the perceived cost-effectiveness and timeliness of support, there is a relatively significant difference for girls' schools, with the former (80%) exceeding co-ed (72%) and boys-only (74%) schools and the latter (74%) distinctly below co-ed (81%) and boys-only (83%) schools. Again, an explanation was not provided in the longer-form responses; however, variations in responses may be influenced by differences in communication, logistical factors, or school-specific priorities during the allocation process.

Figure 8.2: School Response by School Gender Mix



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

8.3 Disadvantaged Schools

An important consideration in terms of inclusiveness is the extent to which any support either addressed or widened access to education for the most

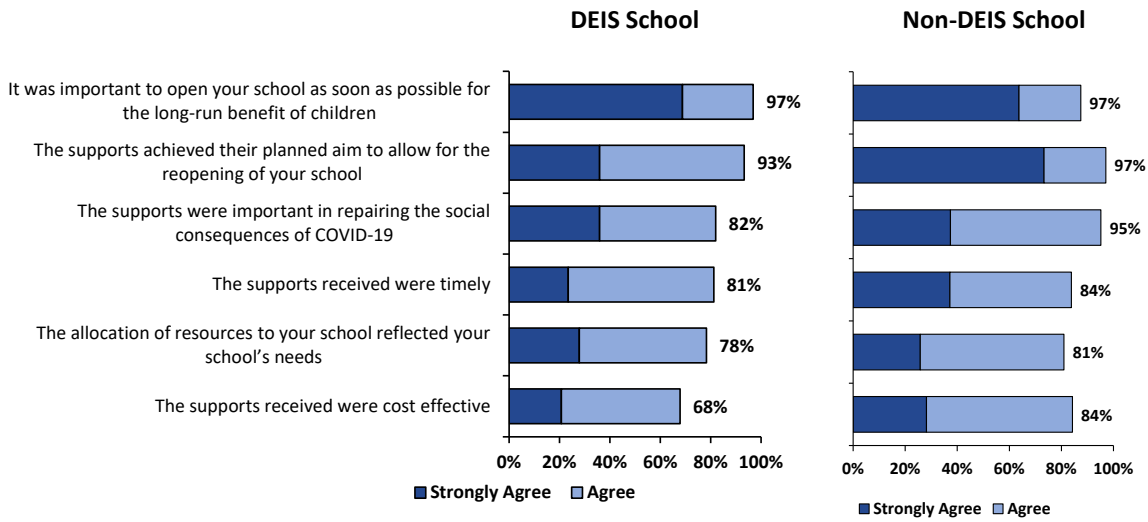
disadvantaged students. As discussed in 6.2, disadvantaged students are more adversely affected by a period of school absence, and as such, the importance of being able to reopen schools safely may be greater for them.

Indecon examined survey responses across a number of metrics based on whether schools had DEIS status or not. The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme aims to reduce educational disadvantage and forms a core element of the Department of Education's policy. Schools are categorised into DEIS Band 1 and DEIS Band 2 based on the level of disadvantage they serve, and this categorisation impacts the level of support and resources they receive.

As illustrated in the figure below, responses to the fund's effectiveness, efficiency, and social aspects are very similar across DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Additionally, satisfaction with the fund is very high across both school types, with 68%-97% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing across numerous metrics, most notably that the support achieved the plan to open the schools and that this was in the best social interests of the students. However, for the statement “the supports were important in repairing the social consequences of COVID-19”, there was a significant disparity in agreement across DEIS (82%) and non-DEIS (95%). This result likely reflects the differing contexts and challenges faced by these school types. DEIS schools serve more disadvantaged communities, which were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. These schools may have experienced higher rates of social isolation, mental health issues, and learning loss among their students, making the supports appear less effective in addressing these deeper and more widespread challenges compared to non-DEIS schools.

Similarly, the differences in perceived cost-effectiveness (68% for DEIS schools versus 84% for non-DEIS schools) could stem from the greater financial needs and resource deficits typically found in DEIS schools. Non-DEIS schools, with fewer systemic disadvantages, may have found the funding more impactful relative to their baseline needs. In contrast, DEIS schools might have required more substantial or tailored support to meet their heightened challenges, leading to a perception that the funding was less cost-effective.

Figure 8.3: Survey Responses Across DEIS School Status



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide more explanations for their opinions regarding the cost-effectiveness of the support. The next table shows a small, representative sample of quotes from schools. Respondents from DEIS schools highlighted the critical importance of financial support in enabling safe school reopenings during the pandemic. Many noted that these supports were particularly invaluable in DEIS settings, where students and communities often faced greater vulnerabilities and challenges. The funding alleviated the financial burden of purchasing essential items such as PPE and sanitisers, which were necessary to protect both staff and students, including those with high-risk health conditions. The reopening of schools was deemed especially important in DEIS areas, where schools provided not only education but also a sense of security and stability for students.

However, respondents also emphasised the need for more sustained and targeted support, particularly in addressing the long-term emotional, social, and educational consequences of school closures. Issues such as high absence rates, emotional distress, and lack of access to services were highlighted as ongoing challenges in DEIS schools, with long waiting lists further compounding the difficulties faced by vulnerable students. Some expressed the belief that DEIS schools should have remained open throughout the pandemic to support at-risk students better, underscoring the heightened role these schools play in their communities. This feedback illustrates both the value of the initial support and the continued need for investment in addressing post-pandemic challenges.

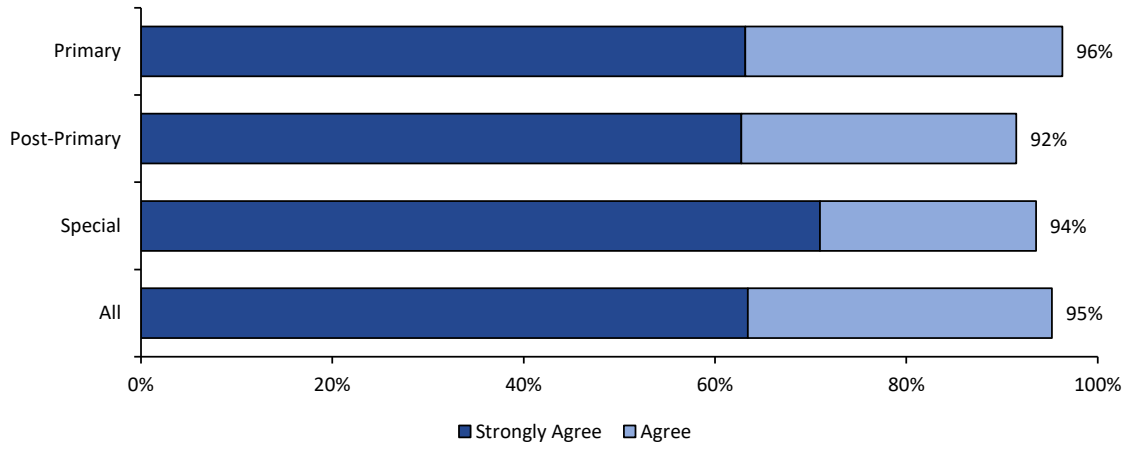
Table 8.1: Open-ended Comment on the Effectiveness of Supports for DEIS Schools
"As a small DEIS rural school with three special classes, we had a very high number of very vulnerable pupils. As a staff of 18, we had to use such an amount of PPE gear that other schools didn't need as we also had pupils in our mainstream classes who were also classed as highly vulnerable."
"The financial assistance proved invaluable to the school in alleviating the burden of purchasing all necessary products such as PPE, sanitisers, etc. The safe opening of the school was invaluable to our whole school community considering that we are a [DEIS] school and our students need the security of the school."
"The support was great and allowed us to open, which I think was the best course of action, especially at the primary level and as a DEIS school."
"It was a very difficult and anxious time for the school community. The supports were necessary, particularly in a DEIS area where the community suffered much more than in more affluent areas."
"More support was and continues to be needed in respect of pupils with emotional needs and additional needs in the aftermath of the epidemic. Schools are seeing pupils who have no access to services and long waiting lists to support their needs."
"More long-term support is needed to combat the emotional, social and educational consequences of the school closures, high absence rates and COVID- we are still seeing the impact in our schools, especially in DEIS plus schools."
"I believe as a DEIS school, we should have remained open to supporting the most vulnerable/at-risk students."
Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

8.4 Special Needs

Survey respondents, including teachers and school leaders, overwhelmingly agreed on the importance of additional support for students with special educational needs (SEN) during the pandemic. As shown in the figure below, 95% of respondents across all school types agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "Additional Support for Students with Special Educational Needs was Needed." This sentiment was similar among special schools, where 94% agreed, emphasising the essential role of tailored funding in supporting SEN students during a particularly challenging period.

The enhanced capitation grants provided for SEN students during COVID-19 were important in addressing the unique challenges faced by this group. These funds allowed schools to implement necessary safety measures, procure resources such as PPE, and adapt facilities to meet the specific needs of vulnerable students. Special schools benefited from this targeted funding, which enabled them to create safer and more inclusive environments while accommodating the heightened requirements for health and safety. The high levels of agreement in the survey underscore the critical role that enhanced capitation and targeted supports played in ensuring that SEN students were prioritised during school reopenings and beyond.

Figure 8.4: The Additional Support for Students with Special Educational Needs Was Needed

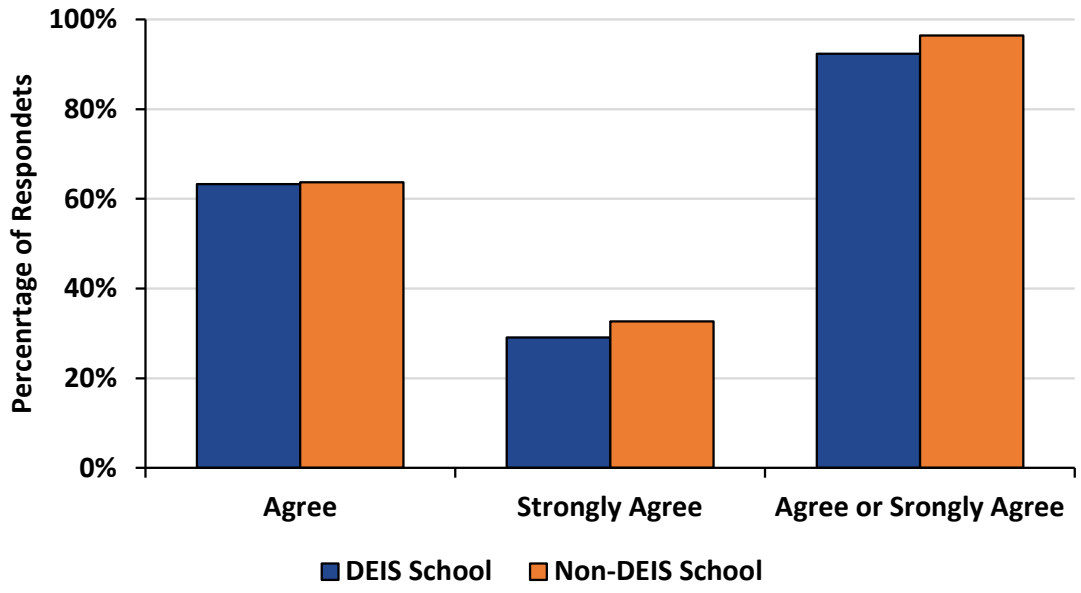


Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

Similarly, for the statement "The additional support for students with special educational needs was needed," survey findings reveal near-universal agreement on the necessity of additional support for students with special educational needs (SEN) during the pandemic, with slight variations between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Among DEIS schools, 92% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that these supports were needed, compared to 96% in non-DEIS schools. While both groups highlighted the critical importance of these supports, the differences likely reflect the distinct challenges faced by DEIS schools due to the socio-economic vulnerabilities of their student populations.

In DEIS schools, the necessity for additional support often stems from the compounded challenges these communities face, including higher levels of poverty, less access to resources at home, and a greater reliance on schools to provide stability and services. SEN students in DEIS schools may require even more intensive support, as these schools often serve disproportionately high numbers of vulnerable students. In contrast, non-DEIS schools may have benefited from stronger baseline resources, allowing them to adapt more quickly to the challenges of the pandemic. However, the universal agreement across both DEIS and non-DEIS schools underscores the fact that SEN supports were critical for all schools to ensure equitable access to education during a particularly challenging period. These findings highlight the importance of tailoring supports to meet the specific needs of different school types and ensuring sufficient resources for the most vulnerable populations.

Figure 8.5: The Additional Support for Students with Special Educational Needs Was Needed



Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

Survey respondents emphasised the role of the support provided in enabling students with SEN to return to school safely and effectively during the pandemic. Many respondents highlighted the timely reopening of schools for SEN students, given their limited access to online learning and the unique challenges they faced during closures. For special schools, measures such as split breaks and enhanced safety protocols were particularly effective and have been retained due to their positive impact.

The supports were widely praised for creating a safe and supportive environment for staff and pupils, ensuring that SEN students were prioritised in reopening plans. However, some respondents expressed concerns about insufficient guidance and support for special schools dealing with complex medical needs and staffing shortages, which created additional challenges. Others expressed disappointment at delays in reopening, noting the disproportionate impact of closures on SEN students compared to their peers. Overall, while the supports were deemed highly effective in many cases, the feedback underscores the need for ongoing, tailored guidance and resources to address the unique needs of SEN students and their schools.

Table 8.2: Open-ended Comment on the Effectiveness of Supports for SEN Students
"The assistance provided was a great support, especially in ensuring that children with Special Ed. Needs were able to get back to school at the earliest possible stage after the pandemic."
"Special schools were very supportive of parents and children and were opened as quick as safely possible a lot of the measures that were out into school during covid such as a split break etc have been kept in our special school as they were very effective."
"Staff and pupils were well supported and felt safe when they returned. For pupils with special needs, this support and no closure will be a better response as the pupils will not be able to access online learning."
"More support/guidance should have been provided to Special Schools with complex medical needs / vulnerable pupils, especially around the shortage of staffing due to COVID."
"The provision for children with special educational needs worked very well for us."
"I was disappointed we didn't re-open sooner, our special needs pupils suffered the impact of this far more than the typical child."
Source: Indecon Analysis of Results from an Indecon-issued Survey

8.5 Summary of Key Findings

This section examined the impact of the funds from the point of view of inclusiveness and non-discrimination. The key findings of this section are as follows:

- The majority of Irish schools are co-educational, ensuring equal financial support for both genders during the safe reopening of schools.
- The proportion of students attending same-sex schools has declined significantly over the past decade.
- Survey responses indicated only minor differential impacts across co-ed, girls-only, and boys-only schools, with some differences in terms of the programmes support being reflection of needs, perceived cost-effectiveness, and timeliness of support.
- Schools under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) program reported broadly similar levels of satisfaction with support compared to non-DEIS schools. DEIS schools emphasised the necessity of support due to the heightened vulnerability of their students and communities. However, differences were evident in responses to the importance of the support in repairing the social consequences of COVID-19, with higher rates in non-DEIS schools.
- Qualitative feedback highlighted the essential role of the REACT-EU fund in ensuring safety and addressing the unique challenges faced by disadvantaged schools.
- A significant majority (95%) of respondents agreed that additional support for SEN students was crucial. Qualitative feedback underscored the effectiveness of tailored measures in supporting students with SEN and emphasised the importance of sustaining such support in the future.

9 Assessment of Contribution to Thematic Objective

9.1 Introduction

The REACT-EU initiative was a vital component of the European Union's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, aimed at fostering recovery, resilience, and the transition toward a green and digital future. In Ireland, the support provided for the reopening of schools contributed significantly to these thematic objectives by ensuring the continuity of education while prioritising public health and safety. This section examines how the support backed crisis repair and resilience and assesses their alignment with the broader goals of sustainability and digital transformation.

The REACT-EU initiative was a key component of the European Union's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, designed to foster recovery, build resilience, and advance green and digital transitions across member states. In Ireland, the REACT-EU fund provided support to the education sector, facilitating the safe reopening of schools, mitigating the social and educational impacts of closures, and prioritising the health and well-being of students and staff. The fund enabled schools to implement necessary precautions such as enhanced ventilation, PPE, and hygiene supplies, such as hand sanitisation facilities, which were essential for ensuring the safe return of students and staff to in-person learning environments. The fund's allocation ensured schools had adequate resources to manage the risks of COVID-19, ultimately accelerating the return to a more normal school experience. This chapter evaluates how the initiative contributed to crisis repair, strengthened institutional and social resilience, and aligned with the broader EU objectives of sustainability and digitalisation.

Survey findings highlighted the significant impact of these supports, with near-universal agreement among respondents on their necessity and effectiveness. Measures such as enhanced cleaning grants, ventilation improvements, and the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) enabled schools to reopen safely and with confidence. Beyond addressing immediate public health needs, these supports helped restore the social and educational role of schools, particularly for vulnerable groups. The insights presented here illustrate how targeted funding supported the education sector in navigating the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic. This helped ensure the continued operation of educational facilities, thereby working to mitigate learning loss and supporting educational recovery across Ireland.

9.2 Contribution to Crisis Repair

The most immediate contribution of the REACT-EU fund was to enable schools to address pressing health and safety concerns, ensuring they could reopen safely and continue operating during the pandemic. Survey data revealed that over 95% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the support provided was essential for reopening schools. Measures such as enhanced cleaning, improved ventilation systems, and access to PPE were viewed as indispensable for minimising COVID-19 transmission risks. One respondent noted, "The cleaning grants and hygiene resources ensured we could provide a safe environment for students and staff, which was critical for reopening."

The social and emotional consequences of school closures were particularly severe, and the reopening of schools played a vital role in addressing these issues. Survey findings highlighted the importance of returning to in-person learning, with respondents emphasising the role of schools in rebuilding routines and providing stability. One participant stated, "Children needed to return to classrooms to reconnect with their peers and rebuild the social skills lost during closures." The surveys

show widespread agreement of the importance of reopening schools for student's social and emotional well-being.

The support provided was particularly impactful for vulnerable groups, such as those with SEN. Tailored funding allowed schools with SEN students to address the unique challenges faced by their student populations, including heightened social vulnerabilities. SEN students, who often rely on structured environments and specialised support, also benefited significantly from the safe reopening of schools. However, despite the successes in health and social recovery, respondents highlighted areas where additional support was needed. Many schools noted that while physical safety measures were well-supported, mental health resources were insufficient to address the psychological effects of the pandemic. One school leader observed, "The emotional impact on students and staff remains a significant challenge, and we need sustained investment in mental health services to recover fully."

9.3 Contribution to Resilience

In addition to crisis repair, the REACT-EU fund contributed significantly to the resilience of Ireland's education system, strengthening its ability to manage future challenges. Investments in infrastructure adaptations, such as upgrading ventilation systems and reconfiguring classroom spaces for social distancing, were widely acknowledged as important measures. The implementation of procedural safety protocols and staff training further bolstered the resilience of schools. Survey data indicated that these measures equipped schools with the knowledge and resources needed to respond effectively to evolving public health guidelines. Respondents noted that these efforts ensured continuity in education despite the uncertainties posed by the pandemic. However, respondents emphasised the need for continued investment in social and emotional recovery.

Additionally, the targeted allocation of resources to special schools/schools with SEN students underscored the importance of equity in resilience-building efforts. These schools, received tailored funding to address their specific challenges, ensuring they were not left behind in the recovery process. Similarly, survey respondents identified little variation in satisfaction with the supports across gender and DEIS status. Social resilience was also a key outcome of the support provided.

9.4 Alignment with Green and Digital Objectives

The REACT-EU funded supports for school re-opening contributed to the EU's green and digital objectives, though these were not its primary focus. Funding for ventilation improvements provided opportunities to incorporate energy-efficient technologies, aligning with broader sustainability goals. Many schools benefited from upgraded ventilation systems that improved air quality and safety, which helped mitigate the risks of COVID-19 transmission. However, these measures were not systematically tied to a comprehensive green recovery strategy.

Digital infrastructure, another key thematic objective, emerged as a significant area of need during the pandemic. Survey responses frequently highlighted challenges faced by schools in rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, where gaps in broadband access and digital tools created barriers to remote or hybrid learning. One respondent noted, "The lack of reliable broadband in our area was a major obstacle during closures, and it remains an issue that requires urgent attention." These infrastructure deficits hindered the ability of both students and teachers to access online learning platforms, exacerbating existing inequalities and limiting educational continuity.

While the REACT-EU fund primarily focused on addressing immediate safety and reopening needs, these findings highlight the importance of prioritising digital equity in future initiatives. Investments in reliable broadband infrastructure, the provision of digital devices, and training for educators and students are essential for ensuring that schools can effectively integrate technology into learning and respond to future disruptions. By embedding sustainability and digital transformation into recovery strategies, the education system can better address long-term challenges while creating more resilient, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable learning environments.

9.5 Conclusions

The support provided under the REACT-EU initiative was pivotal in fostering crisis repair and resilience within Ireland's education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. This funding enabled schools to address urgent health and safety concerns, ensuring the safe reopening of educational facilities across the country. Through measures such as enhanced cleaning, the provision of PPE, and ventilation upgrades, the initiative mitigated the risks associated with COVID-19 transmission. Survey findings consistently underscored the important role of these interventions, with respondents overwhelmingly agreeing that the supports were essential for creating safe learning environments for students and staff.

A key achievement of the initiative was prioritising vulnerable groups, particularly students with SENs. Tailored funding and resources ensured that these groups were not disproportionately impacted by the pandemic's social and educational disruptions. Survey feedback from SEN-focused schools/classes highlighted the importance of the additional funding in addressing the unique needs of their students, particularly in creating safe and supportive environments. Similarly, respondents from DEIS schools emphasised how the funding alleviated financial pressures, enabling them to implement necessary safety measures while continuing to support disadvantaged students.

Beyond addressing immediate challenges, the REACT-EU initiative also strengthened schools' long-term resilience. Investments in infrastructure, such as the adaptation of physical spaces to allow for social distancing and the enhancement of ventilation systems, have left schools better equipped to manage future public health emergencies. Procedural improvements, including the implementation of safety protocols and the training of staff, further contributed to building institutional capacity. Survey data indicated that these measures have had lasting benefits, enhancing schools' preparedness for a range of potential crises.

However, the alignment of the REACT-EU supports with broader green and digital objectives was not an immediate focus. While ventilation upgrades presented an opportunity to incorporate energy-efficient technologies, these measures were not systematically tied to a broader sustainability strategy. Similarly, the pandemic underscored the importance of digital infrastructure, particularly in rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, where gaps in broadband access and digital tools hindered efforts to implement remote or hybrid learning models. Survey feedback frequently cited the need for greater investment in digital transformation to bridge these divides and enhance the resilience of the education system.

The initiative also addressed the social consequences of the pandemic, particularly the impact on students' mental health and emotional well-being. The reopening of schools provided a sense of normalcy and stability, helping students reconnect with peers and reestablish routines. However, respondents noted that the psychological effects of the pandemic remain a significant challenge, with many calling for sustained investment in mental health resources for both students and staff.

In conclusion, the REACT-EU funded supports for school reopening demonstrated the importance of targeted, equitable, and forward-thinking support in addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Its success in enabling safe school reopenings, mitigating inequalities, and building resilience provides a strong foundation for future initiatives.