

## Short summary of the impact of COVID-19 on schools in Northern Ireland

Data from a sample of teachers, parents and pupils in Northern Ireland about their experiences of blended and online learning during the pandemic has thrown light on effective practice and some of the reasons for this. After an initial period of uncertainty leading to a largely reflexive response between March-June 2020, most of the schools studied found ways to provide regular online lessons during the second lockdown from January-April 2021; in many cases lessons had high levels of interaction between teachers and pupils and in some cases between pupils. Purposeful interaction was provided through synchronous classes, remote teacher contact with individual pupils and feedback on pupil work. This was true even in schools which had higher levels of free school meal entitlement – a commonly adopted proxy for pupil disadvantage.

The factors which enabled the emergence of good practice were the prior investment in ICT facilities for every school; every child had a core provision of hardware, software and access to the internet as a normal part of educational support without any additional cost to the school but some schools had supplemented that core provision. Secondly, the educational authorities (the Department of Education, the Education Authority and the Education and Training Inspectorate) worked closely together to have a designated support officer for each school to ensure that guidance was understood and acted on; local teacher networks also provided a further means of giving teachers access to advice and help. Thirdly, the quality of leadership in schools was extremely important; in the best cases, leadership was shown through anticipating probable ‘lock-downs’ and ensuring that teachers, pupils and parents had access to the internet and that staff were given professional development in online and blended learning. Best practice also included the development of remote learning policies and a drive to ensure that all children benefitted from these, especially reluctant learners or those with additional needs who were targeted for additional support.