

Headteachers call for targeted mental health recovery plan to help schools tackle crisis

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that an additional 500,000 youths are now experiencing serious mental health problems — the Evening Standard spoke to four school leaders who are demanding action and who, here, tell it like it is.

David Boyle chief executive Dunraven Educational Trust and former Principal Dunraven School, Lambeth
Roll: 1,750; pupil premium (disadvantaged students) 45%

“While many of our young people are coping brilliantly, a lot of children have become angry or anxious. We have been calling those at home and sometimes we hear worrying things from parents around obsessive or compulsive behaviours, as well as depression. For children in families with domestic violence, it’s toxic and the longer they are locked down, the deeper the impact on their wellbeing will be. We are seeing some children who were previously fine but now lack motivation and express a loss of hope and perspective.

“The breath-taking absence of leadership from government has not helped. With some of the pronouncements, the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson and the Government have appeared actively hostile to educators and this has lost them the trust of many heads and teachers. I spend a lot of time with my jaw thrust forward in anticipation of the next unwelcome surprise.

“It would be great if government could help rather than hinder, but it is the children I worry about. Many are feeling anxious, angry and vulnerable. When they hit difficulties, some move all too quickly to a position of, ‘What’s the point?’ I don’t think we will be able to gauge the real impact of this pandemic for some time. I fear the full challenge psychologically, the worst, is yet to come.”

David Benson headteacher Kensington Aldridge Academy, Kensington & Chelsea
Roll: 1,300; pupil premium 60%

“The majority of our students have a resilience that allows them to cope, but for some, the pandemic presents big issues. If you live in an overcrowded home or one that is chaotic, or with little educational encouragement, or where there is not enough food, or you have special educational needs or suffer from depression, it is major. We have to remember that children who see their parents and older siblings suffering badly from the adversity of



Fears for pupils: David Boyle, above, Andrea MacDonald, inset right, and David Benson, inset below

‘THIS IS GOING TO GET MUCH WORSE’

Jared Brading executive head teacher St Mary’s Catholic Primary School and Sacred Heart RC Primary School, Wandsworth
Roll: 650; pupil premium 42%

“Towards the end of term, we started to pick up issues about raised anxiety, often due to parents losing jobs, worries about finance, and also bereavement. Some of our pupils have tragically lost parents or grandparents to Covid and this has understandably had a huge impact. “We have parents who are anxious about getting ill and this anxiety gets picked up by students. Some of this manifested in a lot



“We haven’t seen the full impact”: executive head teacher Jared Brading

more poor behaviour than normal — such as an inability to sit still, focus and settle into a routine. But overall, the younger children are actually more resilient. This is going to get much worse. I don’t think we’ve seen the full impact of this.”

this period will carry that weight with them, often in a hidden way that bursts out later.

“There is no doubt that pupils from poorer families are under more pressure and we are likely to see the gap

between them and wealthy families widen dramatically. I believe schools need a targeted mental health recovery plan so that teachers can be



LUCY YOUNG

trained and encouraged to recognise and support the growing number of mental health problems. If a child is distressed or misbehaving or withdrawn, you want to get to the root so you can re-engage them with their learning. Covid will have a very long tail and we will feel the effects well into 2022. Schools are doing a great job, but this combination of pressures inevitably means some children will be less confident, less competent and less sociable coming out of this period and that, sadly, some may have their whole futures blighted.”

Andrea MacDonald deputy headteacher Beacon High, Islington
Roll: 453; pupil premium 65%

“Now we are back in lockdown and social services can’t see vulnerable children except for emergencies, we have had to find new ways to help them. We have pivoted to Google Meet and deployed eight members of staff so 100 of our most at-risk students can get online mentoring for one hour every week.

“Sadly we have seen a significant increase in students with mental health problems. In a normal year, we make 15 referrals to child and adolescent mental health services (Camhs) but we’ve already referred 25 students and we’re not even half way through the second term. Camhs took on seven of the most urgent and the others were triaged and given a lower tier of support from a service a step below.

“These are children struggling with raised pressures on family life, many in overcrowded homes who can’t cope with the energy in the house and who are unable to regulate their emotions. One bright 14-year-old girl who did well academically has become disengaged, tearful and withdrawn. Her anxiety has severely impacted her learning and ability to cope. We give her support every day, she can’t manage otherwise. She is someone for whom in-person connection at school with staff and peers is critical. It’s just one example of what we are seeing. This is the worst it’s ever been.”

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10,000 children without access to education in single borough

Rachael Burford

A LONDON borough today warned it needs 10,000 more laptops for children who cannot attend school during lockdown as the row over access to online learning intensified.

Tower Hamlets council said many disadvantaged children are unable to access equipment through Government schemes because their parent or carer may have a phone or computer. It added that many of the same children

are unable to attend classes in person because of pressures on schools.

The same problem is being experienced in other parts of London, causing concern that access to school during lockdown has not been adequately addressed by the Government.

The Department for Education said it has distributed 700,000 devices to schools in England to help disadvantaged children during the pandemic.

But it uses “access” to a device to determine whether a student needs to

be provided free equipment. Tower Hamlets mayor John Biggs warned this meant children living in a house with a device may not qualify, even if it is being used by someone else.

The council, which has the highest rate of child poverty in the UK, has written to Education Secretary Gavin Williamson asking him to rethink the policy.

“Teachers, parents and carers have raised their concerns about children not being able to access the online curriculum due to having to rely on shared

devices. It is impossible to access time-tabled lessons without a dedicated and suitable personal device,” Mr Biggs wrote.

The Government has said children who do not have access to equipment can be classed as vulnerable and attend school. However, Tower Hamlets warned this would push student numbers “well beyond” what teachers could cope with.

The council said that 10,000 more devices were required to ensure every child has access to online learning.

Other local authorities have also strug-

gled with access to devices. Camden council took to crowdfunding after more than 3,000 of its pupils went without access to a computer in the first lockdown. Lambeth TechAid was set up last year and accepts donations of devices to distribute to children in the borough.

A Department for Education spokesman said laptops for disadvantaged children are provided to schools, trusts and local authorities as they are best placed to determine which children do not have access to a device.