Managing a school system through shutdown: lessons for school leaders

Results of a system-wide study of remote learning in Latvia
by Edurio and the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia

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Covid-19 has caused full or partial school shutdowns globally. Edurio has set out to understand how pupils, parents and teachers experience the process to help school and system leaders make better decisions. At the end of March 2020 Edurio ran a system-wide stakeholder survey for the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia to evaluate the implementation of remote learning.

The surveys were launched after week 2 of nation-wide school closures and collected validated responses from over 27,000 parents, 23,000 pupils, 9600 teachers and 790 school heads, becoming one of the largest studies of remote learning effectiveness globally.

After analysing the results, and reading thousands of comments, we have distilled 3 lessons for school leaders globally who are managing schools in a shutdown or preparing for potential future disruptions. For each of the findings, a number of recommendations have been developed by the National Centre for Education of Latvia and Edurio. The recommendations are shared at the end of each chapter.

Crises illuminate the value of strong leadership. When embedded processes break down, leaders have to step up and fill the void. It is not easy to balance the elements of providing a good education in the face of massive uncertainty. However, the many inspirational and devoted leaders we have met in schools give us confidence that we can learn from the experience and shape the future of a better education.

1 Good communication is the first step to success

At a time of flux and stress, clear communication elicits trust, confidence and calm. Clarity of communication is strongly linked with the overall satisfaction with remote learning arrangements for parents and pupils. However, there are diminishing results to the frequency of communication. Structure and transparency can help schools venture into the unknown with the community intact.

2 Managing workload is hard work

Over 60% of pupils report that they are spending more time on studies than they were when at school. Parents share the pain and struggle to balance helping their children while being in employment. Maintaining a manageable workload through prioritisation and planning is a core element of well-being in remote classrooms.

3 Collaboration is at the heart of effective remote teaching

Lack of collaboration and coordination between teachers leads to duplicated work for teachers, and confusion for the pupils. Teachers struggle with planning and preparing lessons and providing feedback to the learners. Parents often take a key role in supporting remote learning. Schools that manage to treat teaching as a team activity will have an easier time than those that simply put the old schedule online.

ILGA ŠUPLINSKA
Minister of Education and Science of Latvia

The impact of Covid-19 on education in Latvia

Following the introduction of an emergency situation in Latvia from 12 March 2020, in order to limit the spread of the virus, remote learning was introduced in all schools and universities from 13 March. Training, competitions and rehearsals held within the framework of cultural, sports and interest-related education programmes had to be discontinued during the period of the emergency situation. Pre-schools were also closed with on-duty groups organised for those children, whose parents cannot provide other options.

The Ministry had a week to devise and implement a remote learning process – school holidays on the week of the 16 March meant that remote learning would start from 23 March in all schools across Latvia. Technical colleges and universities started remote learning from 16 March.

Implementation of remote learning in schools

Several tools were available in Latvia that enabled a rapid roll-out of remote learning. For example, E-klase school management platform was used by the majority of Latvia's schools to access all important information, including guidelines for teachers on providing distance learning. Platforms like Uzdevumi.lv and Soma.lv allowed pupils to carry out and submit tasks online and receive immediate feedback.

Educational TV channel Tava Klase (Your Class) for pupils was created in two weeks and has been on air since 6 April 2020. It supports pupils, parents and teachers in the implementation of distance learning for 1st to 6th and upper grade pupils. More than 70 teachers and a volunteer parent group are involved in the project.

Gathering stakeholder feedback across Latvia

To make rapid policy decisions, it is important that information and data for decision making are as comprehensive, reliable and representative as possible. In addition to continuously consulting the schools on organising remote learning and designing guidelines on the implementation of remote learning, the Ministry was aware of the need to gather feedback after schools were closed and make sure that the implementation of remote learning is successful. Making evidence-based decisions is at the core of the Ministry's culture. The decision to carry out a nation-wide survey of pupils, parents, teachers and school heads was crucial.

At the end of March the Ministry together with the education surveying company Edurio launched surveys on the implementation of distance learning in the emergency situation. Over 60 000 respondents participated – teachers, pupils, parents, and school headmasters (99.6% of schools). The results were insightful and confirmed the importance of listening to and respecting the views of everybody involved.

Impact of the feedback

Based on the analysis of the survey results, conducted by Edurio, the National Centre for Education updated its guidelines on managing distance learning, with a particular focus on planning, task setting and workload. Examples of organising the use of technology were also provided. A set of reminder materials was created, to be used together with the original guidelines and circulated across the schools. Webinars for school leaders were also conducted to provide further clarity and guidance.

On behalf of the Ministry of Education and Science, I would like to sincerely thank all participants of the surveys for sharing their views, but even more importantly – thank you for the resilience and enthusiasm in beginning and continuing remote learning in such an unusual time. After the crisis we will appreciate that together we can achieve the unimaginable and that there is much more creative potential in us than we ever thought.

Survey design

The parent, pupil and teacher surveys were based on Edurio's survey package specifically designed to assess the effectiveness of remote learning (home.edurio.com/remote-learning). Adjustments were made to fit Latvia's education system and support the Ministry's priorities and key decisions.

The surveys were focused on evaluating the early stage of school closures and covered topics like communication, technology access, the learning process, workload and parental engagement.

Survey implementation

Three online surveys were conducted across all schools in Latvia between the 31st of March and the 3rd of April 2020. Using the Edurio survey platform, the surveys gathered a total of 60,060 validated responses. Respondents were authenticated in Edurio by using the sign-on from their school's management system or unique codes issued by the school. Each respondent was validated as a current pupil, parent or teacher and could complete the survey only once. The respondents could access the survey from computers, tablets or mobile phones.

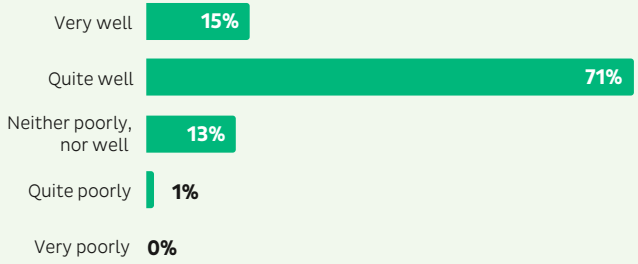
The invitations to complete the survey were shared with the respondents by the schools on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Science. The opportunity to express views was also shared via social media by the Ministry and municipalities, and by national media.

The response rates were exceptionally high for the type and duration of the surveys. The results were analysed by Edurio and the Ministry. School level reports were shared with each participating school and local authority.

RESPONDENTS	
23,316 PUPILS	in secondary and vocational education (**20% of pupils** in the surveyed year groups)
27,087 PARENTS	with one or more children currently in school (representing **over 10% of pupils** across all year groups)
9657 TEACHERS	**30% of teachers** in Latvia

Teachers, parents and pupils, were asked to share their overall perceptions of remote learning arrangements. The overall results have been positive, giving confidence that learning is continuing despite the difficult circumstances. Of course this hides a lot of detail and differences across schools, subject areas and respondents. Equity and well-being of the most vulnerable pupils needs special attention and further research. In the next chapters we will dive deeper into three areas identified as particularly important by the respondents and give actionable recommendations for school leaders globally.

TEACHERS were asked how well they and their pupils are managing to continue studies remotely. 86% of teachers give a positive answer. Comments highlight challenges with vulnerable pupils and those with less access to technology.

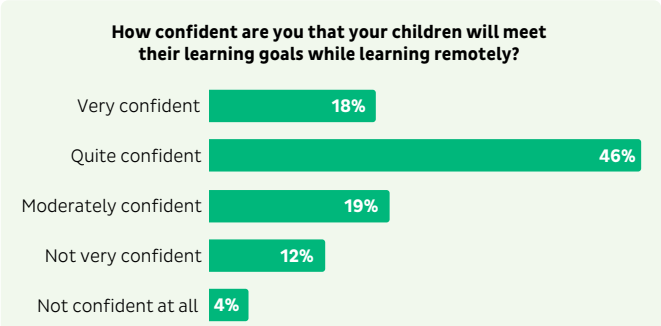


TEACHERS

"Currently it's quite good and I think it will get better. In the second week we have clear rules of cooperation and the necessary technology skills. Many pupils have gotten better at time planning. These were all small challenges in the first week."

"It is a lot more challenging for those pupils who already had difficulties when learning in person."

PARENTS were asked about their confidence in their child's learning remotely. 64% of the parents were confident that their children could reach their learning goals while learning remotely. Comments highlighted the different approaches amongst subjects. Parents also expressed concerns about their own ability to support their children.

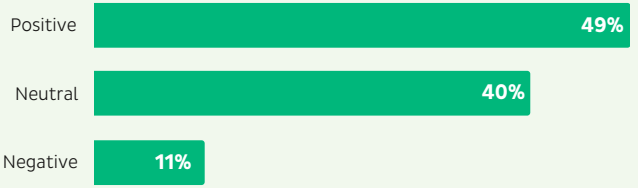


PARENTS

"Some subjects cause concern and we don't know if the child will be able to achieve everything as needed. As a parent I can't explain everything as well as the teacher."

"A large gain is the skill to study herself responsibility, self discipline and other traits. Learning new material might be problematic."

PUPILS were asked an open response question to evaluate their overall experience. Edurio carried out sentiment analysis to classify the responses as positive, neutral or negative. 49% of the pupil responses were positive and only 11% - negative.



PUPILS

"It's a lot more difficult but every new experience is a good experience!"

"I like it a lot! I can sleep enough, have a lot of energy. If I get tired, I can take a break. In the school we need to sit the entire day and sometimes in class it is too loud to concentrate. At home it is quiet and I can do everything calmly."

"Difficult and tiring. I think there is too much of everything, I can't even catch daylight outside."

1 GOOD COMMUNICATION IS THE FIRST STEP TO SUCCESS

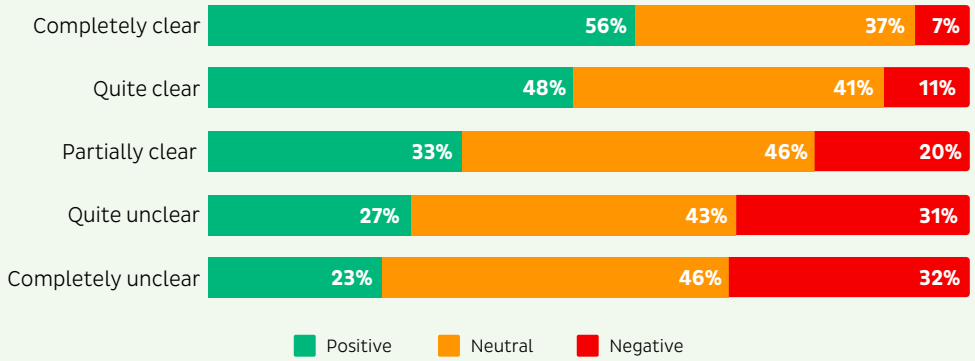
We can't have a plan for every potential crisis. But we can and should have a plan for how we communicate when something unexpected happens. This section explores the clarity and frequency of communication and its impact on pupil and parent attitudes.

The impact of clear communication

Our research demonstrates a strong link between the clarity of communication by the school and overall perception of the remote learning process for both parents and pupils. During a period of uncertainty, clarity and structure in communication can make a material difference to everybody involved.

The overall pupil attitude towards the remote learning process is clearly linked with the clarity of communication from their school. Over half of the pupils who feel they have full clarity express a positive view about their remote learning experience. In contrast, only a quarter of those who lack clarity are positive when reflecting on the learning.

Pupil overall attitude to remote learning depending on their response to the question **"How clear to you is the remote learning process?"**



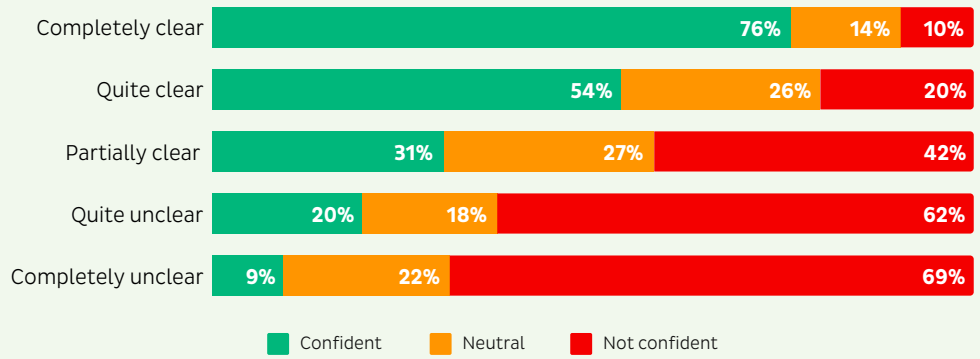
PUPILS

"Now I understand what to do but in the first week of remote learning I didn't understand anything because my teachers weren't in touch at all. I wish there was an easier way to communicate with the class and teachers."

"Everything is clear and I can always ask my teachers if I don't understand something."

The trend is even stronger for parents. 76% of parents who say that the communication from the school is completely clear are positive about their child's remote learning. This is 7 times more than those who report that communication is completely unclear.

Parent confidence that their children will meet their learning goals depending on their response to the question **"How clear is the communication from the school?"**



PARENTS

"I really hope that we as a society say a loud and clear thanks to the teachers for their responsiveness and empathy in this situation. The teachers of my children are available, supportive, helpful, understanding and immeasurably creative. They are fantastic at dealing with this challenge. The weird feeling "What now?" has turned into calm and structured work that gives peace of mind to the child and the parents."

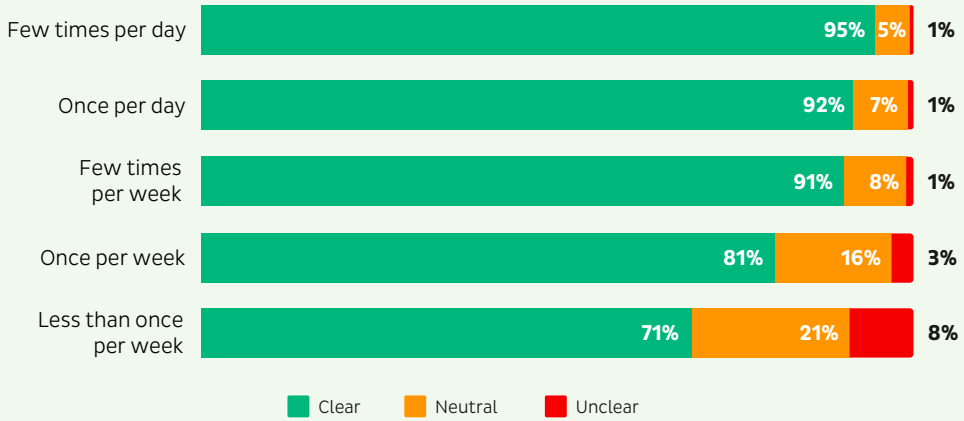
"My children go to different schools. One school sends me information about the virus, resources for mental well-being, informs me of free learning resources and potential scenarios of the learning plan. The other – nothing."

Frequency of communication

It appears that more isn't necessarily better. Schools should focus on clarity and structure ahead of frequency, and be mindful of the workload that communication can generate for staff and parents.

Frequency of communication has an impact on the perceived clarity, however, there is limited difference in reported clarity between parents who receive communication a few times per week (91% clear) versus those who receive communication multiple times a day (95% clear).

Parent reported clarity of communication depending on their response to the question **"How frequently does the school communicate with you?"**



PARENTS

"There are loads of information messages in the school platform but nobody has asked me how my child is coping."

"The teachers mostly communicate directly with the child and there are no communication issues – I see that learning is happening and am happy with that. When everything is clear, no need for the school to unnecessarily bother the parents."

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

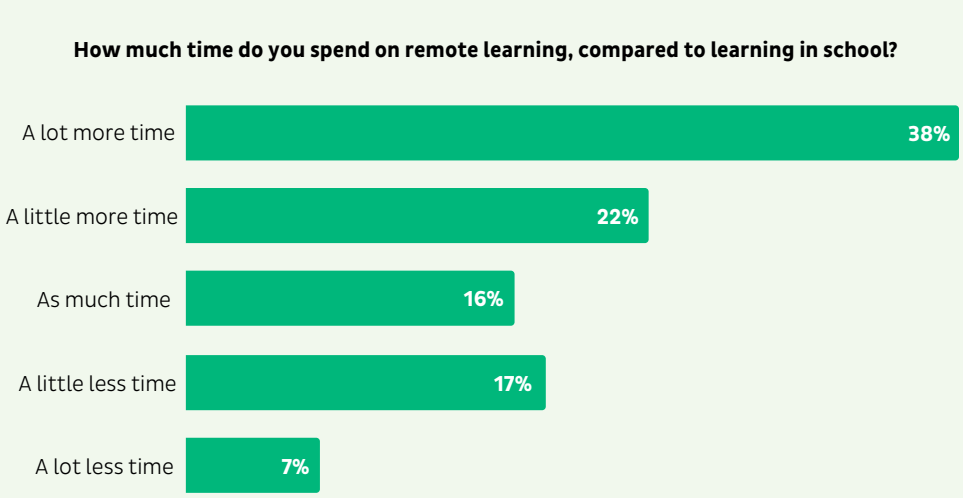
- ✓ Share the information you have with your pupils, families and staff rapidly. Explain your plans and actions more than usual and offer opportunities to ask questions, even if you don't feel you have all the answers yet.
- ✓ Plan regular and structured communication with families. Try to not overwhelm them as they are managing their own unique challenges. Keep the communication with parents to a couple of times per week.
- ✓ Use a narrow and consistent selection of tools for communication with pupils and parents.
- ✓ Coordinate with other school leaders in your network to find what works. Many schools are facing the same issues so good practice should be identified and copied, saving time for the school leadership team.

2 MANAGING WORKLOAD IS HARD WORK

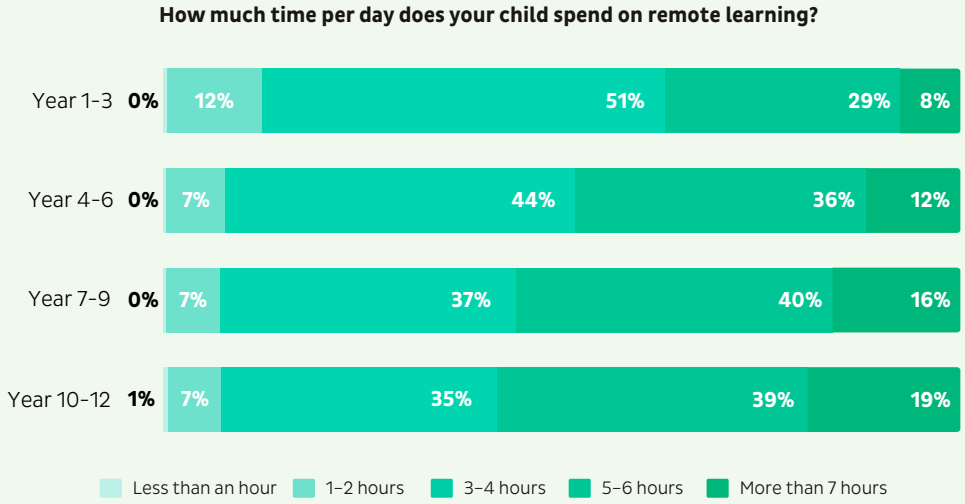
Switching to a new way of working has not been easy. Pupils and parents report considerable workload concerns during remote learning. School leaders and teachers, who are themselves under a lot of stress, face the difficult task of balancing learning objectives against pupil well-being and managing expectations.

Pupil workload

60% of pupils report that they are spending more time on their studies than they were at school. The reasons quoted are mainly linked with teachers giving more work and increased time to cover the same material at home. There is also a minority of pupils who report increased effectiveness in self-organised learning.



Pupil workload is highest for pupils in the higher year groups – in years 10-12 one in five pupils spend more than 7 hours a day on learning. However, even in primary school one in ten pupils spend more than 7 hours a day on remote learning.



PUPILS

"Some days it's more because teachers give bigger tasks, for example, instead of a 40 minute lesson, we need to watch an hour long movie and respond to questions about it."

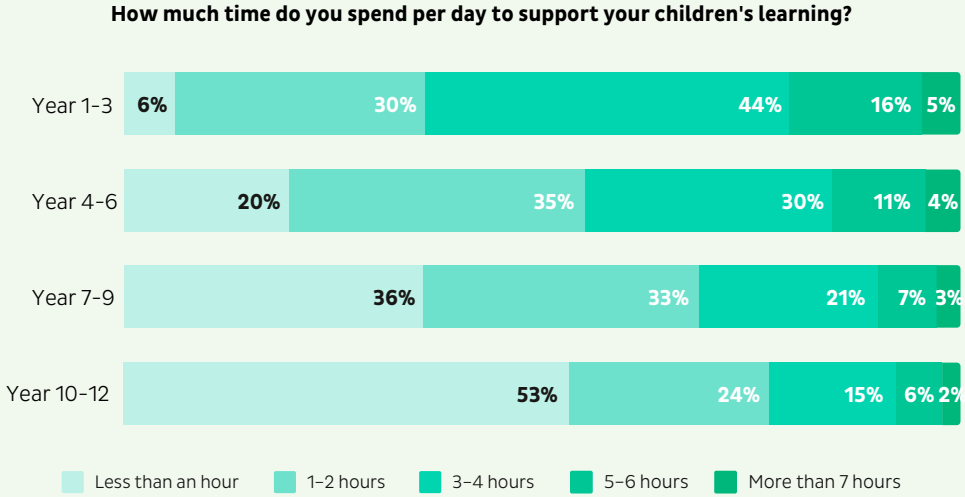
"During remote learning I put more effort in understanding the task and the material. In person I used to just listen, write down what the teacher said and complete the tasks, often without fully understanding the material. Now I pay more attention to understanding and the quality of my work so sometimes I spend more time on learning than I used to."

"The learning takes longer because it is difficult to focus on studies."

"Thanks to distance learning I no longer have to worry about breaks, lunches, travel from home and many other small things that used to take a lot of time. Therefore the time spent studying can be a lot more effective."

Parent workload

For parents, especially in the younger year groups, remote learning can be a major additional load. Two thirds of parents in years 1-3 spend more than 3 hours a day on their child's learning. Parents report fatigue and stress caused by balancing remote learning with their job.



PARENTS

"The child is exhausted and the adults are exhausted, parents have to do their job at night, while the child is asleep."

"My child can't do everything himself so it's almost impossible for the parents to do our job because we're not on a holiday, just working remotely. In natural science there are tasks where we have to go out for a walk, look at birds, trees, etc. Parents have working hours where we need to work rather than walk around bird watching. We are facing a risk at losing our jobs, which is critical as many have already lost theirs."

"For most parents this is a time of stress and anxiety to keep their jobs and save the businesses they work for. That can't be combined with good home learning!"

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

- ✓ Pick the most important learning goals to be achieved remotely during the disrupted period. Communicate your expectations with your team, pupils and their families. Do not expect learning to be as effective as before.
- ✓ Plan the pupils' daily and weekly load together with your colleagues in alignment with each class's learning plan. Ensure coordination of submission deadlines.
- ✓ Allocate learning time specifically for learning new tools, time planning and digital skills necessary for remote learning.
- ✓ Make sure each learning activity is set with a clear consideration of the learning objective achieved and the time expected to be spent on it. Vague directions can cause some pupils to spend a lot more time on tasks than intended.
- ✓ Limit the number of tasks that have to be completed within a certain day. Give pupils the opportunity to plan their time across multiple days or weeks.
- ✓ Consider dropping the usual schedule of classes, reducing the number of subjects that the pupils have to study every day or every week.
- ✓ Regularly seek feedback from pupils on their mental and emotional well-being. Seek opportunities to provide individual support where necessary

3 COLLABORATION IS AT THE HEART OF EFFECTIVE REMOTE TEACHING

Remote learning is fundamentally different to learning in person. It is still possible for schools to provide exceptional learning, as many have been doing, but not just by following the old process remotely. This monumental remote teaching experiment offers us opportunities to reflect on our practice and take some of the lessons beyond the current shutdowns to build a more resilient and engaging learning experience for the future.

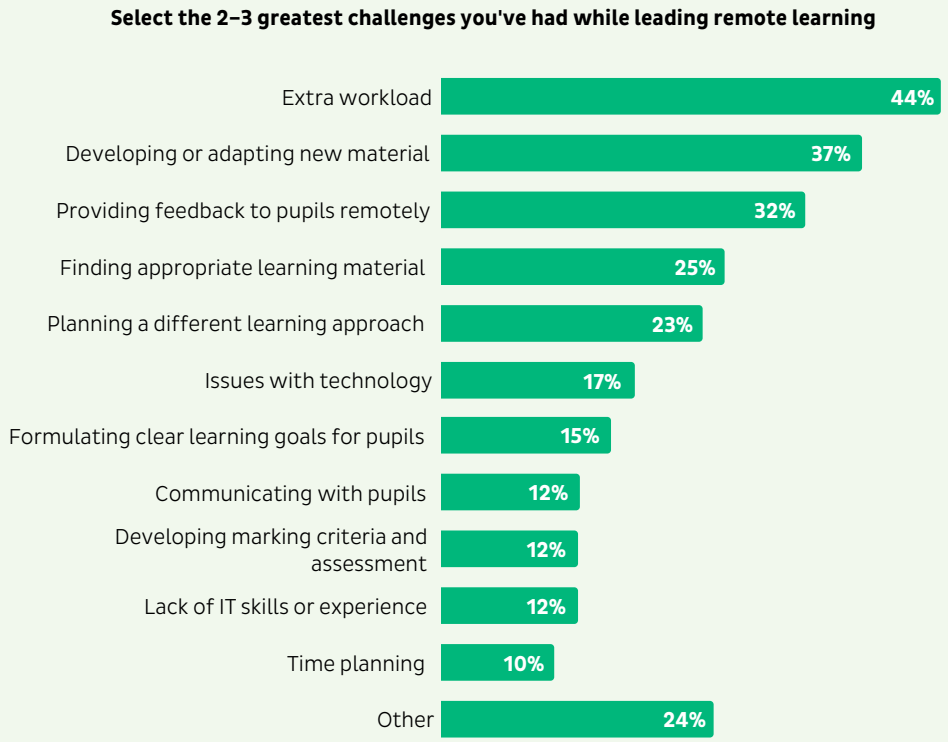
Teaching needs to adapt

There are often multiple teachers in a school and hundreds in a city, working with the same age groups on similar topics, each trying to find or create materials and plan learning, feeling stressed and overworked in the process. Remote learning highlights what a good teacher can do that no technology can achieve alone: support, encourage or explain something in the most suitable way for each learner. Collaboration can help teachers save time on lesson preparation and frontal instruction, and allow them focus on individual support.

It is not just pupils and parents who feel under pressure. 44% of teachers list additional workload as one of their top concerns during remote learning - more than any other factor.

Looking at factors that might be contributing to the workload, teachers report that they struggle with developing and adapting new materials, providing feedback, finding materials and planning learning.

Analysis of thousands of text comments from parents and pupils highlights a frequent lack of alignment, which causes confusion and adds to workload. Parents and pupils seek and appreciate coordination between teachers. Aligned work improves communication and reduces workload for everybody.



TEACHERS

"Currently many teachers are working a lot longer than usual to plan the learning process, prepare materials, contact pupils, parents and colleagues and provide feedback to everybody."

"As a class tutor I struggle with informing parents about other classes because every subject has its own schedule and I can't answer to the parents whether the tasks in each subject are past deadline or not."

PARENTS

"Sometimes it's confusing because every teacher uses their own way of communicating. E-diary, learning platform mail, private email, WhatsApp... We need to keep track of all the different ways to figure out what tasks are set."

"I am very grateful to those teachers who set work that unites themes across different subjects, therefore reducing the amount of work."

"It appears that teachers are continuing to work in the last century, each treading their own path. In this situation pupils have a great opportunity to seek, research and explore a lot more than in class and express themselves creatively. Instead there are tasks from books, multiple choice exercises and learning a poem by heart which will need to be recited when back in school, probably not this year."

PUPILS

"It's not clear where and when to submit my work as every teacher has their own systems and rules."

"There is chaos. Tasks are given but it's difficult to find information about them. There's a lack of a united approach from the teachers. The tasks are given in various places and with different approaches."

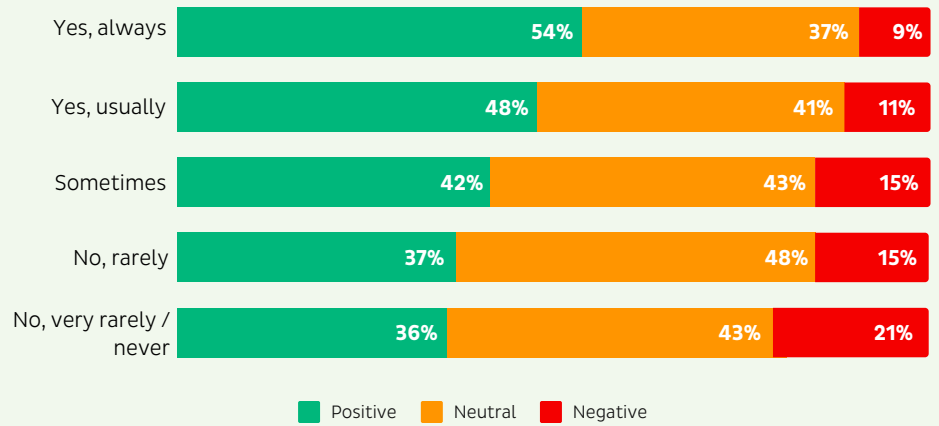
Parents as partners

In a remote learning environment families inevitably take a much bigger role. This is especially the case for primary school pupils, where it is difficult to ensure learning without direct parent involvement. Well managed remote learning seeks to empower parents to guide their child's learning while recognising their difficulties during this period.

Access to support from parents has a direct link with pupil attitude towards their remote learning experience. Over half of pupils who always have access to parent support are positive about remote learning compared to just over a third of those who lack parental support.

When asking parents how they have supported their child in remote learning (see figure on the next page), the top response is helping to understand tasks. Assistance with completing tasks is also a frequent response. These activities are typically intended for the pupils to do themselves with the support of the teacher. The other parental support activities, like helping seek information, time management and encouragement, are great examples of effective parent support.

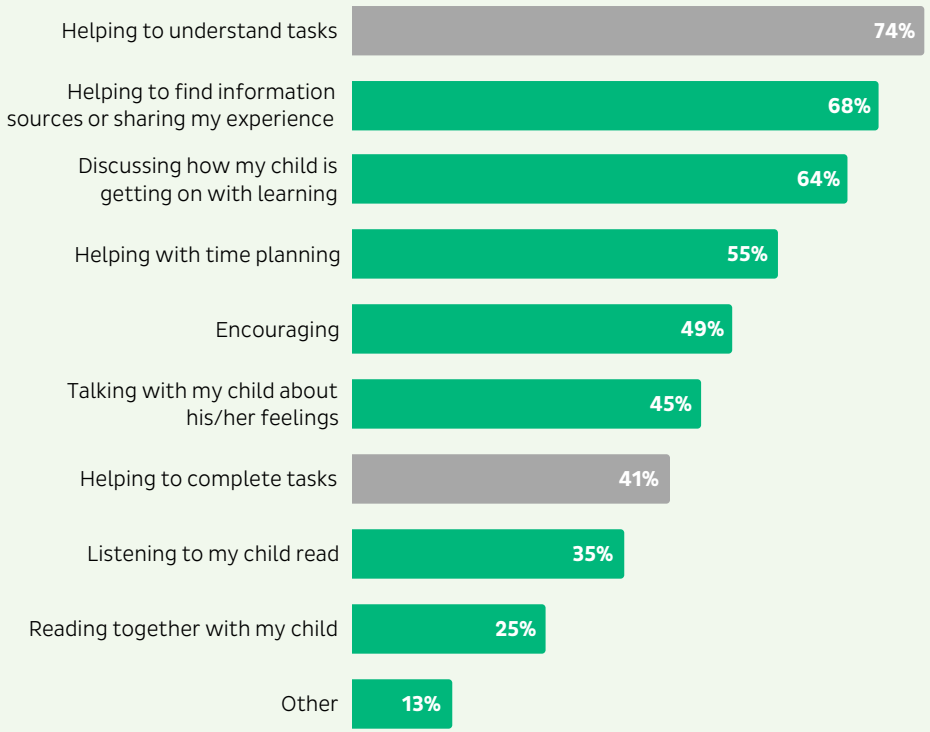
Pupil overall attitude to remote learning depending on their response to the question **"Do you have support from your parents if you need it?"**



PUPILS

"As my mom is home, I get support and motivation. If she was at work, I don't know how I would get through everything."

In what ways have you supported your child in learning remotely?



PARENTS

"I am disappointed because I thought there would only be tasks that the child can manage herself, but in reality we need to get quite involved, just to explain and to tell about the new topics in social science and natural science."

TEACHERS

"Some parents are annoyed and tell me that they have multiple kids who can't manage all their work. Some parents don't care that their kid doesn't do what they've been asked. Some single parents are exhausted at work and can't keep track of the learning. And there are those who are now earning excellent grades for their kids."

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Virtual instruction and self-guided learning scales across large pupil groups. Direct support and making learning personal doesn't. Look for opportunities to collaborate, to limit the time on recreating lesson plans. Work together with parents to maximise direct support.

- ✓ Create a united plan for the week across all subjects with clear learning goals.
- ✓ Facilitate cross-curricular links in tasks for pupils wherever possible.
- ✓ Pay special attention to the development of digital, self-guided learning skills and information search and evaluation skills for pupils.
- ✓ Facilitate collaboration for teachers within the school or across partner schools to plan, prepare and deliver instruction at scale. Spend the time saved on personal support to pupils that need it the most.
- ✓ Use live sessions specifically to provide support to the class or smaller groups of pupils rather than for frontal instruction.
- ✓ Clearly communicate to the pupils, how their work is linked with their learning goals, how it will be evaluated and what format is expected for submissions.
- ✓ Maintain and continuously improve a supportive relationship and communication between the school, pupils and their families to ensure a strong implementation of remote learning

Conclusion

This report sought to highlight the main findings from our research in Latvia and present recommendations to school leaders. Our findings highlight the importance of clear communication and managing workload during a system disruption. They also challenge the fit of some of the current learning practices for a remote setup and attempt to identify elements that can bring better results. From our work internationally we have seen the findings and lessons learned to apply across many different school systems. The research was done early on in the school shutdown so the level of mobilisation and enthusiasm has to be considered. Edurio will work to carry out further research internationally and update the findings. To get in touch with the authors with your questions, feedback or research ideas, please reach out to research@edurio.com.

Acknowledgments

The teams across the Ministry of Education of Science and the National Centre for Education took rapid action to seek feedback at a stressful time for all with deep involvement from the Minister and her administration. Each school in Latvia has participated in distributing the survey to its pupils, parents and teachers, and all respondents have taken their time to improve education for all. The outcome has shaped policy and supported schools. We hope that the lessons will benefit education systems globally.

The report is the outcome of Edurio's UK and Latvia teams working together to deliver nation-wide surveying at an unprecedented pace. The project was led by Gatis Narvaiss and Andrejs Klavins. Data analysis was done by Dita Caunite-Bluma. Design – Artis Taurins. Survey design – Kristaps Ozolins, Ilze Vaivode. Implementation – Lauma Tuca, Evija Rudzite, Renars Eihvalds, Ralfs Alsins, Kaspars Lastovskis, Paulis Svilans, Katrina Kizenbaha, Editing – Richard Brink.

About Edurio

Ernest Jenavs and Janis Strods are the co-founders of Edurio and coordinate Edurio's thought leadership and policy guidance work. Edurio is a leading international provider of stakeholder feedback solutions to schools and school groups. Edurio has developed an advanced survey management and data visualisation platform for schools and groups as well as a research-based survey library. The team designs surveys in collaboration with the University College London Institute of Education experts to address school management priorities and inspection requirements. Edurio publishes research, case studies and practical guidance on evidence-driven school improvement Our latest work on remote learning can be found here: home.edurio.com/remote-learning.

edurio

About the National Centre for Education of the Republic of Latvia

The National Centre for Education led the development of recommendations to school leaders based on the survey results. The NCE is a public administration institution directly subordinated to the Minister of Education and Science. They are responsible for curriculum development, subject standards, examination and learning materials among other areas. The recommendation development was led by Zane Olina, head of implementation at the Centre's Skola 2030 project for curriculum redesign in Latvia. Zane holds a PhD in learning and instructional technology from Arizona State University and was subsequently a researcher and lecturer at Florida State University.

National Centre for Education
of the Republic of Latvia