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Wales Institute of Social and  
Economic Research and Data

# The WISERD Education Multi-Cohort Study

Key findings from 2012-2022



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# Foreword

**The WISERD Education Multi-Cohort Study (WMCS) recently celebrated its 10-year anniversary. The WMCS is a longitudinal study of children and young people in Wales.**

It was established in 2012 by Professor Sally Power and Professor Chris Taylor to chart the progress of children and young people growing up in Wales. Under their stewardship the cohort study has provided a wealth of evidence on young people's lives which has been used by researchers, practitioners and policymakers across Wales.

The WMCS is a unique source of evidence on children's educational experiences and perspectives on national and international issues. Its longitudinal and multi-cohort design enables a robust basis for comparison across years and between cohorts. We now have a decade's worth of data about young people's views and experiences of growing up in Wales, and can see how children's understandings and perspectives have changed over the last decade.

Since 2012 the cohort study has had a considerable influence on education and children's policy and practice here in Wales. It was a particularly important source of evidence during the Covid-19 pandemic, as data on young people's educational experience and wellbeing were provided to Welsh Government task groups to guide their response to the pandemic. In addition, it has been used to inform development of the new curriculum in Wales, with researchers providing evidence on young people's perspectives to Welsh Government throughout the process.



Since 2012 the cohort study has had a considerable influence on education and children's policy and practice here in Wales.



The importance of the WMCS is likely to increase over coming years as Wales undertakes its transformation of the school curriculum. The WMCS is already recognised as an important source of data in this area. The WMCS team is currently working with the Senedd Children and Young People's Committee's enquiry to provide evidence on the extent to which the new curriculum is meeting its aims and regularly provides briefings to Welsh Government.

As the study moves into its second decade, I am pleased that it remains a key part of WISERD's research programme and will continue to inform the development of policy and provide a key source of evidence on the lives of children in Wales.



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**Director of WISERD**

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# Introduction

**The WISERD Education Multi-Cohort Study (WMCS) is an annual cohort study of pupils in Welsh secondary schools.**

Launched in 2012, the WMCS has recently completed data collection for the tenth sweep of the study. Participants are given an online survey to complete each year and each sweep typically combines recurring questions on topics such as pupil perception of education, political engagement, and the Welsh language, alongside more global issues such as climate change and the impacts of coronavirus.

Subsequent sweeps revisit the same pupils as they get older. For example, participating pupils in Years 7, 9 and 11 one year will be revisited the next year in Years 8, 10 and 12, enabling individuals to participate annually for several years until they leave school.

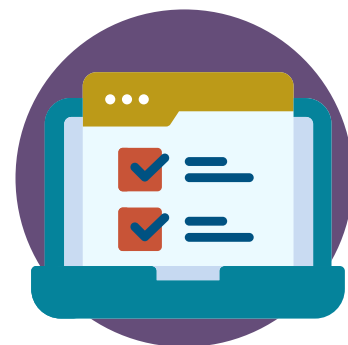
## Aims and objectives of the study

Each year, researchers on the project look at the key findings for dissemination with a view to inform policy and practice. The WMCS also employs longitudinal analysis of indicators, with a decade of data providing significant opportunities to consider the changing views and perception of pupils in Wales over time.

## Respondents

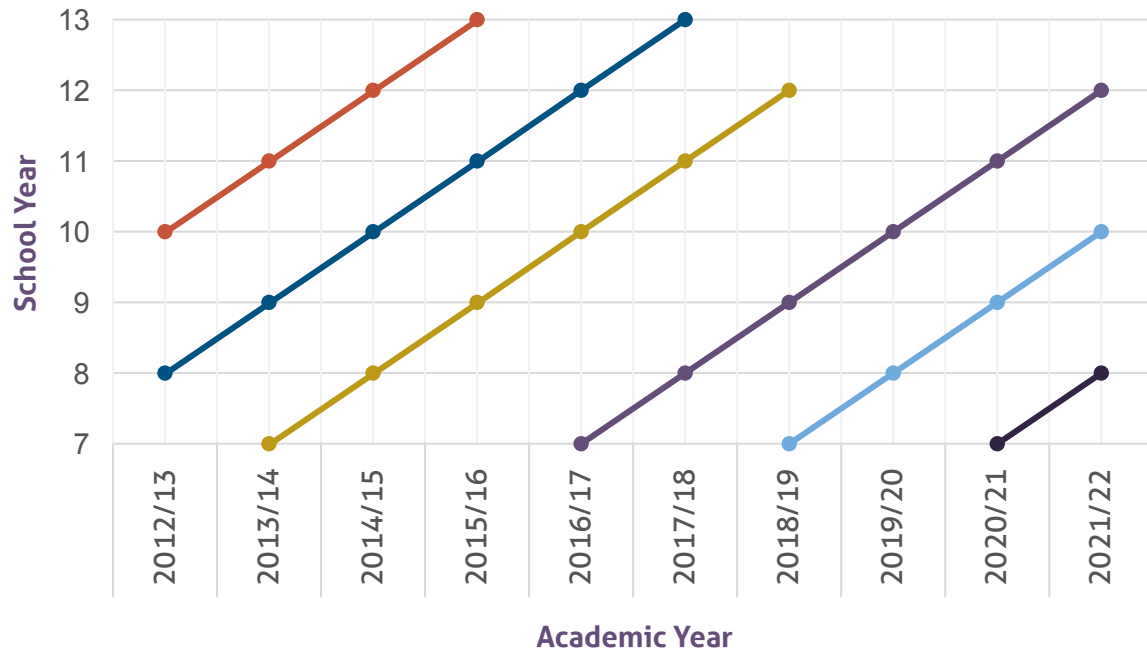
The WMCS aims to maintain a long-term relationship with a sample of schools to ensure participation over multiple years, increasing the likelihood that young people become repeat respondents. Around a thousand pupils participate in the survey each year from across Wales. We sample schools by language of instruction, geographical region and proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals to ensure we represent the views and experiences of pupils from a range of backgrounds.

Around a thousand pupils participate in the survey each year from across Wales.



When pupils join the study, we track them across time, as illustrated in our cohort timeline below.

## Cohort timelines



## Key findings

In this publication, we highlight some of the key findings of the cohort study over the last decade, considering issues such as:

- Classroom exclusions
- Young people's political engagement
- Their attitudes towards the Welsh language
- Their experiences of schooling, including how their schools respond to racist incidents.

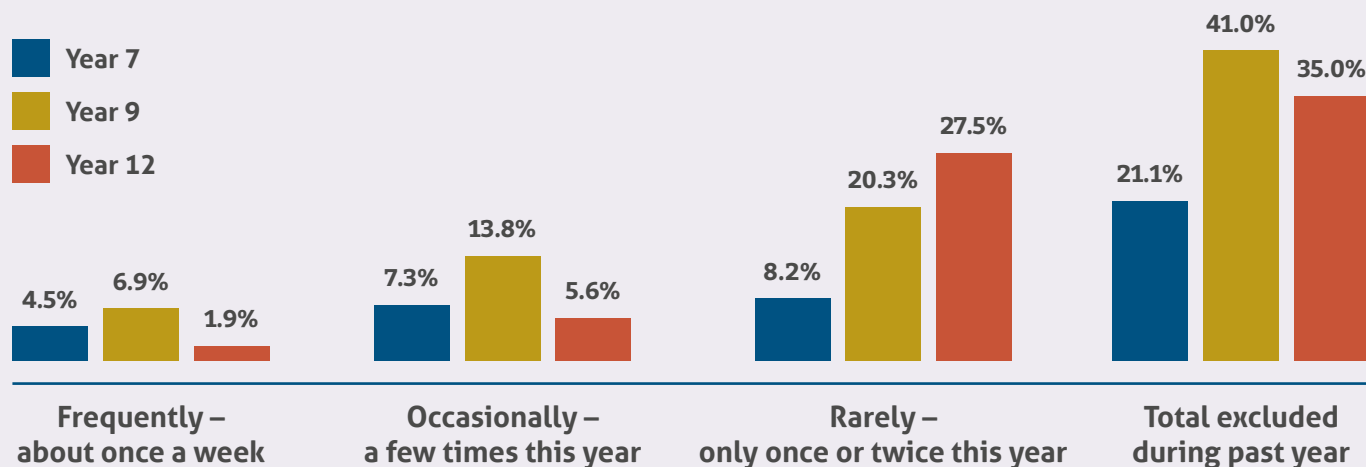
# Excluding pupils from the classroom may begin a trajectory towards school exclusion

Very little is known about classroom exclusions – about how often pupils are asked to leave the classroom because of their behaviour, who gets excluded more often, where they go, and what they do outside the classroom.

Data from the WMCS (2018-19) reveal the following:

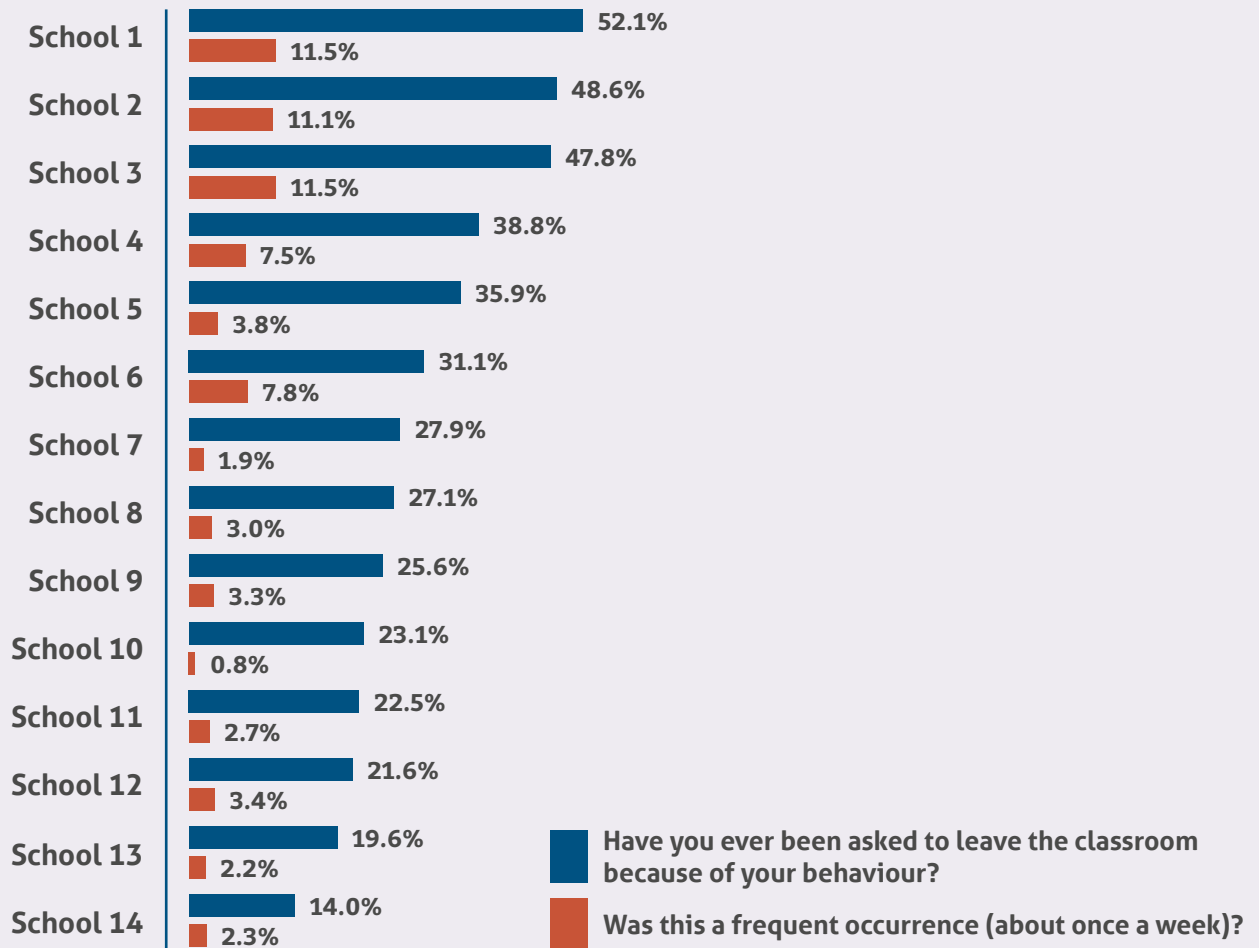
Classroom exclusions happen frequently. Over **40%** of Year 9 students have been asked to leave the classroom at some point in the previous 12 months because of their behaviour. For some pupils (**7%** of Year 9 pupils) this is a frequent weekly occurrence.

## Frequency of being asked to leave the classroom by year group



Asking students to leave the classroom is more common in some schools than others. Pupils in one school were 15 times more likely to be ejected frequently than pupils in one of the other WMCS schools. Classroom exclusions were marginally more common in schools serving disadvantaged communities.

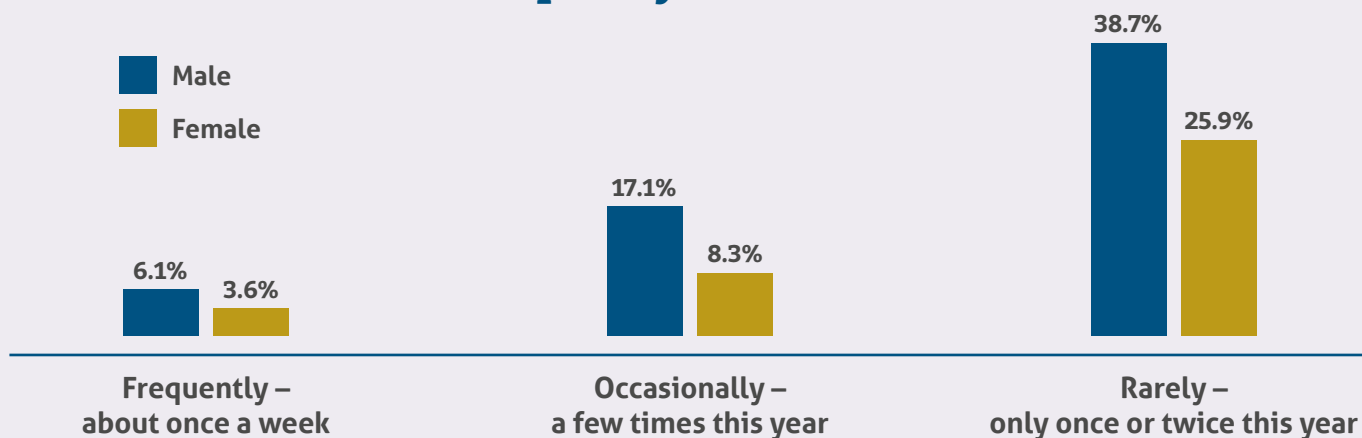
## School-level variations in the incidence and frequency of classroom exclusions





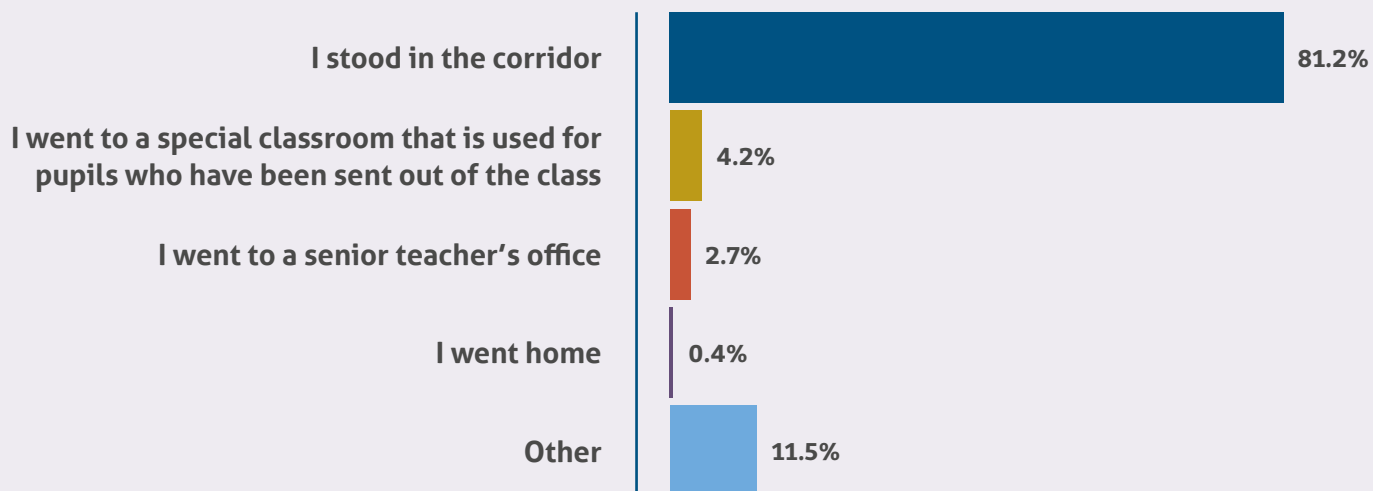
Boys, especially Year 9 boys, are most likely to be asked to leave the classroom.

## Gender and frequency of classroom exclusion



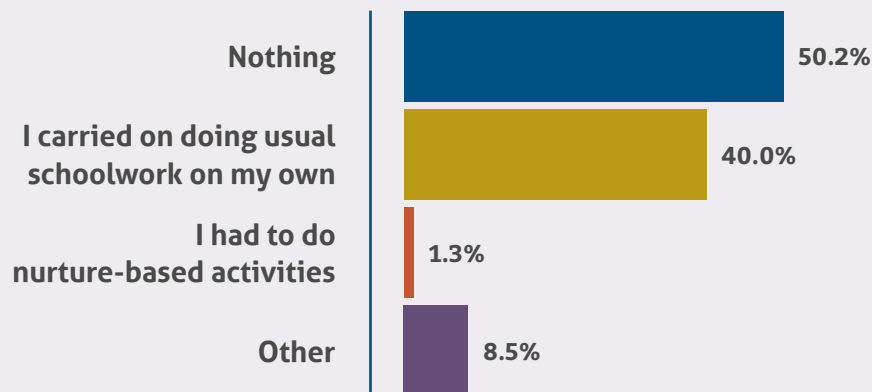
The overwhelming majority (**81%**) of pupils simply stand in the corridor after they've left the classroom.

## Where did you go?



Half of the pupils say they 'do nothing' once they've been excluded from the classroom, but **40%** reported that they carried on doing their usual schoolwork on their own.

## What did you do?



## Why classroom exclusions matter:

- Cumulatively, classroom exclusions must lead to a significant loss of learning time – and especially for those pupils who get ejected from the classroom frequently.
- Classroom exclusions may indicate, or contribute to, a more damaging school exclusion trajectory.

This research appears in Sally Power & Chris Taylor (2022) Classroom exclusions: patterns, practices, and pupil perceptions, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*.



# Differences in pupils' attitudes towards the Welsh language

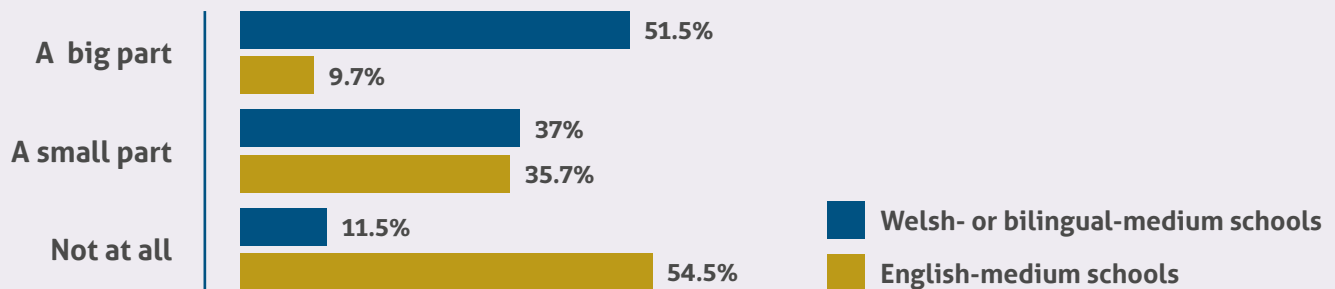
## Welsh language and identity

2021-2022's Sweep reveals variations in the extent to which students consider the Welsh language to be a part of their Welsh identity.

Pupils in English-medium schools are far less likely to connect with Welsh, with **54.5%** saying it is not at all part of their identity. Most pupils in Welsh- or bilingual-medium schools say the language is at least some part of their personal identity (**89%**).



## Is the Welsh language part of your identity?



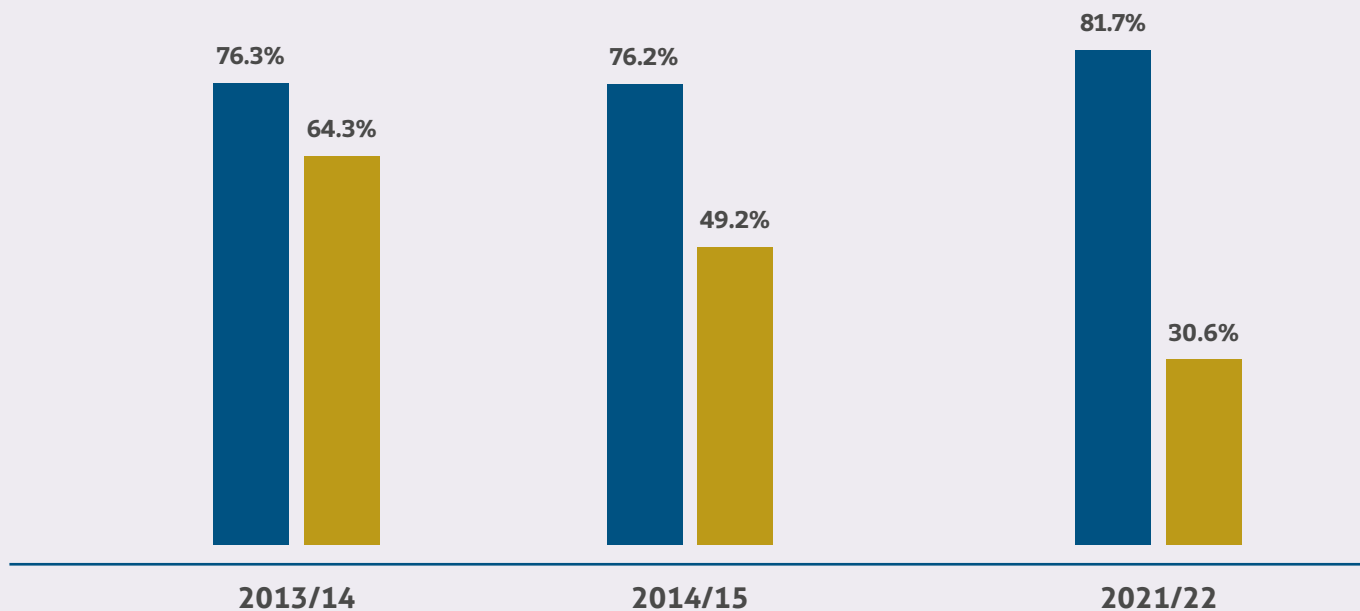
## Decline over time determined by school medium

When comparing pupil views on the importance of learning Welsh over time, the trends are also strikingly split by school medium – unsurprising considering their lack of connection to the language.

However, our study found that the responses to the questions 'How important is it for you to (be able to) speak Welsh?' and 'How important is it for you to (continue to) learn Welsh?' show that pupils attending English-medium schools in Wales now find learning and speaking Welsh far less important than they used to, whereas there has been little change in Welsh-medium schools.

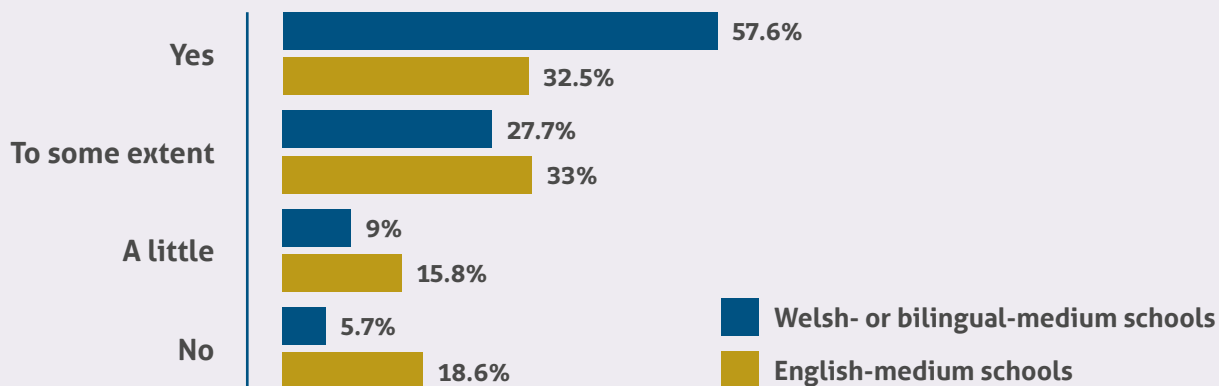
### How important is it for you to be able to speak Welsh? (Responses: very important/important)

■ Welsh- or bilingual-medium schools  
■ English-medium schools



58% of pupils at Welsh- or bilingual-medium schools think that speaking Welsh helps people to find a job, whereas at English-medium schools there is more variation in views.

## Do you think being able to speak Welsh helps people to find a job?



Results are similar for “Welsh helps people to learn another language”, though do not extend to other areas of life in Wales including “fitting in more at work” or “in higher education”.

While pupils at Welsh- or bilingual-medium schools feel that the ability to speak Welsh will have a positive impact on their future trajectories, pupils at English-medium schools are more divided on the matter.

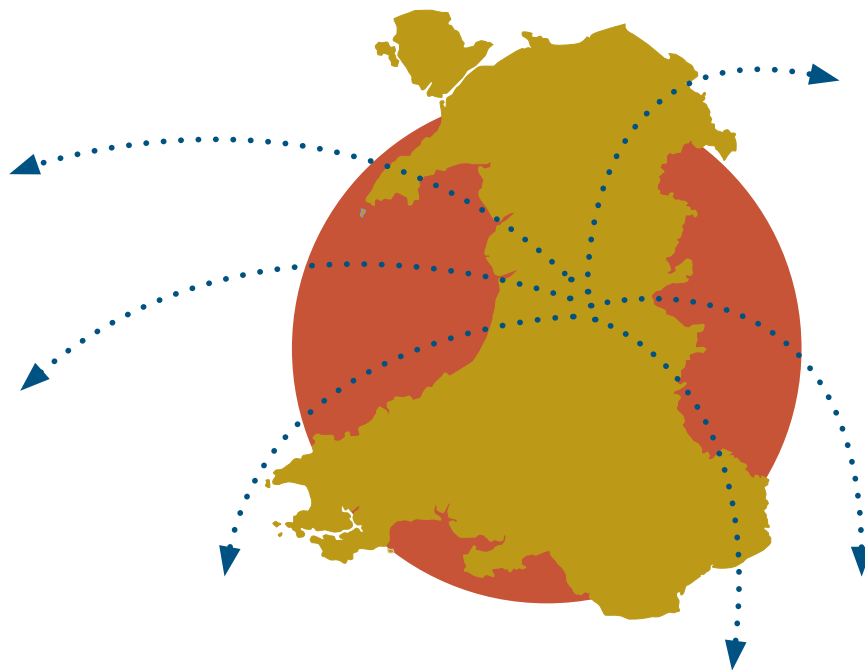


## Lack of confidence to learn

Despite pupils at Welsh- and bilingual-medium schools being confident speaking Welsh overall (**71%**), 3 in 5 report a lack of confidence in the classroom. For many, especially at English-medium schools where confidence is lower (**23%** feel confident speaking Welsh), the classroom is the only environment in which they engage with Welsh.

## Effect on future generations of speakers

Major differences in perceptions of Welsh by school medium show that pupils at English-medium schools are growing less receptive to the language. Combined with low confidence in Welsh- and bilingual-medium school classrooms and a perception that pupils need to leave Wales to find work (see page 26 'In brief'), motivation for future speakers of the language to develop the skills gained at school seems challenging.



# Young people's political knowledge and participation in Wales

Over the last decade we have gained valuable insights about young people's political knowledge and engagement in Wales from the WMCS.

A key strength of the study is that it is responsive to current events and policy priorities:



## In 2017

We asked for young people's views on Brexit and found that **59%** of Year 10 students and **76%** of Year 12 students would have voted to stay in the EU.



## In 2021

We asked young people how they would vote in a Welsh independence election and found that **18.5%** would support this, with the highest level of support amongst the oldest students (**25%** of 15 to 16-year-olds).



# Devolution

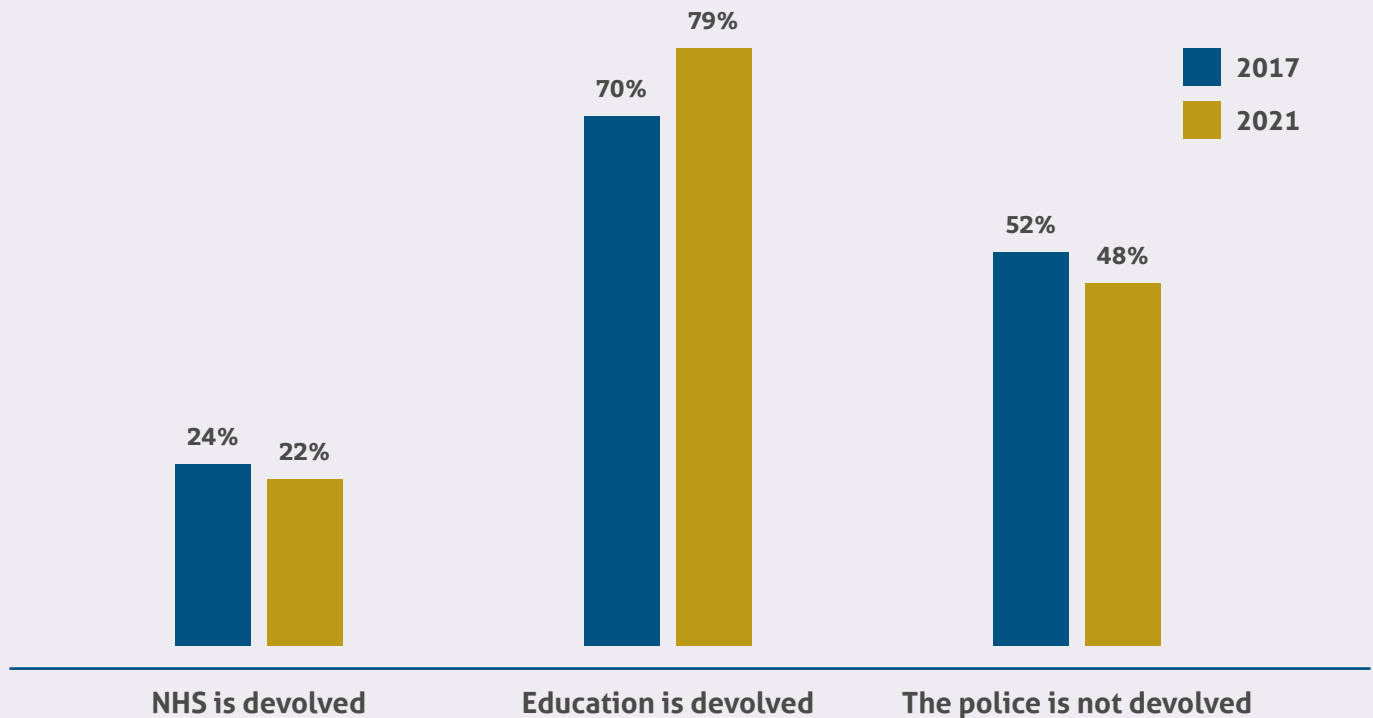
In 2017 and 2021 we asked students which policy areas they thought were devolved to Wales.

The good news is that the majority were aware that education is devolved, and that this increased between 2017 and 2021.

However, only around half of each cohort were aware that policing is the responsibility of the UK Government, and fewer than a quarter knew that the NHS is devolved to Wales.



## % that answered questions correctly



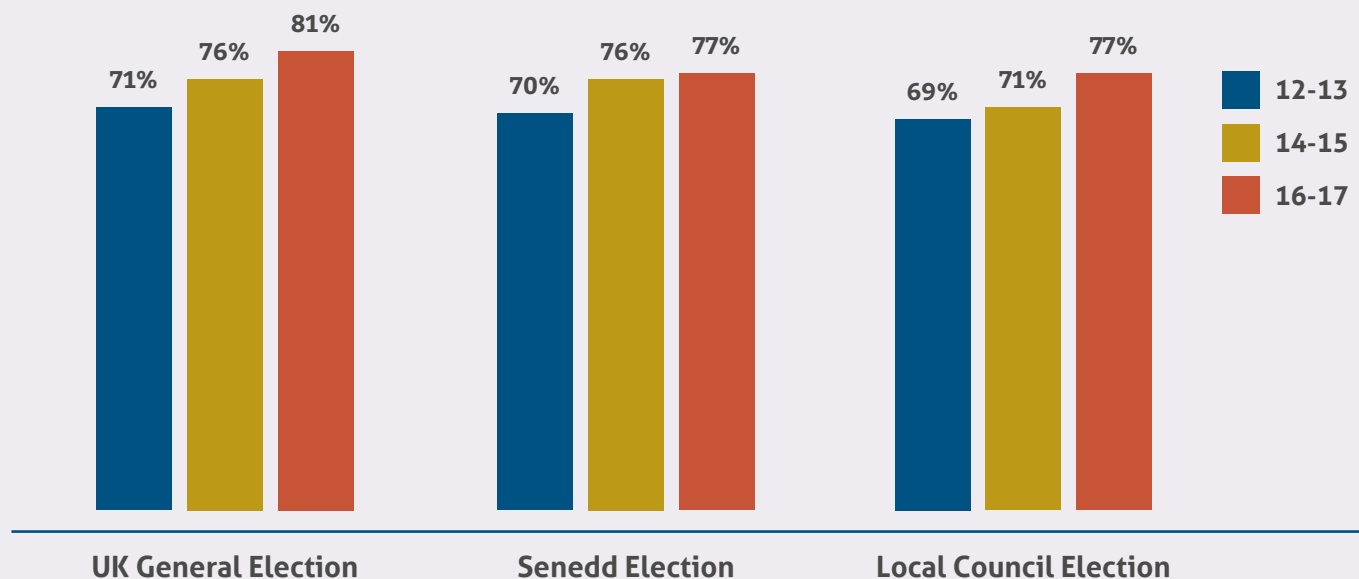


# Voting

In 2022 we asked pupils about whether they intended to vote (when old enough) in UK general elections, Senedd elections and local council elections – and found that intention to vote increased both in age group and with election type.

Over three quarters of 16 to 17-year-olds planned to vote in each election.

## Intention to vote by age group and election type



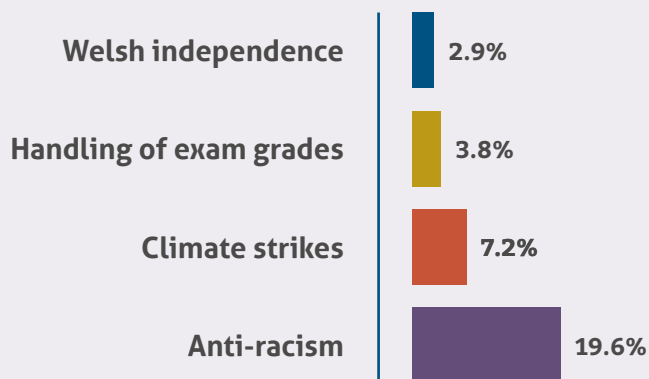
### Students also had good awareness of how to vote:

- The majority of 16 to 17-year-olds (**91%**) were aware that they needed to register to vote.
- **45%** of 16 to 17-year-olds learned about voting at school in the last 12 months, however, only a fifth of 12 to 13 and 14 to 15-year-olds said the same.

## Protest politics

Engagement with electoral politics is not the only way that young people can participate politically, and so we have also considered students' involvement with protest.

### What issues have you protested about? (2020-21)



These findings indicate that a fifth of young people in our study have participated in an anti-racism protest – a considerable number that shows how young people are attempting to address injustices in their communities.

## Future directions

As the study enters its second decade, we will continue to ask questions about young people's participation and engagement with politics, with questions on support for the monarchy, Welsh independence and attitudes towards voting.



# Tackling issues of 'race' and racism in school

In 2022, the Welsh Government launched the 'Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan' which requires all schools to tackle institutional racism.

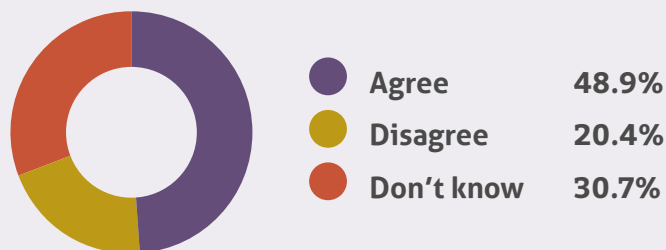
In addition to reviewing the Curriculum for Wales, this will entail schools developing policies to deal with racist abuse, discrimination and bullying. We are interested in the extent to which schools currently deal with issues of 'race' and racism.

Data from the WMCS (2021-22) reveal the following:

Overall, half of the pupils agreed that their school encouraged them to discuss issues around 'race' and racism. One in five disagreed.



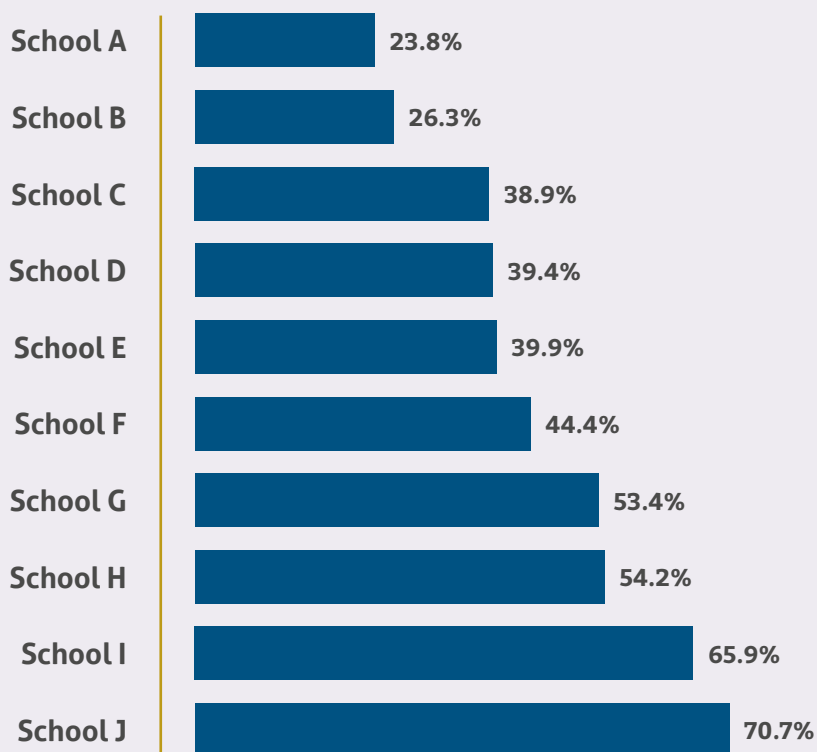
## My school encourages us to discuss issues around race and racism



However, there are wide variations between schools in the extent to which pupils are encouraged to discuss these issues.

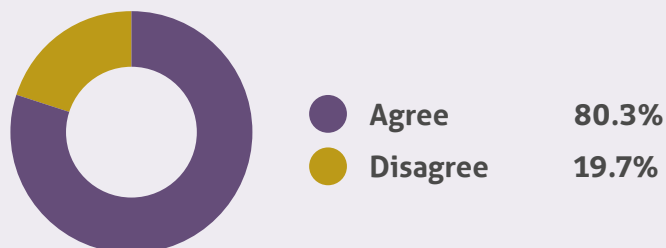
In one school, over **70%** of pupils said they were encouraged to discuss issues of 'race' and racism. This was the case for only **24%** of pupils in another school.

## **% pupils agreeing their school encourages discussions around race and racism**



The overwhelming majority of pupils (**80%**) agreed that their school takes reports of racism seriously.

## My school takes reports of racism seriously



However, there was a wide difference between the responses of white and minority ethnic pupils.

Black, Asian and minority ethnic pupils were more than twice as likely to disagree with the statement that their school takes reports of racism seriously.

	White	BAME
Agree	85.6%	62.7%
Disagree	14.4%	37.3%

## Why it matters:

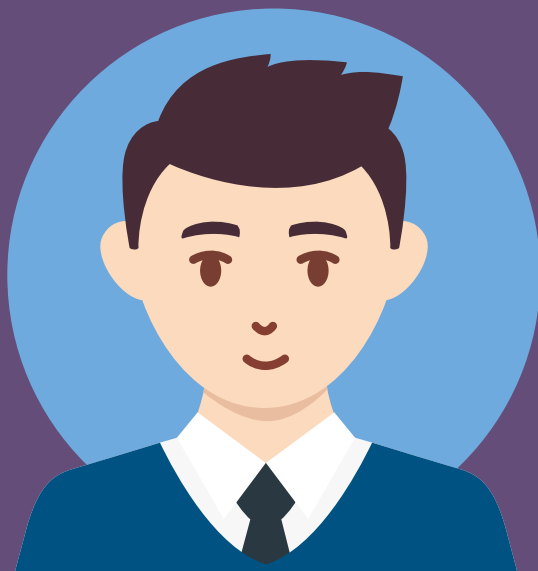
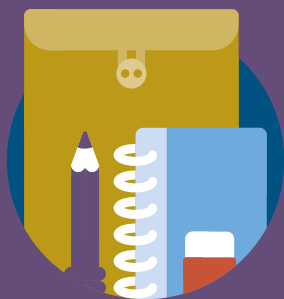
- It is difficult to see how schools can achieve the Welsh Government's vision of an 'Anti-racist Wales' if teachers do not encourage pupils to discuss issues around 'race' and racism.
- While it would appear from the pupils' responses that schools are attempting to deal with reports of racism seriously, many pupils, and particularly minority ethnic pupils, do not agree.

This research appears in a WISERD blog post: [Discussing and dealing with issues of race and racism: WMCS survey reveals wide variations between schools in Wales.](#)

# Trends in school-related issues over the last decade

**Over the last 10 years we have asked pupils about their experiences at school.**

Here, we include some of our results relating to school experience, paying particular attention to those areas the new Curriculum for Wales will address.

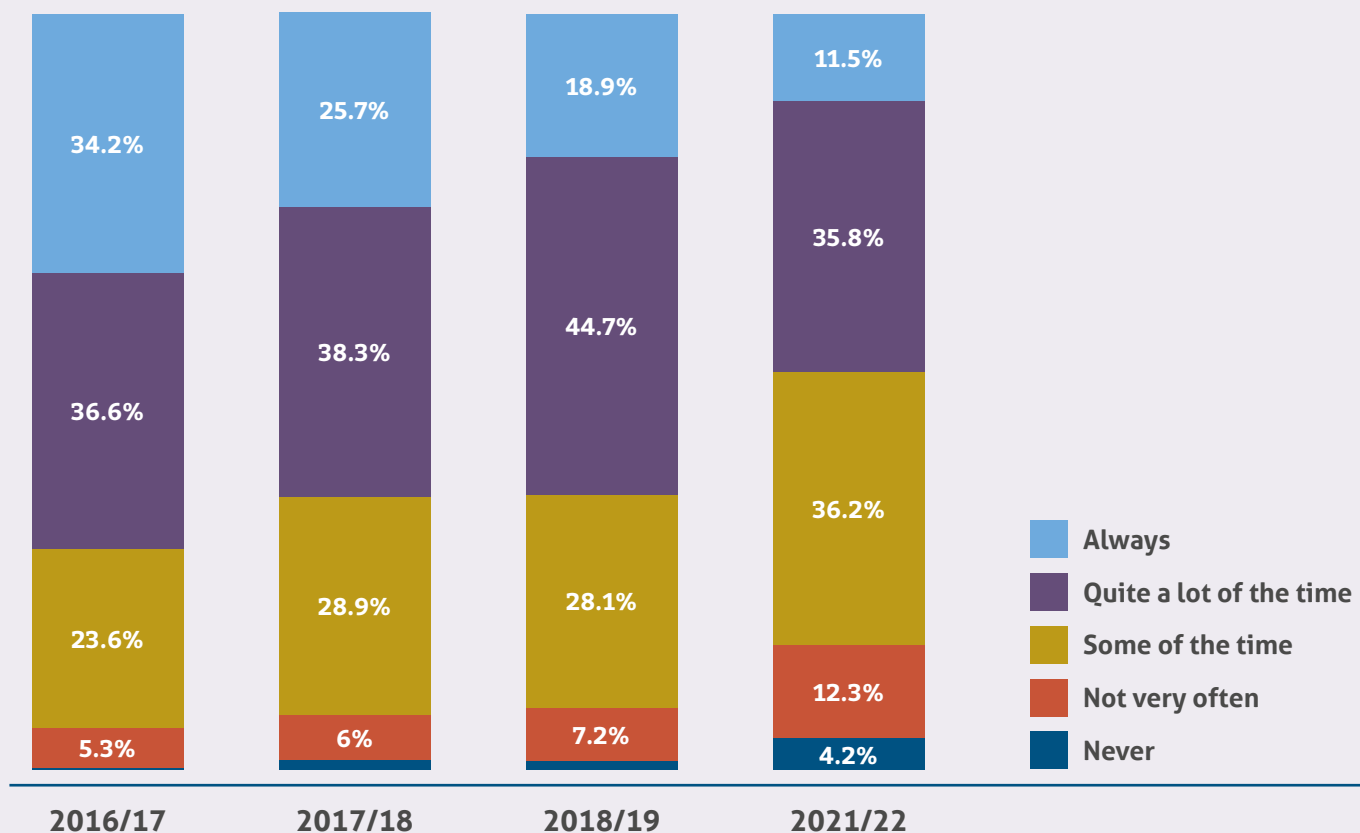


## Getting help from teachers

The results of academic year 2016/17 indicate that 70.8% of pupils felt supported by teachers with tasks that they found difficult – either 'always' or 'quite a lot of the time'.

While this figure was high, there was a clear decreasing trend to 47.3% in 2021/22.

### I get enough help from my teacher if I find something difficult

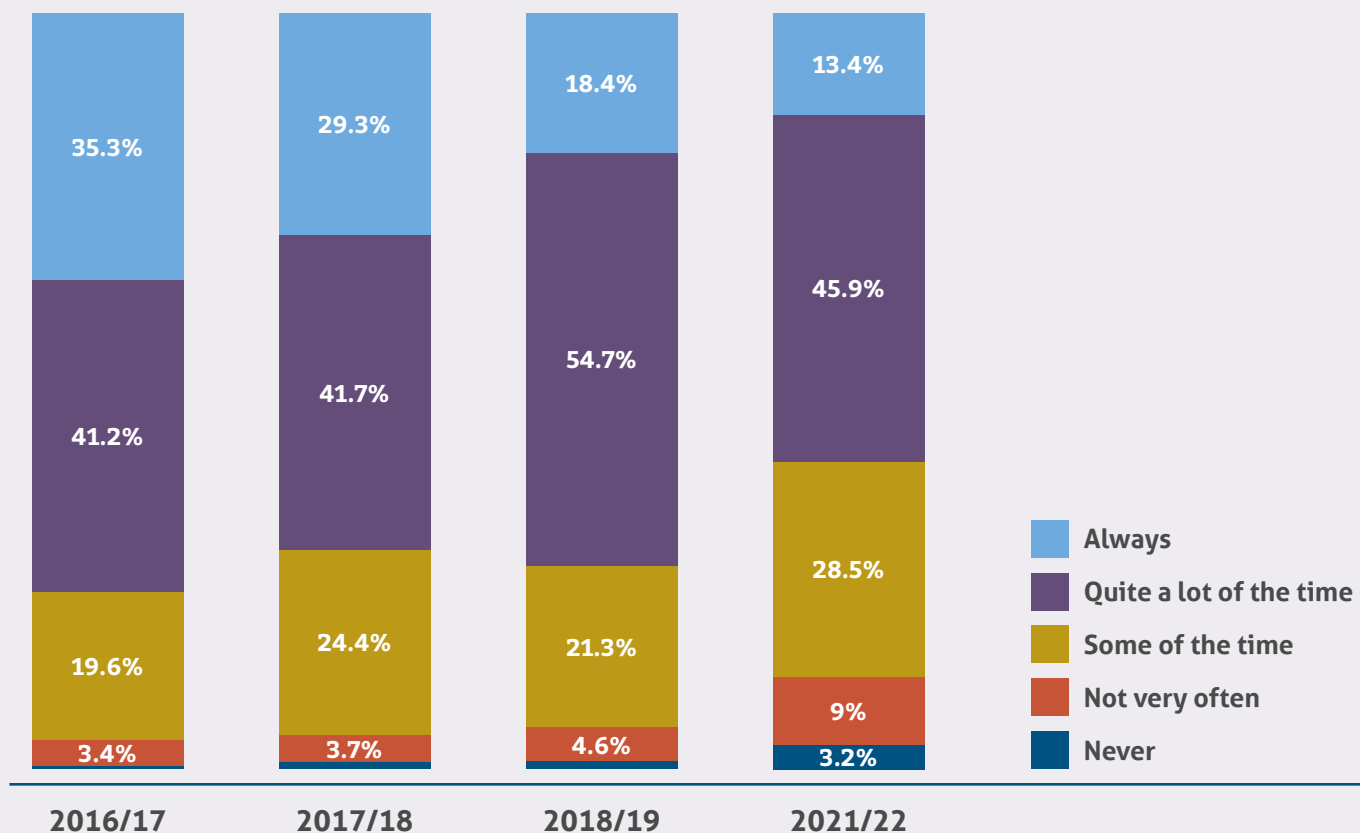


## Understanding lessons

Over three quarters of pupils reported being able to understand their lessons either 'always' or 'quite a lot of the time'.

While this figure is high, it has deteriorated over a six-year period, down to 59.3% in the most recent sweep of data.

### How often do you understand your lessons?





# The study's future

**The WISERD Education Multi-Cohort Study is ideally placed to measure changes introduced to schools with the adoption of the new Curriculum for Wales.**

With this research tool, we can continue to track the cohorts' attitudes to school. We can explore whether these trends are reversed as the new Curriculum for Wales is implemented in the coming years.



**The study continues to contribute to international academic research as well as to vital areas of knowledge about young people and the future of Welsh society and politics.**



# In brief:

## Some of the WMCS's other interesting findings

### 1

#### Young people's sleep is disrupted by social media.

Just under a quarter of 12 to 15-year-olds wake up to check social media most nights.

Unsurprisingly, those who did this were far more likely to report being tired the next day (2012-13 survey).



### 2

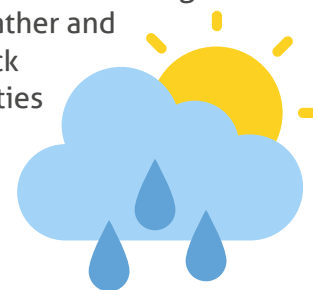
#### Give them a million pounds each and a quarter of them say they would give it away.

A further 25% said that they would give at least some of it away, and 14% told us that they that they would save it all. Only 36% would spend most of it (2012-13 survey).



### 3

**Best and worst things about living in Wales.** They think that the scenery and landscape are the best things about living in Wales. These were followed closely by people and community. The worst things were the weather and perceived lack of opportunities (2014-15 and 2020-21 surveys).



### 4

Almost 1 in 5 pupils say they have campaigned for the environment (2020-21 survey).



### 5

In 2012-13's survey, of the top 20 women listed as 'heroes' by the pupils, all but one were pop singers. Of the top 20 men, the 'heroes' were mainly footballers and rugby players.

### 6

Whilst 82% were able to correctly identify Wales's First Minister, he was found to be the least recognisable leader for our pupils compared to leaders in England, Scotland and the US (2020-21 survey).

# 7

In the 2020-21 survey, 1 in 5 said they have **protested a school policy or rule.**

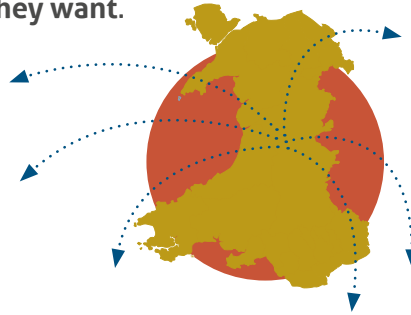


# 10

Politicians are some of the least trusted authority figures, according to 2020-21's survey, with **76%** of pupils responding 'not very much' or 'not at all' when asked whether they trust politicians.

# 8

In 2021, over a third of pupils (**36%**) felt that they will have to leave Wales to do the job they want.



# 11

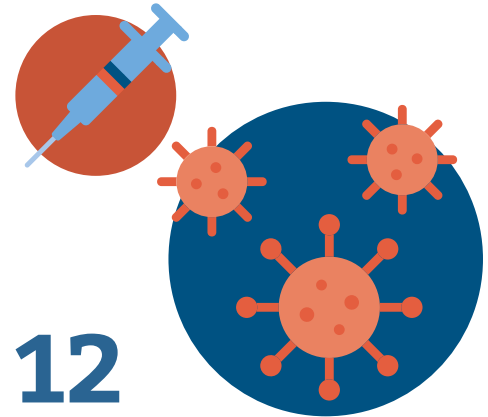
Children are concerned about their parents' mobile phone use. In 2018-19, **59%** of year 7 students and **66%** of year 9 students said that they often ask their parents to stop using their mobile phones.



# 9



**Racism and mental health are young people's key concerns.** When asked which issues they think about the most, racism and mental health topped the list. A fifth of young people say they have been on an anti-racism protest (2020-21 survey).



# 12

In the summer of 2021, **50%** of pupils felt that the **Covid-19 vaccine was safe.** Confidence in the safety of the vaccine appears to increase with age and pupils eligible for free school meals were 2.5 times more likely to believe the vaccine is not safe.

# About us

The Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data (WISERD) is a national, interdisciplinary, social science research institute. We have been designated by the Welsh Government as a national research centre.



[wiserd.ac.uk](http://wiserd.ac.uk)



[@WISERDNews](https://twitter.com/WISERDNews)

## How to get involved

If you work at a school and would like to participate in the WMCS, please get in touch: [WMCS@wiserd.ac.uk](mailto:WMCS@wiserd.ac.uk)

WISERD works in partnership with a wide range of different organisations. If you would like to find out more about our research, are interested in working with us on a joint event or would like to co-produce a piece of research, please get in touch.