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Moving to Online Learning: The Big Picture

The impact of COVID-19 is seeing many schools around the world implement virtual learning programmes for their students. Many online platforms and digital solutions exist to support this, and schools should use the system that is most familiar to their staff and students. The purpose of this document is to outline some key considerations based on our experience in other countries to help you proactively plan for success.

Wellbeing

In school, we check in with our colleagues and students all the time, often noticing concerns rather than waiting for things to be said. Consider how you will look after wellbeing when working remotely. This requires asking about it alongside more formal processes.

Students When structuring online learning there can be a temptation to 'pack the timetable', overlooking all the opportunities that students have in the normal day for less structured conversations that support their social engagement. Encourage students to ask questions during structured and unstructured online sessions, creating dialogue as would be expected in the classroom. Teachers may want to timetable check-in sessions with smaller groups of students.

Staff Be proactive in agreeing how staff can touch base. This is aside from the more formal opportunities to share notices and briefing messages. Consider smaller, pre-arranged groups for a member of the leadership team to check in with staff. A simple structure can work well, e.g. How are you? Any student concerns? Lessons learned? etc.

Get creative Events in school happen all the time that bring people together. Think about how events for students and staff can take place in a virtual environment.

Pedagogy

Schools operate with a high degree of routine and this helps children navigate their day. It is worth proactively considering how this will look with remote and online learning.

The schedule Make sure that children and parents know what their schedule is and what is expected. Enable the schedule to build and change over time. Start with fewer things and build up, and balance screen-based with more physical activities. Remember that parents will be juggling around their work commitments.

Cognitive load Think carefully about the way that you structure your online sessions. This is different from a classroom where you can spot signals of learning and confusion. Break steps into chunks and ensure that students have time to practice their learning.

New learning Try to get a good balance between new learning and application of existing learning. This will help students manage their cognitive load. Be sure to agree how learning should be submitted and how feedback is given.

Communication

Schools communicate all the time in many different ways. Consider what this will look like – and what methods you will use – when everyone is working remotely.

Staff briefing A regular briefing note by email or on your platform is a smart way to communicate the 'quick and simple daily messages' rather than using valuable online meeting time.

Connecting Be clear about the purpose of each of your online interactions with students and structure them with that purpose in mind. Remember that attention span online, when you often do not have the usual visual cues from 'in the room', means that messages need to be snappy.

Parent communication Where possible, continue to use your established channels of communication as this encourages a sense of stability and continuity. Consider FAQs for parents and ensure they know the process for asking questions or raising concerns. Make parents part of your planning and think about how to involve them in the learning process.

Parent connecting Think about how you will connect with parents so that they can share thoughts and anxieties. Small groups are preferable in order to support more purposeful discussion.

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Guidance for setting up online learning at your school

Mindset

Although putting a system in place for online learning may seem daunting, or less effective than what you are used to as a brick-and-mortar school, remember that this is temporary. Let go of any defences you might have and enter into the mindset that this is a way of meeting your students' needs during this unprecedented moment in time.

Online learning is different and takes time to master well. Try to approach this with the spirit of a learner and adventurer, and be open to doing things differently.

Nuts and bolts

Online learning does not need to be expensive; there are many inexpensive or free platforms, e.g. Microsoft Teams, Google G-Suite etc. See the Cognita Remote and Online Learning Protocol for the advice on the best system to use.

Transitioning to an online learning model will take some time and planning. Don't feel like you have to put everything in place from day one. Spend time with key leaders planning your approach.

You will have technology glitches - just roll with it. Anyone who has ever presented at a conference knows that tech can sometimes be an issue and disrupt the flow of a teaching situation. Being prepared to mediate these challenges proactively will reduce student and teacher stress.

First steps

Make a plan and start soon. That sounds obvious, but don't underestimate the challenge ahead of you. Trying to implement online learning without a strong clear plan will end in chaos.

A vital first step is to define what your online learning school will look like. Will you hold **synchronous** classes that would correspond to a normal school day, or will you adopt an **asynchronous** approach in which students will have limited or even no direct contact with teachers? Or will you have a **hybrid** approach in which students have some synchronous schooling and some asynchronous. Whatever you choose, making a clear decision and sticking with it is important. All else will follow this first step.

Factors to consider in making this choice:

- Size of your student population and size of your individual classes
- The number of teachers you employ
- Access to adequate technology (computers and software solutions) for teachers and students
- Your curriculum and the way you assess your students
- The amount of time you have to prepare
- The strength of your relationship with your families/parents
- Training needs for staff and families

Once you have decided what sort of online learning you will pursue, the next most important step is for leaders and staff to determine the policies and procedures by which you will run your distance learning programme. This may be new terrain for everyone involved - people will need to know what their roles and expectations are, and how they will be enforced. Make these policies clear for leaders, teachers, students and families. **Keep it as simple as possible.**

Some of the questions and factors you will want to consider are:

- When does your school day take place?
- How will you translate your in-person curricular experience into a distance one? More on this overleaf.
- How will you take and enforce attendance?
- How often will your teachers be available, and will they come into the school building or work from home?

- Who will be your point technology person to troubleshoot issues like wi-fi connection, lost student work, communications, emails, etc.?
- What learning platform or software solutions will you use?
- What training will you provide your teachers and students/families? How will you make it available?
- Will your current learning management system suffice, or will you need new tools to assist you?
- Who will be the lead on communications among teachers, students and families? Issues will come up, and it will be important to know who can provide clear and correct advice/ information.
- Do you need to provide training about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate online communications?
- Could assemblies be used to share online learning expectations with students?

Parents

Connecting with parents is crucial. Parents will have many questions and concerns. Ideally, holding a parent meeting (in-person and/or via video call) to support them is very important. You might also consider having weekly set times for meeting with parents.

- Before you host such a meeting, have a robust plan of action in place that you can unveil.
- Collect parent questions and concerns ahead of time and address them in a controlled logical progression.
- Many parents will need guidance and support if new applications and platforms are being used.
- Good coordination among the staff team is crucial. Working as a team to troubleshoot this adventure will make the entire experience run more smoothly. Look to appoint some staff champions who can help with the admin, coordinate and train.

Teaching and learning

Teaching at a distance is different. Trying to approach a distance learning situation with the same techniques and strategies that work for an in-person class will not work well. For example, when addressing a group of students at a distance via video conference call, it can be hard to gauge how what you have said is understood - there is not the immediate feedback that one gets when face to face with students (you can't even be sure students heard you correctly, or at all, given the challenges with microphones, connection speed, ambient noise, and various distractions students may have at home). This is especially challenging when giving a complex assignment and made more complicated by the fact that students may be hesitant to ask clarifying questions at a distance. A way of addressing such a challenge, among others, could be to use recorded screencast recordings of the teacher explaining the assignment - something the students can watch asynchronously as many times as they need, such Microsoft PowerPoint screen recorder.

Contrary to what is commonly believed about online learning often requires more time and is more complicated than in-person schooling. There is a lot of behind the scene coordination that must take place to make an effective programme work.

Key questions to support setting up online learning

The technology - some of the factors you may need to consider:

- If you decide to use a video platform such as Microsoft Teams, what will you use and what computer technology do your teachers and students need?
- Agree the best technology for specific purposes, e.g. sharing videos, presenting etc
- How will you administer multiple students accounts, and how will you make sure students know how to login to different classes?
- When will your classes take place, and how do you create this schedule?
- If holding synchronous online courses, what will your class sizes be? Note: In an online classroom it is difficult for a teacher to teach and facilitate conversation with more than 15 students, especially if students ask questions via the chat function.
- What platform/system will you use to reliably deliver student assignments, grade and return work?
- What is your protocol for managing an online discussion? In essence, how do you 'put your hand up' online?
- How will you efficiently track student work/progress?

Teachers - some of the factors you may need to consider:

- Will teachers work from home or the school?
- When will they hold office hours?
- How will you monitor their progress?
- How will you provide feedback to students?
- What is the mechanism for teacher feedback and troubleshooting of challenges?
- Agree a format for saving documents that can be shared with students – be consistent

Curriculum - some of the factors you may need to consider:

- How will you ensure that the workload for students is manageable? (Note: When schools begin online learning, the feedback is often that students feel bombarded with content).
- Are you able to offer a range of difference curriculum content and associated activities?

Students - some of the factors you may need to consider:

- How will students know what is expected?
- How do students engage in conversations and dialogue with teachers and peers safely in used applications?
- Have students tested their logins for applications and platforms already used?

Student wellbeing - some of the factors you may need to consider:

- Will you have virtual tutor groups or form groups for check in?
- How can they connect with their friends?
- How do they raise concerns?

Staff communication and wellbeing - some of the factors you may need to consider:

- How will you share briefing notes with staff (quick info)?
- How will you engage as a team?
- Will you set up 'check-in groups' with members of the leadership team for smaller groups?