

What we have Learnt from Distance Learning

Over the last four months, the Directors of The Education Group have worked with a number of schools through MOE funded COVID PLD programme and have also talked with Principals, Deputy Principals over 60 professional development groups. We have been involved in the administration and analysis of some of the surveys the schools have conducted. The summary below, is our collation of the ideas of strategies discussed with these schools and groups. It is not research, simply a summary of their voices to be used as a benchmark for your own practice.

Feel free to use and share this document within and across schools.

Leadership

Our leaders talked about needing to be

- Calm
- Decisive
- You don't have to do everything that other Principals are doing as per the Principals Facebook Page

Organisation and Systems

- Schools have found it beneficial to seek feedback from parents, staff and students about what worked and what didn't during the Lockdown. Many have conducted surveys, a few have gathered feedback from teaching teams or Departments, others have held group discussions with students
- There is a small window within which to gain leverage from what's been learned from Lockdown. If you are keen to maintain an approach, a practice or an idea, the momentum is still likely to be there.
- One way some schools are using to ensure that bigger changes are sustained is by integrating them into their school's strategic goals. One secondary school involved key planning teams, already in place, to collate ideas from stakeholder surveys that the teams believed needed to be sustained. Teachers discussed and prioritised these ideas and linked them to the school's goals. This process will ensure that what has been learned will be incorporated into the school's direction and will be sustained.
- It is important for schools to ensure consistency of expectations across all classes. Parents were acutely aware of differences in expectations between their own children at different levels of the school. In one school, one teacher was allocated to a family regardless of the year level(s) of the children to reduce the traffic from the school to home.

- Important for schools to support students to understand the protocols around learning platforms such as ZOOM, for example.
- Some schools took a while to “locate” all their students at the beginning of Lockdown. This highlighted the importance of schools having up-to-date details including email addresses and mobile phone numbers for all students. In one school, the school office will continue to update information for all parents who visit the school office.
- Meetings
Over lock down, the focus was on teachers meeting online to plan. Some Principals are aiming to keep the number of whole staff meetings to a minimum and give more flexibility to teachers after school. Their focus is on:
 - Targeted workshops for teachers (rather than whole staff PLD) - these worked very well during Lockdown
 - Teachers having more time to plan together
 - Pursue ways of managing administration electronically other than at meetings

Teacher Wellbeing, Collaboration and Professional Learning and Development

Collaboration between teachers

Principals talked about there being a much higher level of collaboration amongst teachers when planning work for students. Most teachers relished the opportunity to work more closely with their colleagues. Some have noticed that this has been hard to maintain back at school. Pressure led to innovation.

Being Digitally Savvy

Lockdown highlighted the importance of teachers being digitally savvy although it was difficult for some teachers initially. The feedback suggested that all teachers made significant progress even those who were already very competent. Schools made very good use of the expertise within their current staff. They ran online workshops for teachers, encouraged lots of sharing of good ideas and coached each other one on one to improve the skills of their teachers. The use of their own 'bright spots' rather than external experts worked for them.

Wellbeing

Schools acknowledged the importance of staff staying connected with each other and having fun during Lockdown. Leaders also recognised that they needed to understand their teachers' personal circumstances and what support they needed to operate effectively from home. Connections were made in a variety of ways:

- Through a staff Facebook page
- Friday virtual “drinks” sessions

- Quiz nights
- Dress-up days
- Department and team virtual meetings – professional and personal
- Phone calls/email check-ins to staff from members of the leadership team
- Staff videos for students

We talk about teachers knowing their students personally and about their learning. In the same way, leaders need to get to know their staff well - their personal circumstances and their professional lives.

Teacher Professional Learning and Development

A number of senior leaders commented on how quickly teachers prepared for Lockdown. In two or three days many were well on their way to providing an online learning programme for their students. While COVID was a strong catalyst for change, the Principals believe there two lessons can be learned.

- They had a compelling reason for change
- They were given what is equivalent to two teacher - only days, not to listen to talking heads, but to plan and prepare practical teaching and learning activities to be implemented in the classroom over the following weeks.

Teaching and Learning

Student Wellbeing

Many schools had wellbeing as a priority over academic learning. They wanted their students to feel safe, secure and happy. The benefit of this was that many children enjoyed their Lockdown experience, even though they missed making the typical connections with their friends. Some schools maintained a wellbeing focus on return to school. One secondary school has Wellbeing as a strategic goal. As a result of Lockdown, they revised the direction and strategies for implementation – a much stronger focus on every teacher knowing their students personally, how they learn and their career pathways

Learner Agency

Teachers gave students more agency e.g. planning their day

Distance learning provided opportunities to students to have flexibility and choice over what, when and how they learnt. They did this in multiple ways:

- They set up the day with a Zoom meeting (or something similar) which often included a family member in the case of younger students
- A school day with scheduled workshops in literacy and mathematics
- Work being set at the beginning of the week for student to complete in their own time

- A list of Must Do's and Can Do's each day or over a week - Mustard (Must Do) Mayonnaise (Might/May Do) and Ketchup (Catch-Up)

Inclusion or differentiation

- Several schools mentioned the difficulty some teachers had tailoring distance learning tasks for some of their students. Some of these students struggled with their learning and some parents reported how difficult it was for their children to learn or for them to teach them. The SENCO at one school used this information to spark discussions with the full staff about differentiation and inclusion and is now coaching some teachers one to one.
- The SENCO's question is: How can we scaffold students learning so that every student can access the learning, without the teacher helping them at every step or doing the work for them, of giving them tasks that occupy them but don't help them achieve the same outcomes as other students? How can teachers give agency to these students? agency? Another school is using this question to give leverage to its focus on Universal Design for Learning (UDL - <https://www.inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/universal-design-for-learning/>).
- Some teachers provided a wider range of activities and ways in which students could access their learning than would typically occur. This was the case in both primary and secondary 'classrooms'. Students could pick and choose. how they accessed information and how they showed what they were learning.
- IEPs
Some schools used digital tools to organise and run IEP meetings with multiple people and agencies; it was efficient and effective, maybe not for an initial meeting but certainly once connections had been made and relationships established.
- Some ELL learners regressed in their English due to them conversing in their first language at home. Schools realised the importance of setting English speaking-tasks for these students although appreciated the challenges associated with this with parents who had limited English.

Access to Digital Technology

Schools became acutely aware of the importance of all students having access to digital devices, anytime, anywhere.

Some Principals were encouraged by how well students looked after their digital devices with very few not being returned or being returned with some damage. One group Principals is asking why they wouldn't trust parents and students to use the school's devices at home over the holidays. Even without access to the internet, downloaded activities, books and other resources could be useful over holiday periods.

One secondary school has decided that, since Lockdown, they have to facilitate ways for families to buy devices for their children. The school believes that school-owned and loaned devices do not give the same degree of ownership and responsibility and can curb anytime, anywhere learning for its students.

Keeping It Simple and Fun (More than Academic Learning)

In primary schools:

- Schools were aware of the need to keep things simple and give the students work that they were able to achieve with little adult guidance. Some students struggled with this highlighting a degree of co-dependence on the teacher. Some schools asked their teachers NOT to teach new content. On returning from Lockdown, schools wanted to ensure that the students didn't feel they were behind in their academic learning.
- In many primary schools, parents were encouraged to engage in hands-on activities with their children. This included cooking, baking, gardening, and playing board games. Home Learning Grids appeared to work well where children could select from a variety of daily activities.
- It was apparent that some parents were under stress due to changes in their employment or work situations.
- Dress up days for teachers and students via their digital platforms added to the sense of fun.
- One of the benefits of Lockdown that teachers appreciated was the lack of interruptions. They did not miss the busyness of a typical school day. For the first two weeks when schools returned, many focused on wellbeing and minimised disruptions. This is an opportunity for schools to rethink what and how makes the school day busy such as withdrawal and extra-curricular programme, and events in the school calendar.

The challenge is keeping some of the simplicity and fun now that students are back in the classroom and it raises good questions about the design of home learning and who the home learning is for, for example, children and/or other family members.

Assessment and Reporting

Teachers gave limited feedback to students on their and need to find creative ways to celebrate learning -Realisation that reporting in writing to parents and whanau does not need to follow the tradition of two formal reports. The following MOE link was useful for many Principals <https://assessment.tki.org.nz/Reporting-to-parents-whanau/Report-time>

Communication

Communication and Relationship with Families

- Some parents gained a greater appreciation of the complexities and challenges teachers can face teaching their children (Parent noted the following about their children - *He won't sit still and concentrate; He won't do what I say, it is so hard to get her to learn; I can't get him off his video games!*) Parents got to see firsthand how teaching and learning worked for their child or children. It supports the move to a more open and transparent teaching and learning through the use of Student and Learning Management Systems.
- Many schools have talked about the how easy, important, and useful it was to get to know parents and whanau during Lockdown and want to maintain these connections.
- Since returning from Lockdown, some teachers have used ZOOM or Google Meets for parent conferences when parents have been unable or not as willing to come into the school. The question is, how do we maintain these positive relationships with whanau, especially when students move on to a new teacher at the start of the following year?
- During Lockdown, some schools conducted five-minute wellbeing discussions with parents. They asked: What have you found challenging? What has worked? Schools could explore opportunities to have of regular positive wellbeing-focused discussions with families rather than concern-based conversations.
- During the Lockdown period, parents appreciated communication being clear, regular and succinct. Most Principals say that they gave more rather than less information. When they did not know they said so. Being clear and succinct also applies to schools making sure expectations of its learners are explicit to parents. Some parents wanted their children to have a 9.00 am to 3.00 pm day of schoolwork at home. Other schools were more focused on wellbeing. It underscores that schools can build confidence when they are clear about their why, the rationale and are able to communicate this clearly to whanau.

Communication with Students

- Teachers successfully used a range of digital tools e.g. ZOOM, Google Meets, Google Slides, Google Classroom, Google Jamboard Seesaw, DoJos, Screen Castify, Kahoot, Blogs, Facebook, School App and some schools/teachers have continued to use these tools back in school.

Support Staff/Learning Assistants

- Schools found many ways to use their support staff. They acknowledged the importance of these groups having time to meet "virtually" as well as their teaching colleagues.

Assemblies

Schools report that they are rethinking the purpose and function of assemblies. They did without big assemblies in Lockdown and while they recognise that getting the school together is important for maintaining the sense of community and family within a school, many schools are reducing the number of or amount of time allocated to assemblies. They want to give time back to the classroom.

Some school also realise that assemblies can be live streamed for parents who are unable to attend.

Appendix A

Useful Websites/Apps/Books for Primary Students

- Vooks
- Sunshine on Line
- David Walliams' books
- Kids National Geographic
- NASA
- LEARNZ
- Google Earth
- Reading Eggs
- Sunshine Classics
- Mathletics
- Scholastic Books
- School Journals online
- Steps Web
- Google Read and Write
- Padlet
- You Tube