CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

LEADING LEARNING DURING SCHOOL AND COLLEGE CLOSURES

The following principles are designed to help leaders think about how best to lead the learning of the school and college community during what is a very unusual and uncertain period. How schools and colleges approach this may be very different, and that's ok. As noted in point 1, it is important to recognise where we are in meeting this challenge and not all of these points will be relevant immediately – some may become more important several weeks into this new way of working. Maintaining a flexible approach is essential.

Summary

1 It may be helpful to think about it as a series of phases.

2 Young people continue to have an entitlement to learning, but this may look very different.

3 Pupils and teachers will not be as productive in this environment.

4 It may be helpful to focus on consolidation of prior content, rather than introducing lots of new content.

5 Spaced repetition can be an effective way of learning content.

6 This is an opportunity for pupils to encounter the curriculum 'hinterland'.

7 Face-to-face online sessions might work in some situations, but they should not be an expectation.

8 Most assessment during this period should focus on low-stakes formative assessment to help pupils understand their own learning.

9 Collaboration is key.

10 There is not just one way to do this.

1 | It may be helpful to think about it as a series of phases

- The initial phase
  During this time (probably up to Easter) leaders, teachers, young people and parents are all trying to adjust to a new way of living and working. For many schools, colleges and leaders the primary concern at this stage is rightly the welfare and safety of pupils and teachers. This may not be the right time to do deep thinking about what optimal learning may look like in the current context: that may come in later weeks. The situation is dynamic and it is difficult to make lasting plans – accept this and recognise that anything you can do to add value to the lives of young people is a step in the right direction and is, therefore, worthwhile. The resources, websites and activities you've made available to pupils will have given them the opportunity to do some learning at home. It may not be optimal, and it may well develop over time, but right now you are doing the best you can in a situation that developed very quickly.

- The adjustment phase
  We hope that schools, colleges and pupils will settle into a rhythm after some weeks and that leaders will be able to begin to look a little further ahead. Of course, the situation remains fluid and, as such, the extent to which this happens depends on what occurs at a national and local level. If and when a more settled rhythm emerges, this is the time when leaders should consider how learning has been going, what adjustments can be made and what longer term planning may be required. For example, it may be a useful activity to get some feedback from pupils and parents about the learning pupils been doing, what has worked and what has not.

- Recovery phase
  At some point schools and colleges will reopen to all pupils, although we don't know when that will be. It's just worth keeping in mind that this might require careful planning. For example, the normal school/college curriculum may need to be adapted. However, it is probably too early to make decisions about this yet.

2 | Young people continue to have an entitlement to learning, but this may look very different

The principle that children have a right to an education is one that we should cherish and protect. As such, it is appropriate that schools and colleges set some learning activities for children at home, as well as those coming into school/college. However, the quantity, scope and quality of learning during this period may not be optimal. It is about doing the best we can in a difficult situation, balancing learning with an appreciation of the challenging context teachers and pupils find themselves in. It certainly won't be 'business as usual' and we must not expect the learning process or the curriculum itself to be the same as would have happened in school or college.

Pupils will be living and working in very different environments. Whereas some pupils may have good access to technology and an internet connection, in other households such resources may be shared among children, or possibly with adults who are using these for their own work commitments. In some households there may be no access at all. Some schools and colleges are working with families to identify levels of access to online material and providing what they can to bridge gaps. Again, the feasibility of this will vary between schools and colleges. The key is to make sure that pupils have the means to do what you are asking them to do. This challenge might also be met by ensuring that some learning activities that can be done without online access.

Plus, it is important to remember that every pupil is different, including pupils with SEND who will benefit from best practice approaches. A greater focus on repetition and consolidation of knowledge, with regular revisiting and embedding learning will benefit everyone. The key being to grow confidence and a sense of sustained achievement (remembering this may be a marathon not a sprint). Additional resources can be found from SEN organisations such as Nasen and the Driver Youth Trust (at-home activity pack). And the TES SEN Show who have created a list of at-home learning resources.

It may that reading is a big focus in the home learning pack of work, particularly in primary schools. When setting reading tasks, schools should consider potential barriers, particularly in homes where pupils' literacy levels are low. Online reading programs usually require good quality ICT access. Again, consider what alternatives you could provide for those that don't have this access.

Parents can help pupils by asking them questions about what children have been reading (eg "what's going to happen next?"). Schools can help them by suggesting useful questions parents might pose. Some pupils may find it helpful to have some choice over reading materials from time to time, for example being encouraged to choose something that interests them.

A reading timetable or a reading routine may also help, ensuring a small section is read (to a parent, for example) on a daily basis. It is important to note that any reading is good reading, even if the text has not been finished.

It's also worth remembering that primary school children tend to be less independent than secondary school pupils and might require a lot more time, support and help with their school tasks. Be mindful of this when considering the volume of work and any requirements you have for pupils to log or submit it.

In secondary schools, pupils may have been provided with extensive reading material, notably English literature texts. Much of the advice for primary school pupils can still be applied here. Access to e-books might be supportive where this is possible.

3 | Pupils and teachers will not be as productive in this environment

Setting some learning activities for pupils is desirable but is essential that leaders' expectations are realistic and sensitive to the situation. What can be achieved may vary over time, depending how the impact of the virus unfolds, but it is important to recognise that the normal curriculum cannot be followed in the usual way. We can't expect parents to 'home school' children but we can try to give activities, guidance and support that will help everyone to do the best they can within the situation as it unfolds. It may be that, particularly in the early stages, 'less is more' and that we need to be mindful not to overload pupils, parents and teachers. Leaders will need to communicate this message effectively to teachers and middle leaders too so that all staff are aware of the need to be sensitive to the context pupils are working in. Email messages and the like are delivered without any of the non-verbal cues pupils are often used to. As such, what a teacher intends to be a well-meant motivational email expressing their concern about a pupils' missing work submission might be viewed by the receiver as unsympathetic. Again, leaders can help to ensure communication from staff is pitched right in terms of volume and tone.

4 | It may be helpful to focus on consolidation of prior content, rather than introducing lots of new content
For practical reasons it may be difficult for teachers to introduce some new content to pupils, particularly during the early phase of these changes. This will vary according to subject and phase but the normal job teachers do of explaining concepts, correcting misconceptions and making links with other learning is likely to be trickier when done remotely. That's not to say this can't happen (some staff are doing this through virtual lessons) but it may be helpful to recognise from the outset that ploughing through lots of new content might lead to misconceptions or gaps where some pupils have understood it and others haven't. Consolidation of prior learning, however, is likely to be beneficial. We know that what pupils store in long term memory can help them to learn more, so consolidation is not wasted time or a lack of 'progress'. This is potentially a good opportunity to help pupils become fluent in key aspects of the curriculum and thus lay solid foundations for when school and college resumes.

Moreover, we know that many leaders are concerned about how this period might widen the existing disadvantage gap. It's too early to say whether specific approaches have been effective in mitigating this, but it is plausible that building in frequent opportunities to consolidate prior learning and avoiding rushing through lots of new content might help. Of course, it is reasonable to introduce some new content, and if school and college closures persist for several months (as expected) this is likely to be desirable. The point here is to think about the purpose of the tasks being set and to recognise that revisiting prior learning is a legitimate, and potentially powerful, focus for pupils.

5 | Spaced repetition can be an effective way of learning content
We know that unless we repeatedly encounter information we tend to forget it. Trying to remember something we've already learned can help us to remember it better. This is why activities that require pupils to systematically retrieve information from their memories can be highly effective. Pupils can do this using traditional flash cards. But there are also online tools too that use special algorithms to identify what you are struggling to remember and ask you about this content more frequently until it is embedded. This approach may be particularly useful for Year 10 and Year 12 students. There are a variety of platforms that offer online spaced repetition, such as Brainscape and Anki. Alternatively, it may be that hard copies of flashcards might be a useful resource for pupils without internet access.

6 | This is an opportunity for pupils to encounter the curriculum 'hinterland'
Curriculum thinker Christine Counsell has written about the benefits pupils gain from a broad curriculum. In short, she argues that what might appear extraneous curriculum details, because they don't feature in a test or exam, can often form important reference points in the narrative of a curriculum. For this reason, don't feel all the learning tasks you set pupils have to be focused entirely on the sorts of things that would appear in end of topic test content. For example, some history departments are using the 'Meanwhile elsewhere…' approach to broaden pupils' sense of period by studying what else was going on concurrently with events they have studied previously

7 | Face-to-face online sessions might work in some situations, but they should not be an expectation
It is useful to see face-to-face sessions as just one tool to support home learning. These could be 'live' sessions carried out as a webinar or a pre-recorded video. They can provide useful contact between teachers and pupils and the opportunity for teachers to undertake teaching which is more similar to that which takes place in schools and colleges. However, planning and undertaking these sessions can be very time intensive and requires teachers to have the facilities to do so, which includes a suitable workspace as well as the required technology. For this reason, running these sessions should not be a blanket expectation, although some teachers may want to run them occasionally. If so, leaders should draw up clear guidelines to ensure the safety and wellbeing of staff and pupils are not compromised in any way.

8 | Assessment during this period should focus on low-stakes formative assessment to help pupils understand their own learning
It is challenging enough in normal circumstances for teachers to carry out assessments that are valid and reliable. It will be even more so at this time. For this reason it will be hard for teachers to draw meaningful summative conclusions about the extent of progress pupils have made. If assessment is to be carried out it is much better to put it to a formative purpose, helping pupils get a sense of what they've understood and remembered, and which bits they might need to return to. Many online packages provide this facility with self-marking and feedback built in. Some packages and platforms allow pupils to submit work they've completed. This can be useful for teachers but they should think carefully about which pieces they require pupils to submit. Also, they should proactively manage expectations of pupils regarding which pieces of work they will get feedback on. It may be helpful for leaders to discuss expectations regarding feedback with teachers and agree some approaches. Again, this should be mindful of the challenging context teachers and pupils find themselves in.

9 | Collaboration is key

As with all aspects of the coronavirus pandemic, working together will help us to be successful. Subject teams will probably find it useful to distribute workload between them where they can, for example in relation to setting learning activities. However, some teachers may not be part of a team. In which case, what can leaders do to support them? Are there other colleagues in your Trust, local authority or cluster which might provide mutual support for such teachers? Putting teams, teachers and leaders in touch with each other through professional networks might be beneficial in numerous ways, not least helping to reduce the sense of isolation. Social media can also be a helpful way of finding out about what other schools and colleges are doing, latest guidance and links to resources.

10 | There is not just one way to do this

You will no doubt hear many different approaches schools and colleges are taking to meet this challenge. However, each of these will be determined by a range of complex factors, including the pupils and community they are serving, the staff, the facilities and resources they have and the impact of the virus itself. As we move through the phases outlined above it may be that your approach changes as you develop better models of working remotely. It may be that you'll need to provide training and guidance to staff to enable this to happen.

It is also worth recognising that subject difference can be an important factor. For example, a particular type of activity or approach might work well in maths but not in art. Furthermore, that art teacher may also have many more classes to set work for, which might make particular approaches trickier. Leaders should build an appreciation for subject difference into their longer-term approach. What works in one subject does not necessarily work in another.

It is also likely to be the case that what the children of keyworkers do in school might be quite different to what children are doing at home. This is ok. The key is to make sure that, over the long term, we try to make young people's experience as enriching and coherent as possible within the circumstances.

Likewise, how households approach this period is likely to be very different. Providing suggested structures and timelines for the day might be helpful for children and families but we shouldn't expect these to be implemented or stuck to rigidly.

Stephen Rollett | ASCL Curriculum and Inspection Specialist
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