



Turning the corner:

Tactical and strategic digital learning decisions in our schools

Tuesday 26th January | 1530 – 1645

Summary note

Context:

The Prime Minister declared on Monday 4th January that all schools in England would close for an initial period of six weeks, with possible extensions if the virus continued to spread rapidly throughout the country and hospitals remained close to capacity. This required all schools to recommence operating remotely for most pupils (apart from vulnerable pupils and children of key workers).

This disruption follows an Autumn term in which many schools experienced partial closures, with many pupils needing to learn remotely. Indeed, government data [published](#) on 1st December showed that school attendance across the country stood at 83.5%, with rates of 88% at primary and 78% at secondary. There was significant variation in pupil attendance between local authorities, with attendance levels in secondary schools as low as 61% in Knowsley, for example, as found in a recent [EPI report](#).

The social mobility impacts of school closures are widely documented. Not only do pupils continue to have varied access to remote learning, unlikely to improve given existing funding settlements only covering 1/3 of schools' COVID-related expenses, but EPI research has shown that disadvantaged groups and those with low prior attainment are more likely to miss school, meaning these groups may be more dependent on remote provision. EPI analysis has shown that pupils in special schools are least likely to attend school (86% in Scotland, 82% in Northern Ireland, 73% in England); disadvantaged pupils are less likely to attend school than their more affluent peers (8% gap in Scotland, not available for other countries); and older pupils are less likely to attend (Y11 attendance rates are 5-6% below secondary average in Wales and Scotland).

The Department for Education has taken several positive steps to improve the quality of remote provision, including on device and internet access as well as funding centralised resources.

Given the expectations of schools to deliver quality remote provision, and the importance of responding to these expectations both tactically and strategically, we hoped that this event, focused on those themes, would be a useful contribution.

What follows is a summary of the discussion that occurred during the event, which we have shared with all attendees and on the EPI website.

The agenda:

Time	Subject	Speaker
1530-1535	Welcome and introduction	David Laws Executive Chairman, EPI
1535-1540	DfE priorities and policy overview	Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson MP Secretary of State for Education
1540-1610 (Panel)	Managing expectations and supporting pupils needing to learn remotely	Dame Rachel de Souza CEO, Inspiration Trust and incoming Children's Commissioner Steve Rollett Deputy CEO, Confederation of School Trusts Evelyn Forde MBE Headteacher, Cophall School (Tes Headteacher of the Year) Matt Hood Principal, Oak National Academy
1610-1635 (Panel)	Schools' responses- resourcing and curriculum decisions	Gill Jones Deputy Director for Schools and Early Education, Ofsted Graham Quinn CEO, The New Bridge Trust Rob Carpenter CEO, Inspire Partnership
1635-1640	DfE takeaways	Emma Stace Director for Digital and Transformation Department for Education
1640-1645	Closing comments	David Laws Executive Chairman, EPI

Introduction

The impacts of the pandemic will be felt for many years and they will not be fully understood for a long time. The scale of the challenges the education sector has faced in the last ten months has been enormous - logistically, financially, and on the health and wellbeing of learners, teachers, school leaders and parents and guardians.

Many of the speakers stated that the response of the sector has been herculean, particularly considering such frequent changes to guidance on attendance and the associated health and safety risks of on-site provision. Speakers noted the many faces that schools have adopted, from becoming track and trace centres to mass testing sites and of course, and on-site providers in tandem with remote providers of education.

The demands of the pandemic on the school system, on both the delivery and policy sides have been truly exceptional, as have the responses. Unsurprisingly, some measures put in place at both the policy and individual school level have been relatively successful in achieving their objectives of minimising learning disruption, while others have provided learning experiences that have not worked as well as intended and require/d correcting.

For instance, the scale of the laptop roll out has become immense but changing eligibility criteria and logistical issues have slowed distribution to pupils that need them. More pupils have now got access to internet connection, but many were without adequate access for a significant portion of the previous academic year. Webinars produced for teachers and leaders on best practice have been welcome and helpful, but we could be doing more to improve the supporting guidance for parents. Blending live lessons with alternative delivery modes appears to be working, but we do not yet know the most effective combinations for learning in specific subjects and for different pupil needs.

Questions now arise as to the future direction of policies introduced during the pandemic: should all pupils be guaranteed access to a tablet or laptop or is access to a mobile adequate? Will measures put in place to improve access to learning websites be continued after the pandemic to allow pupils easier access to resources?


When it becomes possible to comprehensively consider the effectiveness of our responses, there are two parts to the assessment: provision and access. A thorough review is needed so that lessons are learnt, on both what has worked and what still needs to be addressed. The evidence on both sides remains threadbare- speakers highlighted that we are still working on 'best bets' rather than proven conclusions.

What is clear, however, is that provision has improved enormously since the start of the pandemic and the initial period of school closures from March 2020, both from a policy and school perspective.

The following outlines the key themes discussed by speakers during the event, and does not necessarily reflect EPI's views.

Appreciating context

Speakers were keen to stress that while the central government response is welcome in helping to support remote provision, schools must be able to apply and tailor guidance to their particular



context. Schools support hugely varied communities, in demographic and socio-economic terms, so central guidance needs to be applicable to varied situations.

In the context of the pandemic, it is important to recognise that schools have taken on a broad range of roles: track and trace centres, testing centres, on-site providers, remote providers, community hubs amongst others. The roles schools have adopted will vary by the communities they serve.

Schools have varied pupil groups, teacher groups and socioeconomic contexts. For example, in a particularly disadvantaged community, in which many pupils continue to lack access to devices and the internet, higher proportions of the pupil population will be attending schools for on-site provision. The same will be true in communities with particularly high numbers of vulnerable pupils and children of key workers. On the other hand, some schools who do not fall into the categories above may have low proportions of the pupil population attending school. A single set of guidance cannot be applied to both circumstances- rather, a menu of support and guidance is necessary to ensure that schools can develop a response that matches their needs. Speakers highlighted that, we need to better understand and recognise the experience of poorer pupils during periods of required remote learning at a policy level, so that means of delivery and feedback reflect the individual circumstances of individual children.

For example, speakers emphasised that staff have developed webinars for families to guide the support they provide in the home, and to help identify gaps that staff might be able to fill. Surveys are also ongoing to better understand the individual experiences of pupils in the continuing period of the pandemic, to build an improved evidence for future remote provision and highlight gaps in support that the school can fill. This is only possible at the community level, as experiences will have varied to such an enormous extent.

Robust policymaking

On a similar theme, speakers called for more robust policymaking which is better able to adapt in the face of stresses and pressures that change the methods of learning delivery. Policies should be resilient in the face of challenges, in order to minimise disruptions in learning and enable the improved monitoring of pupil and teacher wellbeing.

Speakers argued that key to improving the resilience of policymaking is building the capacity of infrastructure to withstand shocks. For example, if schools in a particular area are required to close due to an unforeseen circumstance, there should be infrastructure in place (a combination of both government and school-level support) that allows schools to continue operating remotely, as seamlessly as possible, so that pupils do not lose out due to circumstances outside of anyone's control. Regardless of external circumstances, schools should be able to deliver their core functions.

Part of the process of building robustness in the system must involve synthesising the guidance that is provided to schools, parents, teachers and pupils so that it's easily sourced, communicated simply and straightforward to apply. This might involve bringing together Ofsted's [guidance on remote learning](#), the Department for Education's [guidance, resources and support for teachers](#) and the Education Endowment Foundation's [overview of evidence on remote learning](#).

Speakers noted how useful such resources are, but also said that it would be helpful to not need to sift for the most relevant resources- a central resource pool would be more helpful, particularly when timelines for implementation are squeezed, as they often have been during the pandemic when little notice of government guidance on opening plans has been provided to schools.

Access to technology

Access to technology is arguably the highest profile issue on the remote learning agenda as access is assumed to be a prerequisite for effective remote learning. This is not entirely the case, given that quality learning can take place via pen and paper, as speakers noted. As one speaker stated, remote education is any learning that happens outside the classroom away from teachers- and so includes digital and non-digital solutions. Technology is “a means, not an end.” As Ofsted’s guidance states, “a good textbook can provide the curriculum content and sequencing pupils need. It can also be easier to access for some pupils”. However, the process of feedback and review is substantially more difficult when operating in this way.

Device and internet access certainly does facilitate effective and diverse lesson delivery, resource sharing, assessment and feedback, and relationships between teachers and the home.


While the Department has made substantial progress on the distribution of devices - with 800,000 of 1.3m purchased devices now distributed since the start of the programme in April 2020 - a significant number of pupils still await a device to which they are entitled under the scheme. Indeed, there are also pupils ineligible for the scheme who do not have access to their own device and are potentially using a mobile device or sharing a device with their siblings.. Speakers cited a possible ‘tipping point’ at which a gulf in provision appears between a majority with reliable device and internet access and the minority that continue to lack consistent access- given the unavoidable focus of teachers’ time on the majority group. As such, some speakers argued that device access might now be “even more important than it was during the first lockdown.”

Mobile devices are widely considered to be less useful for remote learning than tablets and laptops. One speaker noted Oak National Academy’s findings that pupils accessing lessons and resources on a mobile device spend half as long on the platform as pupils accessing the resources from a tablet or laptop.

Given findings such as these and citing difficulties in simultaneously delivering on-site and remote education, several speakers raised concerns over the speed of device delivery- “pupils need the devices and they need them now, not in two months’ time”. A mooted solution involved the direct transfer of funding to schools so that they could source the devices themselves, as well as civic engagement to raise support to fund devices for pupils that need them. While philanthropic support is welcomed by the sector, a universal device should be carefully considered by the government both in the short and longer term.

Devices are only useful if coupled with internet access and speakers noted the enormous progress that has been made on this front in recent months, including partnerships with the telecommunications industry and the associated zero-rating of educational sites. Speakers noted that this should be explored for the longer-term, to reduce the extent of the digital divide and prevent internet access from impacting the learning chances of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

School leader presenters cited their own experiences in their remarks, with one speaker referring to their three years of experience leading a school group with 1:1 tablet access across the school. Though the pivot to full remote learning was challenging, the speaker cited their own confidence that their pupils could access their teachers and relevant resources whilst learning remotely. The most



significant work undertaken to adjust to remote learning involved comprehensive engagement between school and the home, to understand possible internet access and bandwidth issues as well as electricity issues. This allowed the school to undertake targeted interventions to make sure that all pupils were able to continue their learning and reduce variation in circumstances that teachers would need to consider and address in their content delivery. Further, a reliable team of technicians remained on-hand to address any access issues that arose for pupils. Such a thorough approach reduced the role of parents in the remote learning process.


Delivery of lessons

As highlighted above, it is widely agreed that the most effective way of enabling pupils to learn remotely is via devices and associated internet access. But in terms of adjusting pedagogy to deliver effective learning, Ofsted highlight that “everything we know about what a quality curriculum looks like still applies.” It should therefore be a priority for the remote education curriculum to be aligned to the classroom curriculum as much as possible. Several speakers noted the importance of carefully sequencing the curriculum and ensuring that pupils obtain the building blocks they need to move on to the next stage of their courses-particularly in vertically structured subjects, where some blocks unlock further aspects of the course.

Speakers also noted that teachers should continue to consider themselves “designers of learning, not deliverers of curriculum.” Teachers should recognise that they know their children better than anyone else in the education system and they should trust themselves to deliver courses of learning that best match the learning styles of their pupils. This ties in with the point outlined above, regarding the importance of delivering learning that is tailored to the community a school serves, given demographic and socio-economic variation.

As well as the importance of delivering learning that matches a school’s community, speakers were keen to highlight the importance and value of the centralisation of resources, both at school group and national level with portfolios of resources like the Oak National Academy (Oak) and on BBC Bitesize. Oak has now seen more than 75 million lessons undertaken by pupils and its curriculum coverage expands further as its pool of 350 contributing teachers continue to produce resources, including for subjects that are more difficult to deliver remotely, such as Drama, Physical Education and Design and Technology. These sites are preferable to the use of other video hosting sites which might distract pupils from the learning they are being directed towards by their teachers.

Live lessons are often considered to be the most effective means of delivering content remotely, given that it is easier to align content with the curriculum and is more effective for maintaining pupils’ attention and making them accountable for their attendance and completion of tasks, but Ofsted’s interim findings suggest that live lessons are not always more effective than asynchronous approaches. There are, as with most forms of delivery, specific difficulties associated with live lessons, such as it being hard to build in interaction and flexibility and therefore feedback for pupils. It can be more effective to use recorded lesson segments followed by interactive chats or tasks. This can be the instance in which externally produced resources can easily and effectively be utilised, allowing teachers to focus on the understanding of content, rather than diverting their energies towards delivery (assuming close alignment with the curriculum). Evidence also suggests that concentration online is shorter than the length of a typical lesson, meaning that interactive lessons can be more effective in securing pupil engagement than using a single type of content.



These approaches need to be tailored to specific groups of pupils, subjects and particular aspects of the curriculum within each subject. Speakers were keen that the conversation now moves beyond the oversimplified question of ‘are live lessons better?’ and into the realm of ‘when are live lessons better?’, ‘on which subjects?’, ‘on which parts of subjects?’ and ‘for which pupils?’. For example, recorded Design and Technology lessons are less likely to be effective at delivering learning than an interactive combination of hands-on learning, content delivered by teachers, and online resources. Speakers emphasised that we should not over-simplify the delivery question as we move forward and consider lesson structure for both the remainder of partial school closures and beyond.

Further, speakers called for subject-by-subject analysis on best practice of using resources that are held centrally on platforms like Oak and BBC Bitesize. This could inform a series of best practice case studies for schools and teachers to apply to their own contexts. There should also be resources aimed at parents and carers so that they can assist their children as effectively as possible. This should include translations to relevant languages and consider accessibility issues so that all parents can utilise the guidance.

The process of ‘catch-up’ will only be effective if school leaders and teachers understand what they are trying to catch-up and how to best approach this complex process. Sequencing learning effectively, so that pupils can only progress once they have understood core elements of the curriculum, is essential.


This catch-up process should include detailed consideration of how these centralised resources and resource banks produced by specific school groups can be taken forward and utilised as we reach the end of full-time remote learning. Speakers noted their potential effectiveness in cover lessons. Where teachers would have previously needed to design lessons for their cover, they can now utilise rich resource banks that have been formed by experienced, knowledgeable subject specialists. Given the high quality of the resources, they can also be used for teacher CPD, regarding both teaching techniques and delivery of specific concepts that teachers might consider more difficult to explain than other parts of the curriculum. This is potentially applicable to the group of trainees that have been unable to undertake the placements that would have taken place in previous years.

Specifically on content, Ofsted advises not to overcomplicate resources with too many graphics and illustrations that do not add to content as well as using an easy-to-use platform. Its guidance states that ‘remote education often benefits from a straightforward and easy-to-use interface’.

Ofsted also advises that it is important to focus attention on the key elements of effective teaching, citing that it can be useful to provide pupils with an overview of the bigger picture and where a specific lesson or activity sits within a sequence of lessons or activities. Another example is the ‘split attention’ effect. Pupils can find it harder to concentrate, so the way we integrate words and pictures, or graphs is important. Text can be integrated with images where it is appropriate and does not just encourage guessing. This can be shown in chunks in the appropriate place and makes the words into a description of the images and allows pupils to focus on what is most important.

Engagement – of pupils and staff

As mentioned above, Ofsted guidance defines remote education as learning which takes place outside the classroom and without the teacher there. Feedback and assessment are therefore as important as they are in the classroom as a tool for pupil engagement.



Whilst learning should not be fundamentally different when delivered remotely, it can be harder for teachers to deliver immediate feedback to pupils. Speakers noted that teachers had found some clever methods to give feedback remotely, for example: chatroom discussions; 1-to-1 interaction tools (including the use of breakout rooms which can be particularly helpful to teaching assistants supporting pupils with additional needs); interactive touchscreen questioning in live recorded lessons; and adaptive learning software.

As with other areas of remote education, several speakers mentioned the importance of understanding and appreciating context. How you engage and give feedback to sixth formers is going to be very different to how you would for young children. Certain subjects also might be more suited to particular types of feedback and assessment, so it is important that schools look at engagement by year group and subject and tailor their approaches accordingly.

One speaker described an engagement tracker they had employed at their schools for student learning which tracks task completion, turning up to lessons and even shows who is and isn't engaging with feedback. This tracker identified around 10 – 14 per cent of pupils which were still in need of additional support.

This also highlights the importance of teachers staying in regular contact with pupils. If necessary, it was noted that they can even do this by using technology to send automated communication. Some teachers have set up automated check-in emails to pupils to identify where they are with set tasks. This also gives a perception that teachers are 'watching' while pupils learn remotely.


One speaker stressed the importance of meaningful assessment as a key driver for pupil and teacher motivation and suggested that assessment could be used to maximise the learning that will take place during the remainder of the 2020/21 academic year.

Assessment is already built into some online platforms and most textbooks. Low-stakes quizzes can be built into remote education, as can written assignments and retrieval practice activities. It can be helpful to make sure pupils are 'warmed up' and 'readied' for content through an introductory task or scene-setting. Pupils can then be invited to re-visit and process the main content further in an additional task or later lesson through retrieval practice.

It is harder to engage and motivate pupils remotely than when they are in the classroom. There are more distractions and teachers are not physically present to manage the situation. Communicating and working with parents, without putting an unreasonable burden on them, can help engage and motivate pupils and support home learning.

Speakers discussed the importance of engaging families from the outset. Establishing good communication channels with parents and carers helps schools better understand their challenges and in turn helps them identify what additional support is needed. Communicating and working with families also means that they are more likely to speak to the school when they are struggling. For many families, the barriers to effective digital remote learning often stem from social issues - and one speaker highlighted the need for policymakers to improve their understanding of poverty.

Peer interactions can also provide motivation for pupils and improve learning outcomes. It is therefore worth schools considering enabling these through, for example, chat groups or video-linking functions. As well as providing motivation, this will help pupils maintain their socio-emotional skills.



Speakers also found that engagement increases when pupils feel part of the school or college community. Whole-school digital assemblies and feedback, such as through newsletters to pupils and parents, can help them feel part of the community even when learning remotely.

The curriculum is another way in which education providers can build a sense of community in their settings, involve pupils, and increase agency and engagement in learning. Where possible, schools can design their curriculum around pupil experiences and supplement this with resources from the likes of Oak National Academy and the BBC.

Student engagement surveys were recommended for older cohorts of pupils in secondary schools to better understand their experiences of remote learning, what they think has worked well and how they have coped during the pandemic. The results of these surveys can then inform and improve school engagement strategies and curriculum design.

A lot of attention has been paid to ways in which online education can be made more engaging. For example, we can make sure different types of tasks and activities are alternated, or build in rewards and incentives to make learning more 'game-like'.

While it is important to engage pupils, this is only a precondition for learning. There is only so much a teacher can do to engage pupils remotely. We therefore need to make sure that efforts to engage pupils do not distract from teaching the curriculum. We also need to check whether pupils have learned the content through assessment. More than ever, it is important that schools are clear on fundamental building blocks of the curriculum and that pupils make progress in these areas before moving on to more challenging content.

Speakers saw staff agency as crucial to their engagement. The higher the levels of staff agency the more likely you are to get deeper levels of engagement which leads to better outcomes for students. As with pupil engagement, involving teachers with curriculum planning and development was associated with increased agency and engagement.

Schools that involved staff at all levels including teachers, support staff and personal care assistants as co-constructors of their own team strategies saw real engagement and energy from them. In one example the school set up a YouTube channel to help with staff continued professional development (CPD) where teachers and support staff can develop and share the resources they need without interference from the school trusts central team.

Examples such as this demonstrate how much expertise on remote learning has improved, as have the methods in which teachers share best practice and resources. In comparison with the initial school closures early in the pandemic what is expected from teachers and remote learning is also much clearer and there is a much wider range of resources available. Schools should still continue to deliver CPD on remote learning and synthesise and share evidence and guidance such as the papers from the Department for Education, Ofsted and the Education Endowment Foundation already mentioned. One speaker also suggested that policymakers should consider including a programme of training within the Early Career Framework.

Wellbeing

A digital strategy cannot be effective without a mental health strategy as children cannot learn remotely or otherwise if they are not well. Department for Education guidance also supports this approach and pupil health is a key thread running through their strategies.

When implementing their remote learning strategies and trying to engage students, schools have found social issues and poverty challenges as the hardest situations to tackle. It is important for schools to accept that at times, families will struggle with remote learning due to these challenges and to support parents as best they can – including by helping them manage their own expectations of their child's learning.

With the most vulnerable children in schools, it is those who do not quite meet the vulnerable threshold that should be the focus of schools and policymakers. We need to provide socio-emotional support for these pupils who are not in school, but still might be facing multiple problems in the home.

Those with social and emotional needs who require a community for learning should also be a priority. Now that learning is online, the provision is in some ways more traditional than learning in the classroom as settings focus on providing the foundations of the curriculum. We need to ensure that provision for children with socio-emotional challenges goes beyond this traditional offer and provides them with the same levels of support as their pre-pandemic learning offer.


As described above, speakers noted engagement increased when pupils felt part of a school community, which in turn supports mental wellbeing. One school trust created an exhibition, 'Museums of Hope', which could be shared across its schools. The exhibition depicted the socio-emotional experiences pupils have faced during the pandemic to help them come to terms with these challenges and to develop their emotional literacy. This demonstrates the value of schools as the centres of our community and shows how essential they are to children's health and wellbeing.

Schools are still establishing the best ways to provide quality wellbeing support with the assistance of strong pastoral teams. In some cases, they are providing yoga or therapy and reinforcing practices which support mental wellbeing through social media as well as wellbeing apps or websites. Speakers also noted the importance of schools encouraging downtime without devices and facilitating opportunities for children to have time away from learning to speak with their friends as they would in the classroom.

Speakers also agreed that we need to support and empower teachers who themselves are dealing with their own wellbeing issues due to the multiple pressures of working in the school system during the pandemic. Throughout the past year, they have been grappling with a demanding, highly skilled job and have shown great energy, dynamism and moral purpose in supporting pupils and each other. The delivery capacity of teachers has gone beyond learning and has reinforced their positions as changemakers for their communities and as civic leaders. However, one speaker noted a drain of energy in the profession after a year of restrictions. We need to keep these teachers motivated as the system faces significant challenges in the next three to five years to recruit and retain teachers.

Conclusion

Speakers stressed the importance of giving schools time, both to respond to consultations and fine-tune their own approaches once an overarching strategy had been agreed. They also highlighted the need for training and funding to support the implementation on the ground. It was agreed that any



future digital remote learning strategy should be shaped by policymakers, the wider education sector and those working in the school system. Collaborating on the development of the strategy allows us to listen and learn from the expertise of others - particularly those on the front line who have experience delivering remote learning.

When developing a remote learning strategy, we should take into consideration the following principles:

- Access to technology must be the bedrock for any future strategy. Technology includes a digital device, connectivity at home, school infrastructure and networks which support connection as well as a setting in the home which enables learning. Closing this digital divide between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers is a moral imperative and it is essential that we get these technological foundations right so we can achieve this.
- We should consider the capacity and capability of the schools, systems and structures that enable learning through remote education. The Department for Education should take the role of supporting training and learning in schools as well as providing guidance more coherently.
- A future strategy should support the socio-emotional development of pupils and their learning and should not be focussed on technology as an end in itself. It should enable and empower school leaders to strategically apply it to support the design and delivery of the curriculum and pupil learning and wellbeing outcomes.
- The strategy should not just apply to this pandemic but should be system-wide in its thinking. It should take the lessons that we have learned during the pandemic and support a system which is continuously improving and adopting new technologies.