

Communicating under lockdown: Mark Steed answers your questions

Following his webinar, 'How to support pupil, staff and parental wellbeing when you're school is closed', Mark fielded questions from the audience. Here are some of the most-common queries.

How do you monitor pupil progress over time via online learning?

Senior school: heads of department had access to all classrooms to monitor work that teachers set. Students submitted work which was assessed to monitor progress. We used virtual class lessons to ask deeper questions to check understanding.

Prep school: teachers monitored work submitted. They gave online and verbal feedback in Zoom sessions. We tracked work that was submitted.

How do you support staff who are struggling at home?

Before the school closed, we set up a series of CPL sessions for staff to ensure technical proficiency. When the school remained closed, staff were still able to contact IT for technical support. Staff also had access to their line manager, HR and the wellbeing team for support. Heads of department has regular check ins with their teams. For staff who lived in particularly small apartments, we allowed them access to the school when possible.

Although, there was a good pastoral/wellbeing support system already in place at the school, we introduced additional measures in our prep schools. We held meetings with our deputy heads of school and phase leaders and we sent a regular wellbeing survey to staff members.

How did your school deal with rewards and sanctions? Did you continue to use the same system and guidelines or adapt them to the new way of working?

Teachers were still able to send reward postcards home and award Kellett points for pupil's work. We encouraged the use of our behaviour system, but we amended it so that we could track and follow up with pupils who were less engaged.

How did you review and monitor curriculum output to ensure consistency and quality without adding further stress to staff?

Subject leaders had access to their teams' classrooms, so they were able to monitor work that was set and submitted. It was already a stressful time, so we didn't want to impose an SLT, top-down approach, we trusted our staff. Additionally, departments were able to have virtual meetings.

In the prep schools, we provided guidance to staff and parents on how much of the curriculum would be covered. This was documented, discussed, reviewed and amended as we evolved with the process. Deputy heads of schools regularly checked the online curriculum content and we cross referenced it across both prep schools to ensure it was consistent. Phase leaders held meetings and year group teachers planned collaboratively.

As a principal, how often were you in contact with teaching staff and senior leaders?

I held a daily, start-of-day meeting with my SLT.

How did you manage consequences about all behaviours?

When we observed poor behaviour during a virtual call, it only took a phone call to the parent to address the situation.

As with real-time lessons, you need to focus on the quality of the staff/pupil engagement and provide quality learning which will stimulate pupils to engage and focus on the task.

What proportion of your lessons were live lessons, pre-recorded lessons and uploaded tasks?

Senior school: in the first weeks, we focused on VC live lessons with Y10 and above and then as confidence grew, we opened this to all lessons. While we encouraged VC, we were aware that it wasn't appropriate for all lessons and we were happy for teachers to use their professional judgement.

Prep school: this constantly evolved, it changed depending on what was required for a successful learning outcome.

What made the most difference in communicating with parents in terms of "calming them down"?

At both the prep and senior school, we regularly communicated with parents via a weekly newsletter. We also used video messaging to communicate the most complex and unpopular areas. We had consistent messaging regarding fees, term dates etc.

How was leadership able to monitor online teaching, without teachers feeling they were being inspected?

As a school, we believe in appointing great staff and trusting them to do a good job. It was the time to trust teachers. It wasn't a time to be top-down heavy, especially when it was a new way of working for all staff, which came with its own stresses and challenges. We empowered subject leaders to manage and support their departments. We took the approach that we were all in this together and we supported each teacher accordingly. If the SLT received negative comments from parents or from the pupils' questionnaire, we followed up with the staff involved.

When running streamed lessons, how did you cater for/factor in pupils with limited access to technology? (E.g. families sharing a laptop.)

We're a 1:1 laptop school and so home learning with the respect of technology presented fewer problems. For those families who had siblings at a different phase requiring additional laptops, we were able to loan school stock. For those students who required particular software to support exam class students in subjects like music / media we were able to purchase the software for their home use.

How often did you meet virtually as a staff?

Senior SLT met twice a week via Zoom. SLT also had regular Zoom meetings with their staff. During the closure, we also published a twice-weekly home learning bulletin to all staff.

The prep schools hold three staff meetings a week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 8am by Zoom.

How did you keep track of attendance? Did you put a deadline or timeline for submitting assignments?

In secondary, teachers were tracking attendance at Zoom meetings and we tracked engagement via Google classroom submissions.

The prep schools tracked engagement via Google Classroom submissions.

Would you expect routines such as staff appraisal to continue during this time?

No, we postponed all appraisals for the year. They will start again in September. Because of the financial situation, we had to announce a total pay freeze for next year, including no incremental progression on the pay scale.

Do you have any other tips for staff wellbeing, particularly those who are also parents and the younger staff who are alone and away from family? I'm worried about long term sustainability for staff.

I'd offer regular communication and let staff know that you're available. It's really dependent on the strength of your school community. Consider sending a personal email, writing a thank you card to each member of staff, celebrating achievements and contribution at whole staff meetings. Make sure that you listen to your colleagues who may know a staff member and understand their needs better than you do.

Have you seen any evidence of trauma within your students, and if so, has it taken different forms of intervention?

We've had to support students of different ages through quarantine – in a couple of cases they were separated from their parents. We've done this through one-to-one counselling.

How do you find staff connectivity/morale when you are all working offsite?

It's more difficult working offsite, so it's still important to build in wellbeing and staff community events into your weekly programme. For instance, we held a virtual pub quiz to mark the end of term.

It affected everyone in a different way. Genuinely, staff were amazing and coped well. It's also important not to stigmatise staff who may have struggled, you need to be sensitive and expect that most staff will have a dip in mood at some point.

How do you balance staff wellbeing with board expectations that staff go "all in" to meet parental expectations?

The staff have been "all in" – this has been driven by the senior team in part, but mostly by the staff themselves and not in response to the board or to parents.

How did the prep schools deal with provision for EYFS - any tips?

This is a really tricky one as we had to acknowledge that this year group were one of the hardest to accommodate. The loss of their learning environment and the social element of their learning is such a key aspect of how they develop.

There had to be flexibility and understanding that these pupils won't be able to follow an online regime in the same way that older pupils can. Activities needed to be open, practical, short and simple. It's important to acknowledge that parents may interpret some of the tasks in a different way and any submissions should be celebrated and acknowledged, even if it's not necessary what the teacher asked for.

Pupils at this age need to have an adult with them for learning to work. Although, we were doing some Zoom sessions with reception pupils, we made a lot of videos of teachers and teaching assistants modelling activities so that parents could access them at a time that worked for them. Many of our reception pupils did their home learning when their parents returned from work, not during school hours.

We had three Zoom calls for reception with their class teacher and teaching assistant. The children were in a group of no more than eight for these sessions. We gave them a question or two first (which was emailed to the parents with the meeting time/code) so that the parents could talk to their child before the Zoom call.

When the pupils were used to interacting on Zoom, we introduced PE and Chinese sessions hosted by our specialists. PE was an active session so they needed a bit of space around them. For Chinese, the students listened to a story or they needed to have a resource with them, such as a picture of their family for naming family members/a doll to name body parts etc. We also filmed phonics sessions so they could be viewed when convenient and replayed.

Here are some activities that younger pupils have enjoyed:

- Creating their own role play areas. Pupils were asked to create a shop that sold either toys, food or clothes, all items that would be in the home. Parents gave them coins so they could role play. There were lots of opportunities for mark making with price tags, open and closed signs etc
- Growing things, such as carrot tops. They could draw and record its progress
- Building and creating using boxes, containers, furniture – whatever was likely to be available in their home

Parents sent in photos or videos so that the teachers can see them doing hands on activities. We rang parents after a few weeks to see how they were coping and we made a few parent instruction videos. They particularly found it hard to support writing activities. They found maths/ counting activities easiest. We also held Zoom parent teacher conferences with them to discuss child learning.