RESETTING DIGITAL PRIORITIES
FOR A BLENDED SEPTEMBER (AND BEYOND)

Resetting digital priorities for a blended September (and beyond)

Blended or hybrid learning is here for the long haul, says Al Kingsley, MD of NetSupport.

There's no doubt that teachers earned a well-deserved rest over summer. The challenges of the last months have been huge.

While teachers have worked tirelessly to help deliver remote learning, it's fair to say that some schools were able to pivot to online learning more easily, while others continue to struggle.

Schools that found the transition easier were those that had already embraced a strategic approach to technology. Even before COVID-19, schools were increasingly awake to the need to scrap piecemeal approaches to educational technology and focus on long-term, holistic digital strategies. However, even the most digitally-savvy schools weren't entirely prepared for long-term lockdown. They are now looking at how their strategies must flex to support ongoing blended learning.

With the Department for Education (DfE) expecting schools to have contingency plans in place for remote learning that include high quality online resources, schools must be ready to embrace a fully blended approach from September onwards.

Much has been made of the vast amount of useful and quality content available for teachers to utilise throughout lockdown – Oak Academy, BBC Bitesize to name but two. However, while the government's approach seems to be that 'content is King', it fails to recognise a lack of direction on how schools should effectively deliver that content while promoting communication and collaboration.

Why communication and collaboration shouldn't claim content's crown

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that having access to tools that promote collaboration and communication at their core is vital. Content is nothing without the mechanism to deliver it remotely. Teachers need to collaborate not only with each other but with students and parents, while also having the ability to communicate with distinct groups and individuals safely.

Post-corona digital strategies must focus on communication tools that increase productivity and connection, not clog up email inboxes and drive a digital divide between individuals. Cloud technologies could be used to aid collaboration with colleagues, whether through allowing remote simultaneous editing of documents in a secure and 'always on' environment, or through the use of communication apps such as Slack. What's vital is that schools have the infrastructure, training and support from the whole school community in place to ensure communication and collaboration tools deliver.

Step one in any strategy is to step back and evaluate your position, including your strengths and weaknesses. For example, our current crisis has laid bare the challenges of digital equity, training for teachers to deliver blended learning, finding appropriate tools , agreeing appropriate methods for remote assessment and a broader challenge with staff and students having suitable connectivity. Infrastructure too has been a sticking point – there's a greater need for technology to be accessible both locally and remotely with the ability to deploy devices in the field and connect teachers with students – and with each other wherever they are.

Continuity counts

Making communication and collaboration a foundation pillar of your strategy also provides an additional benefit: continuity. Whether your students are in school or connecting remotely from home, providing a sense of continuity can really support student progression and make the transition between home and school (which we may see twist and turn over the next year) easier to bear.

Of course, it's not possible to translate the full classroom experience to remote models. However, where possible, schools should seek to implement strong foundational technologies that support both in-class and remote teaching and learning. Whatever the content of their lessons, technology must enable them to deliver it in any setting. For example, **cloud-based teaching platforms** can enable teachers to deliver a range of learning experiences that enhance classroom teaching and enable effective remote learning including:

- **Staying on task** – cloud platforms can help teachers easily monitor students' screens, the applications they're using, websites they're visiting, what they're typing, who they're collaborating with – and help out swiftly when support is needed, in-class and remotely.

- **Interacting and capturing feedback** – using chat and messaging tools to interact with the class and giving every student a voice, using quick polls to gain an insight into everyone's topic understanding can be used in both contexts to great effect.

- **Managing behaviour** – focusing students and keeping them safe online by controlling web and application use with 'allowed' and 'restricted' lists – removing the temptation of distractions and preventing access to unsuitable content, ensuring focus and attention by blanking screens or locking keyboards and mice.

When students are used to digital teaching platforms in the classroom, making the transition to remote, home learning is not such a change. Teachers benefit from greater control, communication and insight – no matter where they're teaching from.

In pre-COVID times, we wouldn't have advocated rushing edtech experiments, but there's a need for schools to be fast-thinking and agile in the way they respond to current challenges. Clearly schools need to act fast but the principles of strategic planning remain the same; a principled, mindful and sustainable approach to technology. Now is not the time to abandon strategic thinking for short-term fixes.

A well-planned technological strategy based on sound principles, supported by the right infrastructure and foundational technologies will help support students and staff for years to come.

Many schools are already doing that and sharing their learnings. For example, a host of international school leaders' experiences are reflected in the updated Digital Strategy Guide we co-created with ICT Evangelist, Mark Anderson, which details the many factors schools need to take into account right now.

There's a long-term benefit to adopting a strategic view of educational technology now – it will help schools "build back better" for the post-COVID world. If we can take a positive from the pandemic, let it be a fundamental shift in how we use technology to deliver transformative and impactful teaching and learning.

Words from Al Kingsley, MD of NetSupport.