

Digital strategy post-Covid

With the future still uncertain, digital plans for schools have taken on a new significance and we must ensure that ed-tech can be used effectively both in-school and remotely...

Whether you are starting a digital strategy from scratch or simply adapting it, the first thing to do is reflect. As well as identifying the areas that are digital priorities, it is also necessary to look backwards to get a clear picture of the technology currently used in your school – and if or how that has changed during the lockdown. You can then decide which solutions are effective and are delivering impact.

The word “impact” itself can sometimes be a barrier as it may give the impression that everything must deliver a measurable evidence of progress. However, it can be more than that. It is about saving time. It is about saving resources. It is about promoting wellbeing – and much more. Some of those things are less tangible when it comes to measurement.

For example, recent months have shown that using tools like Teams, Hangouts and others has significantly helped with peer-to-peer and teacher-to-teacher engagement and collaboration. Those kinds of benefits are not things that necessarily filter through to school data and results.

At the heart of your digital strategy are students and teachers. The core areas to consider are:

- Enhancing learning outcomes and supporting pedagogy.
- Increasing staff, student and parental engagement.
- Allocating training time to ensure teachers are confident with using the tools (especially important when thinking about trust-based operations, where staff are potentially required to work in different locations).
- Implementing collaborative technologies.
- Thinking about how, as a school or trust, technology can be used to promote digital wellbeing.
- Employing sustainable, cost-effective solutions.

It is worth noting too that a clear digital strategy can deliver additional benefits for a MAT or federation of schools. For instance,

there are significant economies of scale when it comes to buying technology collectively in bulk, rather than piecemeal as standalone schools. Standardising solutions across all schools in a group, as well as centralising their control and maintenance, can also help achieve better value for money.

Three golden rules

Be clear: First and foremost, keep it simple. Complicated strategies (and/or revisions) are often less flexible and more likely to disenfranchise the whole school community. It is much easier to concentrate on one or two key changes and ensure sufficient time for CPD to build staff confidence than it is to try to introduce lots of changes at the same time.

Recognise when tech is needed – and when it is not: It is important not to fall into the trap of using technology for technology’s sake. The question to ask that gives you maximum insight into your school’s IT situation is: would anyone notice if it was gone? It is important to recognise that technology is not the panacea for everything, it is simply there to support good teachers in delivering great lessons.

Work within your budget: Start by looking at where your existing technology can multi-task and bring you savings (in time, money or both) and also at technologies that you are paying to lease or maintain, but which you are not really using. You can then redirect the money saved to a different area of your strategy. Ensuring your plan is sustainable over time and that your existing technology will continue to add value will provide consistency for everyone.

Ed-tech post-Covid

How has Covid-19 affected how we think of a school digital strategy? We all know that the method of delivering teaching and learning has changed fundamentally in the last few months and, for many, there is no going back. There is now

a new emphasis: the requirement for schools to consider what technology will work best for them both inside and outside of the classroom.

Blended learning

The biggest change is undoubtedly the use of the blended learning model and I believe that this is here to stay. I have heard countless stories of its benefits, particularly regarding engagement, and it offers greater flexibility for both teachers and students. For example, it could be used on snow days so that students do not miss a day of learning, or for delivery of revision classes during the Easter holidays, so students and teachers do not have to come into school.

Of course, more technology-based remote learning throws up its own challenges – namely, the digital divide. Technology itself cannot fix the challenge of students either having no access to it at home or access that is limited or shared with parents and siblings. So, with that in mind, blended learning is likely to be best employed as a supportive platform alongside more traditional methods.

Other tech possibilities

At the core of every digital strategy is the need to make evidence-based choices about classroom technology that supports pedagogy. However, we also need to consider whole-school technology, particularly the role it can play in student safeguarding and pastoral care, on and off-site.

The ability for teachers to use technology to maintain one-to-one relationships with their students – whether in the classroom or over a remote connection – will remain vital in the months to come, especially for quiet or vulnerable children. It will be important in order to build normality into their schedules as well as to provide reassurance where it is needed.

Now that the blended model has come into play, another thing to think about is ensuring that teachers have the tools to create

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and distribute resources effectively – and that students can return their work just as easily. Choosing the right technology can really streamline this process and prevent an unnecessary extra burden for teachers.

In addition, ed-tech that enables teachers to provide timely feedback to students about their progress is critical to maintaining learning momentum and motivation (especially for remote learners) – and tools that can help provide enrichment activities also need to be on the list for consideration.

Reflect and revise

For many schools, Covid-19 has been a catalyst to start the conversation about digital strategy. Some were already some way down the path; others less so, and they have had to catch-up quickly. What needs to happen now is that the areas that have benefited from an online approach through necessity (e.g. collaboration, communication and pedagogy) are not lost as “normality” returns. There are ways that many of those facets can be incorporated into the standard methods of delivering teaching and learning in classrooms.



FURTHER INFORMATION

- ▶ Al Kingsley has co-authored a guide to creating a digital strategy in education: <https://tinyurl.com/y4ue7n8q>
- ▶ Al Kingsley was among the guests on SecEd’s best practice podcast, Technology & Digital Strategy in Schools (July 2020): <https://bit.ly/3eRqXkH>