



An Evidence-Based Approach to Blended and Remote Learning in Schools

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I think things will go back to pretty much normal when the Covid-19 pandemic subsides. While I welcome children in our schools being able to collaborate more, develop creativity and be part of a vibrant school life without Covid-19 restrictions, I feel that lessons may not be learnt by policy makers.

Meeting the needs of all learners and also developing the provision of state-of-the-art technology in schools require significant investment. Many people may blame administrators and education authorities; however, individuals working within these organisations are constrained by limited resources. It is high time that governments and policy makers take an evidence-based approach to education, similar to the approach that school leaders have taken so that the needs of their children would be met in the return to school at the end of the summer.

School leaders have made the day-to-day running of a school manageable despite the shifting sands of guidelines on how to manage Covid-19. The massive increase in paperwork and also investment in time around track and trace in school as a result of a positive case is taking a substantial toll on leaders, distracting us from the management of remote learning.

The learning experiences of children should be our top priority, but the majority of schools have had no training or experience of providing quality remote learning prior to the pandemic. While many educators may say that they are experienced in using an online learning platform and have used technology effectively in the classroom, trying to plan and deliver effective lessons for children both in the classroom and at home because of shielding or isolation measures is a brand-new experience for the vast majority of us.

Over the summer, a large number of educators, including myself, with experience of using technology in schools offered ourselves as trainers or advisors on how to manage remote and blended learning. What experience has taught me is that after 8 or 9 weeks since the return to school, through evaluating how learning and teaching in this hybrid model has worked, we may only now be in a position to put in place an effective approach to remote and blended learning.

I like to start with the end in mind: we want to provide the most effective model of remote/blended learning possible.

Our measurable success criteria are:

1. As many children as possible are confident in using technology so that learning continues through remote teaching during periods of lockdown.
2. The majority of teachers feel confident in the use of technology to raise standards in learning and teaching and to support remote learning.

The following is hopefully a roadmap to achieve this.

1. Gather as much evidence as possible to inform your decisions.

Find out what works and doesn't work, with a particular focus on academic research. I found the [Remote Learning Rapid Evidence Assessment](#) from the Education Endowment Foundation extremely useful with key findings indicating exactly how to plan and deliver remote learning lessons.

[Module 1](#) of the EA Blended Learning Teacher Professional Learning programme was full of supportive information on how to develop blended learning in school.

2. Parental surveys

It is very important to gather evidence from surveys on the experiences of the parents of your school from during the lockdown period. If there are further lockdowns or children have to isolate at home for 14 days, parents will most likely be there with their children.

Schools have to ensure that parents are supported as much as possible. The overwhelming responses to surveys which I have seen have indicated that parents want their children's teachers to provide feedback on work completed during lockdown. A [positive home-school link](#) is crucial to ensuring that remote learning is effective.

3. Select the correct online learning platform.

It is even more important that you select a learning platform that is right for the needs of your own school. It can be tempting to look to the school down the road or to an app that you have heard positive anecdotes about. Remember to employ a healthy scepticism about third hand information – many people have vested interests in particular platforms.

School leaders should gather the opinions of their ICT coordinator and staff on their experiences of using different online learning platforms. Identify the pros and cons of each platform and make a decision on what suits the needs of the children in your particular school. An effective ICT coordinator and an open-minded staff are important during this time and I am privileged to have inherited both in our school.

4. Training and time for teachers

It is crucial that you tailor a bespoke training programme for your staff with training that helps them feel confident in using technology. Give them time to practise using the technology and gather their views on it. Leaders should take these views on board and tweak things so that teachers feel supported in using technology and that it actually helps them manage their workload. There should also be a sound pedagogical approach to this training,

using the [evidence](#) to inform and support your practices. What this evidence points to is that children can learn through remote learning if:

- explanations are clear and build on previous learning,
- activities are scaffolded appropriately, and
- there is clear feedback to children present.

Training for teachers should reflect this. Teachers need time to simultaneously meet the needs of children in the classroom and children at home. Any after school meetings, activities and initiatives not directly supporting learning should be put on hold until this pandemic subsides.

If needs be teachers should be released from class for a few minutes each week to meet (socially distanced, of course) with their colleagues to review how things are going both in the classroom and with blended learning. They should discuss what is going well, what needs to be improved and what needs to be discontinued. It is crucial that teachers feel supported in the provision of both in-school and online learning. School leaders are required to be innovative in providing formal and informal learning opportunities which address the needs evidenced through research and regular and supported self-evaluation.

5. Support for parents and pupils

Schools may have decided to use an online platform which is new to the school community. Children and parents need to be supported to feel comfortable in using the online platform. Perhaps the best way to do this is by providing short video guides on how to use the platform at home. For a few minutes each week, children should be encouraged to log in to the learning platform and use some of the features, so that they are prepared and less apprehensive should a period of remote learning arise.

At the heart of everything, an effective school is one where the needs of the children lead all learning and teaching activity, and I am extremely lucky to have inherited a team who understand this. This year, staff in my school and in every school have had to redesign school life to deal with the guidelines in response to Covid-19 and deserve to be commended for their hard work and dedication in these most difficult of times.

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