School Leadership during Lockdown

Notes from the 2020 Summer Term Online Leadership Forums

24 June 2020

Foreword : Snow days to no days. A personal view

Having now co-hosted the series of eight online forums, I have been privileged to hear the good work that many schools are undertaking during these difficult times.

How school leaders should judge success during the Covid crisis has been a recurring theme over recent weeks.

Following these discussions and considering recent research evidence, I believe two basic criteria will prove to be the most important in ensuring pupil progress:

- the amount of lesson time that students have benefitted from, and
- whether the various distance learning strategies have had the same ambition of quality (if not quantity) and basics of good teaching as any good lesson.

I recall the efforts that many school leaders made, me included, to keep their schools open during periods of bad weather. On one occasion a bus company that was located on Dartmoor was not able to provide the usual school transport service to my school in Launceston as a result of snow at their depot, despite the complete lack of any snow at all between the children's homes and their school. Phone calls to parents and a few journeys for the school minibuses meant that less than an hour of education was lost for these pupils.

With the threat of the coronavirus currently receding – which we all sincerely hope will continue – I would now be determined to get as many children as possible back into school.

It has been clear through discussions with school leaders that there has been a large variation in the educational offer provided to children during the coronavirus crisis lockdown. This view has been supported by several research reports which have been published during the last two months.

In April the Sutton Trust[1] reported that 23% of pupils were taking part in live and recorded lessons online every day but that this was 16% for working class pupils, 30% for pupils from middle class backgrounds and over 50% for pupils at independent schools. Research published by the NFER[2] for a week in May found that 58% of students had not submitted any work at all. UCL Institute of Education research[3] published in June found that 71% of state school children received none or less than one online lesson per day, only 17% put in more than four hours a day and that 31% of independent schools provided four or more live online lessons daily, as compared with just 6% in state schools.

I'm sure that no headteacher in normal times would have called less than one hour a day of lessons to 71% of the pupils a success.

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[1] https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Impact-Brief-School-Shutdown.pdf
[2] https://www.nfer.ac.uk/news-events/press-releases/new-report-looks-at-pupil-engagement-in-remote-learning-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/
[3] https://www.llakes.ac.uk/sites/default/files/LLAKES%20Working%20Paper%2067_0.pdf

Like many school leaders I have been focused for many years on the attainment gap between children from disadvantage background and their peers and I believed that this gap would be closed by high quality teaching. The rapid evidence assessment undertaken by the EEF[4] stated that supporting effective remote learning will mitigate the extent to which this attainment gap widens but that the elements of effective teaching such as clear explanations, scaffolding and feedback are more important than how or when lessons or support are provided. This seems obvious, of course, but with so much effort spent on logistics and grappling with the new medium and requirements of distance learning, I fear many schools and teachers have overlooked, or been unable to focus, on these basic elements – initially, at least.

In April this year, 200 army engineers and 160 civilian contractors opened a 500 bed hospital from scratch in just 9 days. I would love to see a similar national effort from students, parents and teachers to heal the educational wounds inflicted by the pandemic, and most especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. If I currently have any cause for optimism it is because of the commitment and high quality of school leaders and teachers that we have in this country.

2020 has been the first year since 1880 that attending school for primary aged children has not been compulsory, the first since 1918 that 16 year olds have not sat external examinations in the summer and it is the first year since 1992 that Ofsted have not inspected a single school in a 6 month period and that there will be no school performance tables published.

Without these external influencing factors there is an even greater need for school leaders to lead their schools in the interests of their pupils and their communities. I believe that we have the autonomy and the moral imperative to take responsibility for returning to the quality of education that we were providing for our pupils six months ago. If not us who, if not now when?

Jack Jackson, June 2020

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[4] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/REA_-_Impact_of_school_closures_on_the_attainment_gap_summary.pdf

Some conclusions from the Summer term 2020 PTI Leadership Forums

The PTI Leadership forums took place weekly from 22nd April to 16th June 2020 in response to school closures due to coronavirus. Below are some reflections and conclusions drawn in mid June from the many viewpoints aired and the ensuing discussions.

1) The pandemic has affected every school differently. Over the lockdown period, there has been a wide range of strategies employed by different schools in terms of both the quantity and style of teaching available for students. Where schools have been ambitious with their expectations of students, they feel that students have risen to this challenge.

2) Schools have worked hard to maintain personal contact with students and to continue to focus on strong relationships. The importance of the relationship with parents has been highlighted.

3) Whilst all schools voiced concerns about students who have not engaged, there were also reports of some students who appeared to be thriving better than in the classroom.

4) Heads should continue to demonstrate courage and autonomy and be trusted to make the right decisions for their school, staff, pupils and their families. They should focus on:
   - Having a high quality curriculum taught by teachers with good subject knowledge focusing on a Return Curriculum rather than a Recovery Curriculum
   - Managing and protecting the wellbeing of students and staff

5) Going forward teachers should continue to:
   - Use the newly discovered wealth of online resources and virtual experiences
   - Engage with parents about the topics their children are learning
   - Use a blended approach of online work and classroom teaching
   - Remember that pupils have different learning styles – some made better progress during lockdown

Motivating staff and learners
22nd & 28th April forums

The key themes discussed were underpinned by the concern of the first forum participants to establish as sustainable a situation as possible.

1) There is a need to ensure staff wellbeing:
    – Some staff find the boundaries between work and home life difficult
    – Others find it easier to come to school to work than staying at home
    – Those who are less technology-savvy feel under pressure

Practical ideas included :
- Enforce a holiday "enrichment programme" to prevent staff from working in down time
- Avoid compulsory use of Zoom/video contacts with students
- Ensure regular check-ins with staff, although not too much as some prefer not
- Ensure a positive tone in email communications

2) There have been a very wide range of approaches to delivering the curriculum across schools, with some schools delivering a 100% timetable online using virtual classrooms to some banning any video contact at all. It was mentioned that everyone is getting better at using the technology, and that mixing media is optimal. Methods and ideas being used included:
    – Creating workbooks for the next 5 weeks for all year groups, which have been either posted to homes or picked up from school
    – Use of conferencing software like Microsoft Teams (initially only for Years 10 &12, or for live assemblies)
    – Each student having contact with one teacher per subject once a week, maybe by telephone
    – Using Year 11, 12 & 13 students to create resources and mentor younger year groups. (Parents required to sign an online policy to meet safeguarding concerns)

There has been a welcoming of live lessons from parents, although schools have had to protect staff who are not in a position, for whatever reason, to deliver them.

SEND children were proving difficult to cater for, with an example of a school not being able to reopen its autism centre due to concerns for staff safety; one school had developed specific resources for its SEND students that were very appreciated by the parents.

All acknowledged the challenge of keeping even the most motivated students' levels of ambition, whatever approaches are being adopted.

The EEF quick review of distance learning was referenced as being particularly useful:

- https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-resources/
- https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/Covid-19_Resources/Remote_learning_evidence_review/Rapid_Evidence_Assessment_summary.pdf

3) There was a similarly divergeant set of responses from schools over how to keep in touch with all students, but widespread concern over how to ensure the wellbeing of the most vulnerable children, who are not coming in to school. Approaches included:
   - Staff running keep in touch calls for all families with those most vulnerable having weekly and daily calls. Staff should ask parents for permission to speak directly to pupil too.
   - Making use of TAs and administrative staff to help with phone calls to vulnerable students, as these might be seen as less forbidding
   - Some schools had established a hierarchy of phone calls, from contact from the pastoral team initially, followed by contact from the Head of Year if the former was not successful, and some schools engaged in doorstep visits (including the delivery of paper resources)
   - A text or a letter warning to parents to expect a phone call helped with keeping parents engaged and ensure they do not ignore the call (which appears as "number witheld" to protect staff privacy).
   - Messages should kept positive and offer support rather than criticism

4) Looking ahead to when schools return, some contributors felt that staff time was not best spent now overthinking and in general schools were not spending time planning. However, some Heads and schools were making early plans for a number of return dates. Key themes of reflection for the return were:
   - How to best to cater for the most vulnerable students, both academically and pastorally
   - Transition at all stages (KS2-3, 4-5, 5-university)
   - Primary/Secondary transition was a major concern
   - How to fill the gaps in foundation subjects. After school homework clubs may be necessary to catch up.
   - How to provide counselling support and the pastoral curriculum for both staff and students to help adapt back
   - The importance of having a "rite of passage" celebration for Y11 at some point

5) Lessons learnt from this experience should include:
   - ways to improve students' aptitude at independent learning, and reducing the tendency to have teachers "serve material up on a plate"
   - refining teacher assessment methods for external examinations
   - a sense-check on schools' over-reliance on external assessment and decisions being dictated by Ofsted framework concerns.

Meeting the needs of all children
6th & 12th May forums

As context, the government guidelines on return to schools were issued on Sunday 10th May at 7pm, stating that Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 classes were to return on 1st June, and Year 10 and Year 12 to return in July. Attendance would not, however, be mandatory.

The discussion at both forums was dominated by concerns over how to handle a partial return to schools. Key points made were:

1) The situation had yielded some benefits, including a closer working relationship with many parents, and some students doing better when away from the normal peer pressures of school

2) None of the leaders were confident about coping with having some pupils in school and others at home, as schools reopen:
   – Attendance of the most vulnerable and disinterested students will still be a concern, therefore both live and online lessons should continue in parallel – blended approach
   – Tutors will still need to phone non-attendees
   – Staff capacity to deliver this blended approach was a concern, especially with those with their own children at home
   – Many schools' physical infrastructure would not allow satisfactory social distancing whilst maintaining the school ethos

3) Ideas were exchanged about how to provide the necessary pastoral support for pupils when they return to school, such as:
   – Staff having access to online CPD to help them prepare for dealing with pastoral issues eg bereaved students
   – PSHE to be part of the core curriculum on return to school
   – Support staff should be given training in pastoral support too
   – A realisation that singing, PE, outdoor activities will be important. One school recommended having a Therapy Dog.

4) It is important to support students at key points in their education, especially those transitioning over the summer

5) Dame Alison Peacock, Chief Executive of the Chartered College of Teaching, joined the 12th May forum and shared that nowhere across the world has the problem of educating young people effectively during the coronavirus pandemic been solved.
   – Globabally, students' engagement has diminshed as extrinsic constraints have relaxed. This is true even in China, where there is considerable peer and parental pressure on children to do well in exams
   – The critical importance of the teacher has been made clear

6) She has also been liaising with the DfE Recovery Planning Team, and the government priorities when considering the reopening of schools are:
   – Economic benefit (more parents can return to work without children at home)
   – Educational benefit of face-to-face lessons (the planned return of Y10 and 12 suggests a Government priority on exams)
   – Health of the population

Teaching and assessment
20th May forum

The focus of the discussion was about showing courage and autonomy in school leadership and, as schools return after lockdown, how leaders might change their priorities.

There was agreement that the main priority and moral purpose will always be to give all children, regardless of background, the best possible education. However, against a background of vague guidance, uncertainty and the teaching unions' debate associated with reopening (it was mentioned that ASCL had approved reopening), school heads felt the priority now is the practical issue of opening of school whilst ensuring the safety and well being of children, staff and parents. School attendance will not be mandatory and there is a real concern that the most vulnerable children and the disaffected students who have not engaged during lockdown, will not return, thus widening the attainment gap even more.

The experience of lockdown has generated some positive thoughts on how schools might change for the better in the future eg

- Continue with a blended approach of online and face to face learning eg Microsoft Teams could be used to bridge home and school learning
- Progress 8 will no longer be meaningful given the wide gap between pupils who continued to engage on line and those who did not
- A curriculum should not focus on exam specifications and a return to a three year KS3 would be welcome
- Teacher assessment, rather than relying solely on external exam results, might give a better reflection of students' ability and potential
- Ofsted currently focuses on how well pupils have built on previous learning. With some pupils having big gaps in their education due to lockdown this approach should be adjusted accordingly
- SATS are not helpful to secondary schools. They put too much pressure on Year 2 pupils and should be scrapped. Models used in other European schools should be considered.
- Ofsted should appreciate the tremendous effort all teachers have made during lockdown to continue educating their pupils, adapting and using innovative ways to cater for the needs of their particular pupils. Also the commitment to pastoral support provided for pupils, staff and parents should be acknowledged.
- Depts eg English and ICT, should work together to help pupils to catch up with key skills

As context, the forum took place after half term and with the Primary schools returning the day before.

Two Primary school headteachers reported that their return to school yesterday had been very successful with a very buoyant mood amongst pupils (one school had played music as the children arrived) and staff were very positive. Parents could choose whether their children returned and the take up varied between 40% and 60%. Other children eg of key workers and some siblings also attended.

A key message is that headteachers should do what they consider right for their school and community. Press coverage has not always been helpful. People should not be judgmental about others eg criticise parents who keep their children at home or criticise headteachers who do not open their schools.

Y6 curriculum can be flexible to match the needs of the children; transition materials uploaded by secondary schools have been helpful.

A blended approach ie a mixture of online and in-school teaching, is the way forward. When Y10 return, hopefully in mid June, it is important to have subject specialist teachers giving live lessons online. If space is limited the priority should be to have those Y10 pupils who could not or would not engage online, back in the classroom. The well being of students will be important and a blended approach should include pshe and form tutor sessions.

Looking forward to September, it is likely that the need for social distancing will remain which will limit numbers returning to classrooms which will make a continued blended approach essential.

Suggested feedback to policy makers:

- The level of professional accountability that exists and has been demonstrated amply by teachers during the lockdown, is remarkable and should be valued. Heads should be trusted to make the right decisions for their school, the staff, the pupils and their families.
- The threat of an Ofsted inspection team descending should be removed. Schools should be given time to refine the new ways of working before Ofsted monitoring resumes.
- Teachers have demonstrated their ability to rank their students accurately.
- The heavy content of exam syllabuses should be reconsidered to allow more time for reflection in lessons.
- There should be a move away from terminal exams and more emphasis on teacher assessment and coursework. What is the value of GCSEs (and perhaps SATs) when education continues to age 18?
- School league tables not being published this year presents an opportunity to discontinue them permanently.
- Teachers have been working flat out throughout the lockdown and any suggestion of continuing to teach throughout the summer holidays should be dismissed.

What is the vision?

The focus of the discussion was about showing courage and autonomy in school leadership and, as pupils return to school, how leaders might change their action plan after the experience of lockdown, refocusing on educational priorities rather than dealing with practical challenges and overcoming barriers.

It was agreed that the priorities going forward should be:
- Having a high quality curriculum taught by teachers with good subject knowledge focusing on a Return Curriculum rather than a Recovery Curriculum
- Managing and protecting the well being of students and staff

A Primary School head commented that during lockdown, rather than teaching new material, they had focused on reinforcing knowledge in English, Maths ,pshe, French and Science projects. This had shown to be effective in that the Y6 pupils who have just returned had not forgotten anything.

A secondary school head said that in September their priorities would continue to be Literacy and SEND. Lockdown had highlighted Online resources which would continue to be supportive for improving Literacy. Lockdown experience had shown that 3 sessions was an optimum for Online teaching.

Some students (including some autistic pupils) had clearly performed better when working at home rather than at school. Some vulnerable children who had continued to attend school in small numbers had benefitted from more attention. Teachers should be mindful of this on the pupils return to school and consider adapting the teaching environment/style/resources to encourage continued success for all pupils.

Suggestions for improving the well being of staff and students included:
- appointing an extra pastoral leader to support tutors
- creating a house system where Y12 students can offer vertical tutoring support
- training admin staff to support the pastoral team
- giving newly appointed, inexperienced staff lighter timetables and the opportunity of co-teaching
- using Action Your Future webinar to emphasise the 12 pillars of well being
- using former students to support sixth formers via ZoomLeadership Forum Group 2

As pupils returned to school the week of 16th June, some initiatives included:

- Organising a "Reset Day" with tutors for those students who had not engaged online to give them positive encouragement and advice on the priorities for catching up with missed work.
- Using Groupcall which has a translation facility to help communication with EAL students and families
- Recalling not just Y10 and Y12 students but also vulnerable children, children of key workers and siblings

Lockdown initiatives which will be continued in the future included:

- Adopting a blended learning approach -- some pupils progressed better with online learning at home rather than being in the classroom
- Using virtual trips and tours eg museums
- Recording videos for parents to inform them about topics being taught so they feel more empowered to give their children support