UK educators share distance learning strategies beyond their schools

In the wake of COVID-19 school closings, the past several weeks of UK education have been like no other time in recent history. With little preparation time, teachers have had to upend every model of classroom teaching, adapt to distance learning and accompanying technology, and work with students whose home lives are also in upheaval. Normally, educators would have the time to research digital tools and pedagogical methods before introducing them into the classroom. But today, every day becomes an opportunity for "on the fly" professional development.

"You know that saying about failing quickly and learning quickly?" asks Dawn Haywood, deputy CEO and education director of Windsor Academy Trust headquartered in Halesowen, West Midlands. **"We've all learned how to fail quickly, learn quickly from those failures, and share what we've learned with everyone else."**

Educators like Haywood—along with Graham Macaulay, Director of Technology at LEO Academy Trust in the London Borough of Sutton, and Ben Barnes, Director of Computer Science for Outwood Grange Academies Trust across northern England and the East Midlands—are eager to share what they're learning with their peers. Below is their best advice for ensuring that no matter the constraints, teaching and learning are as effective as they can be every day.

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Feed teachers a steady stream of lesson ideas

In the absence of both live meetings with subject leaders as well as the idea-sharing that occurs organically in school communities during school days, Windsor Academy Trust has strengthened online resources for teachers. The Trust's 15 subject directors have created shared Google Drives for every subject, and populated those Drives with lesson plans and activities. The trust's teachers can simply visit those Drives if they need inspiration.

Early on, Haywood says that teachers saw students with special education needs having challenges completing their lessons outside of the live classroom environment. Seeing this need, educators have created special Drives with supportive lessons and activities to serve special education teachers.

Ensure students have technology to support learning

As LEO Academy Trust schools prepared to close, educators surveyed parents and guardians to find out which students lacked online access or devices like Chromebooks. The Trust ensured that those families received a take-home Chromebook, and, if needed, a WiFi connection device.

Haywood notes that Google Classroom helps Windsor Academy Trust educators locate and follow up with pupils who may need extra help. **"At the end of the first week, we looked at** which students had not logged on to their Google Classroom,"** she says. **"We then rang every single parent or guardian of students who had not logged on, really just to do a bit of a welfare check, and then, secondly, to just ensure they had the technology that they needed to be able to access Google Classroom. From there, we have then continued to distribute more Chromebooks to those students who need them."**

Provide IT support for parents and guardians

Parents and guardians who are home with children are pulling double and triple duty as caregivers and teachers—and, often, IT consultants. To help parents and guardians who need help with the hardware and software their children use for distance learning,

LEO Academy Trust has established a live chat feature on its distance learning site. **"We get about 250 questions a day,"** Macaulay says. **"About 230 we can solve there and then, and for the other 20 we say we'll look into it and call them back later."**

Schedule and stagger student assignments

At the beginning of the school closure period, teachers were anxious to ensure that students were kept busy with assignments, says Barnes. The problem was that there was too much on students' plates. **"Kids were getting a bit overwhelmed,"** Barnes says. **"So we told the teachers, hang on—you can schedule assignments in Google Classroom. You don't have to put everything out there at once."** Haywood saw a similar effect at

Windsor Academy Trust, although she notes that it was the teachers who were feeling overwhelmed.

"Some kids were going into their Classroom over the weekend and looking at assignments for the coming week, and by Saturday they'd done the whole week's worth of work and were bombarding teachers," Haywood says. As Barnes did, Haywood's instructional technologists reminded teachers to schedule posts so they'd appear throughout the week.

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Share the knowledge

Educators at every shut-down school in the UK—and indeed, around the world—are looking outward for distance-learning tips and tools. When Macauley and his colleagues find a teaching tactic that works, they want to share it with peers. **"We decided from the outset that anything we do for our children would be open source,"** he says. **"That's why we have all of our learning resources on our website."** The LEO Academy Trust website has logged about 13,000 unique visitors since the schools closed in mid-March. There's a similar philosophy at Outwood Grange. **"Quite often we keep a lot of our stuff to ourselves, because it's our intellectual property,"** Barnes says. **"But this time we said, 'you know what, have the lot.' "** The assignments, which include Google Forms and YouTube videos, are grouped on Google Sites by subject on the subject home page).

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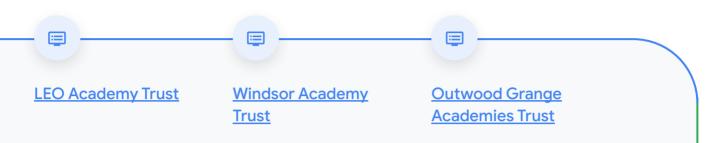>
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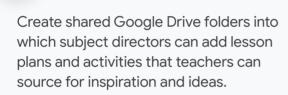
Encourage activities beyond academics

Schoolwork is important for children. But so is well-deserved time away from academics. **"Our first priority was to make sure that the remote learning was set up; but very quickly we added the whole area around physical activity,"** says Haywood. **"We want to make sure children do daily physical activity, and we give them links to help them do that. We also began providing guidance around well-being, particularly as we became clearer about students and perhaps families feeling more isolated."** The Trust's PE and well-being resources Google Site includes exercise routines, dance classes and yoga.

At Outwood Grange schools, Barnes and his colleagues also realized that students and their families needed guidance on being together while in isolation. Just before the Trust's Easter break, Barnes asked teachers to compile activities that weren't about academics, and create Google Sites pages describing each activity under categories such as 'Get Cooking!' and 'Get Crafty!' A great example is the 'Lip Sync Battle', which encouraged students to record videos of themselves lip-syncing to their favorite songs, and get family members involved.

Google for Education

Distance-learning takeaways:

Create shared Google Drive folders into which subject directors can add lesson plans and activities that teachers can source for inspiration and ideas.

Check on students who don't log in to learning platforms. Do they have devices and online access? Do their families need extra help?

Provide parents and guardians with technology support via chat or email if they have questions about devices or online resources for their children.

Schedule Google Classroom assignments at intervals throughout the week to manage student and teacher workloads.

Share lesson plans publicly so that educators outside of your schools can tap into new sources of knowledge.

Offer activities that go beyond academics, such as ideas for physical activity or fun things for families to do together.