

# The new normal

FROM LIVESTREAMED LESSONS TO SOCIALLY DISTANT CLASSROOMS, LOCAL SCHOOLS REFLECT ON A UNIQUE MOMENT IN EDUCATIONAL HISTORY – AND CONSIDER ITS LASTING IMPACT

WORDS BY CHARLOTTE PHILLIPS

If you had to think of three words to describe schools' capacity for change, 'fast', 'surprising' and 'unexpected' probably wouldn't be among them. Prepare to give those preconceptions a makeover, because one thing that's emerged from these extraordinary times is that schools can be all those things, and more.

When schools shut back in March, teachers had to do things differently, innovate and evolve, and do it quickly – and they delivered. Almost overnight, they came up with new ways of communicating lessons, taking classes and keeping the pastoral side going, too.

National lockdown may be over, at least for now, but the way schools work has changed, possibly forever. In preparation for the new term, they've been rethinking every aspect of school life. Just about everything we take for granted when it comes to schools, from assemblies to lessons, team sports to playtimes, has been taken apart and put back together again to ensure that every health and safety precaution has been taken.

What has emerged is that doing things in a new way can sometimes bring other unexpected benefits. Not that this should come as a surprise, points out Chris Townsend, headmaster at Felsted School.

"Critical situations often lead to change, and I am sure that this recent experience will be no different."

School communities' ability to rise to the challenge has been a constant theme. Despite worries about how children would adapt to lockdown, teachers at St Faith's reported that pupils had reacted with impressive maturity, showing great resilience and independence and often faring far better than anticipated, making excellent progress in core subjects.

It's down to teachers and families working together to give children outstanding support, says headmaster Nigel Helliwell. "I'm proud of the staff ▶






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and the way they’ve reacted, because, for most, it was the toughest period of their career. It was a big learning curve for us, as it was for most schools, and I’m proud of how quickly we got there.”

For Victoria Hearn, principal of Impington Village College, lockdown also provided proof of just how united her colleagues are. “For us, having to think on our feet cemented how much of a team we all are. All staff members, at every level, were willing to get involved and help one another out. It was heart-warming to see everyone pull together during such an uncertain time.”

Teachers’ wholesale adoption of technology in our schools has also been extremely impressive. “I think IT understanding and usage probably moved on three or four years in about two weeks, which is a really positive dividend,” says Douglas Robb, headmaster at Gresham’s. “It has turbo-boostered the integration of technology into teaching. The capacity was always there, but the pandemic created the imperative to use it.”

Many schools had already invested in snazzy IT systems that were being used,







for example, for setting and uploading homework. Come the pandemic and its use took a quantum leap forward as remote learning and virtual classrooms became the lifeline connecting home-based pupils and teachers.

The original plan at Impington Village College had been to introduce Microsoft Teams for the next academic year. Then lockdown was announced, and everything changed. “What was planned to be a 20-hour programme of learning for staff over an 18-month period was delivered within a week,” says Victoria Hearn, who is extremely proud of her team’s hard work and dedication. “All of our staff were fantastic and worked extremely hard so that they could learn the new technology and, in turn, provide our students with the best possible educational experience during lockdown. This also included a huge virtual TeachMeet, attended by nearly 100 teachers across our trust, to share good practice.”

Junior school teachers at St Mary’s School, Cambridge, also demonstrated just how fast change could take place. “The speed with which our teachers

and pupils prepared for and adjusted to online learning really highlighted our ability to adapt – our dedicated teaching staff really went the extra mile to ensure that effective virtual learning and online lessons were up and running immediately,” says head of juniors, Matthew O’Reilly. Felsted School was also fleet of foot, quickly scaling up its online resources to create ‘Felsted at Home’, an extensive home-learning programme that covered academic subjects and co-curricular activities.

It is reassuring to know that if lockdown were to happen again (something nobody wants), schools would be ready. And when, hopefully, things are back to normal – or as close to normal as it gets – technology will be playing a bigger role in school life than ever before.

At St Mary’s School, teachers’ excellent working knowledge of Microsoft Teams means it will continue to be used, for example as the school’s homework tool, says Matthew O’Reilly. Meanwhile at St Faith’s, specialist teachers quickly adapted to live streaming, delivering lessons to up to six classrooms at the ▶






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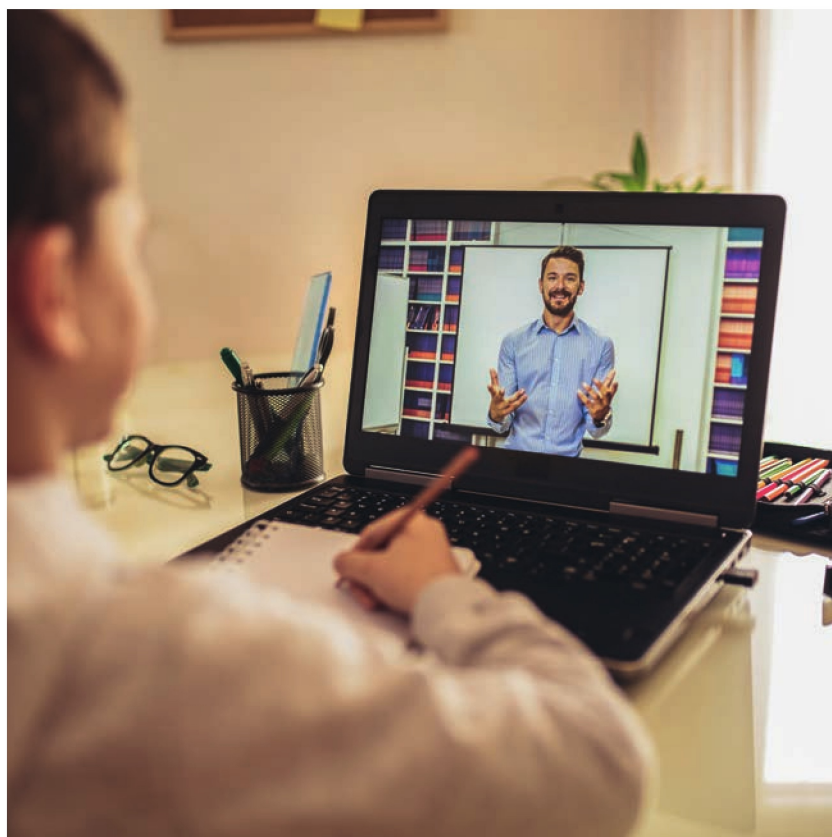
## “Students will be able to contact their teachers through functionalities such as the chat space”

same time as more pupils returned to school in the summer term. It was so successful that it may well be here to stay, enabling teachers with a particular passion or specialism to share their expertise more widely.

Collaborative technology will be widely used at Impington Village College, too, spanning everything from after-college and project group work to one-to-one sessions between teachers and students. “Moving forward, parents and students will be able to contact their teachers through functionalities such as the chat space, and get quick and succinct answers and feedback to their questions and homework. We will be supporting students virtually via the house system, where larger gatherings won’t always be possible,” says Victoria Hearn.

Increasingly, technology will also be coming to the rescue of children who are away from school, haven’t fully understood a topic or who are revising for an exam. In the past, pupils who were off sick might have been sent an email telling them what they’d missed and asking them to read a textbook to catch up. No longer, says Douglas Robb at Gresham’s. “Now we can say: ‘Log on to the Team’. You can watch what’s going on in the classroom, we’ll record the lessons and you can watch again if you didn’t quite get it. It will create a revision resource that I think is superior to anything we’ve had before.”

But while a smarter, whole-school approach to technology seems set to lead to significant changes, other aspects of school life are also undergoing a significant rethink. At Felsted, classrooms will be more spread out, furniture



reduced to a minimum and teachers – because of social distancing – moving round far less than they normally would. House assemblies will be delivered online to avoid large gatherings, with year-group bubbles and boarding-house households used to organised pupils into groups for breaks, lunches, sports, activities and assemblies. “Some adjustments are required to manage this effectively,” says Chris Townsend. “As confidence grows, we will get closer to ‘normal’, but initially there will be a balance between ensuring safety while making sure that it does feel like ‘school’.”

When it comes to life outside lessons, schools have come up with a range of solutions. St Faith’s children are learning new sports, doing more conditioning and athletics and working on their endurance, for example. Gresham’s, meanwhile, has rethought its chapel services and drama productions. Previously involving the whole school, they are now organised by year group. Sport lovers won’t be

short-changed either, with ‘Super Saturdays’ pitting different teams from a single school against their Gresham’s counterparts in a range of sports, reducing the risk of spreading the virus while maintaining all the old sense of competition and excitement.

In addition to the changes to these tangible aspects of school life, interactions between parents and teachers have also had a bit of a shake-up. Never before have parents been so involved in their children’s education on a day-to-day basis. If schools had the resources to organise online learning, as some did, mums and dads also had a unique insight into the nuts and bolts of what children learnt and how it was taught – the way their teachers planned their lessons and captured their children’s interest – and just how hard it was.

Has it led to greater mutual respect? It could very well be the case. Head teachers report that already supportive parents have become even more so, ►







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for example almost 100% of St Mary's Junior School parents surveyed during lockdown were very positive about the school's approach to remote learning. Nationally, though, the picture is a little different, with many parents worried about the long-term impact of being out of school for an extended period, fearing that children could lose out academically.

The key is not to panic, says Chris Townsend at Felsted. As long as children are happy in themselves, everything else can be sorted. "Better that children have remained positive and happy during lockdown than that they have covered every piece of content," he says. Yes, some pupils will need some additional support from teachers, but it's something that can happen gradually, he stresses. "It really doesn't matter if this takes weeks or months, not just days, to get the right balance back. Teachers and parents should be encouraging children to focus on the positives at this stage, not the negatives."

Schools also point out that they are used to dealing with pupils who have been raised in different educational systems or haven't covered the same ground. Helping them to catch up is, ultimately, what they do every day of the school year. At St Faith's, an increasing number of pupils join from overseas, at different ages and different times of year. "We've had to learn over the years how to adapt to that," says Nigel Helliwell. "A child that might be a few months behind in a subject is really not an issue at all from our point of view."



Schools are also gearing up to support pupils over the next academic year if, as predicted, there is a rise in anxiety and mental health issues. This period, after all, has been incredibly hard. Cutting children off from routine, friends and new experiences, coupled with the surrounding uncertainty about when schools would go back to anything resembling 'normal', has been less than ideal. Schools are reassuring about the measures they've put in place to help. St Faith's, conscious of the fact that the economic fallout will have impacted on some parents, has put together a thorough induction programme for pupils and sent out a wellbeing questionnaire to ask how they feel about coming back to school.

Parents talking to prospective schools, says Douglas Robb at Gresham's, should be asking about how they responded to the lockdown. "It's a sign of how nimble the school is. If they got on with it and prepared something that was decent for the children and got them through this period, that's a good marker, so the reflective question might be: what did you do and would you have done it differently in trying to provide this online education? I would be wary of any school that says 'we did it perfectly'."

Their answer will tell you a lot, agrees Matthew O'Reilly. "It will demonstrate the school's ability to adapt and best respond to any future challenges, ensuring that the pupils' learning goes uninterrupted whatever the circumstances."

Ultimately, getting children back where they belong – into school – is what this is all about, says Douglas Robb. "That's what people are clamouring for – getting kids back into a routine, occupied, busy and productive for large parts of the day rather than just marking time." ●

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## "Better that children have remained positive and happy"

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