

Negotiating Lockdown – Focusing Leadership on Community in a Period of Challenging Times - Richard Parker, Head of ISL

In March 2020, schools in the UK went into lockdown, dramatically changing the face of education. At the International School of London (ISL) we faced a period of upheaval and change on an unprecedented scale but the school emerged from it as a stronger community. In this article, I will explore why ISL was so successful throughout this period, and the place of leadership in generating a new sense of pride as a result of this transformation. I will also explore two fundamental lessons that we, as a school, have taken from the experience. The first lesson is that early planning allows bolder decision-making. The second is that huge benefits arise from putting community wellbeing at the heart of planning in a period of unusual change.

Early Planning

We started serious planning for an online school a month before lockdown was announced, and by the time we announced the shift to online learning, the whole community was ready. We were also lucky in having strong connections with schools in Hong Kong, and were able to speak to leaders there and learn from their successes and stresses in experiencing lockdown.

The most important lesson from Hong Kong was that multiple platforms were difficult to support and manage. As a result, we chose to run everything through one platform, Microsoft Teams and our PD switched to online training on Teams, so as to ensure all students and parents were familiar with the platform.

With our teachers trained, and students equipped and excited to connect virtually with ISL, we were ready to make

good on our commitment to deliver a high quality virtual education and we announced the move to a virtual school a week before lockdown. This announcement invoked a feeling of pride amongst all stakeholders that nobody had expected, as we witnessed many other schools struggling with the transition. That positive platform allowed us to then think boldly about other community-related decisions.

Initiatives around Community Wellbeing

Leadership were continually challenged to re-think and re-plan as the landscape of the crisis changed. We had to prepare for various ongoing scenarios (rotating classes, the return of some year groups but not others, phased start and finish times). However the ongoing support of the wider community went a long way to mitigate the challenges we faced.

It soon became apparent even before we went into lockdown that wellbeing would have to be at the heart of our planning as we moved forward. We had learnt from Hong Kong schools that many teachers had found it difficult to cope with the demands of online learning and many students and families had themselves isolated and struggled, lacking the support they needed.

To keep morale high and further foster the sense of pride generated at the beginning of lockdown, we wanted to avoid redundancies and furlough wherever possible and find meaningful alternatives. One of the biggest decisions we made involved our catering team, some of our lowest paid and therefore most vulnerable members of staff, who, as a group had no obvious purpose in a lockdown period. We took the decision not to furlough them, but partner them with a local homeless centre for which they would provide daily hot meals. Parents were given the option of discontinuing payment of lunch fees, or donating the money to help support this initiative, and we were amazed by their

response. Parents overwhelmingly agreed with this initiative and gave their support, so our final financial position did not suffer as a result of the decision. This generated a degree of pride in the community that we had not expected.

We also worked hard to ensure the wider community was supported wherever possible. We scheduled all parent meetings and workshops online, to ensure we were receiving regular feedback, and questionnaires were also sent out once a week. One of the discoveries in this period was that we had much higher parental participation when meetings were online.

One of ISL's unique features is its extensive home language programme (we provide five lessons per week of home language teaching for all our language groups as part of our curriculum offering). Our home language teachers proved pivotal in our wellbeing initiatives because they were the best equipped teachers to reach out to our families, particularly in situations where English was not a strong language. The support of those teachers proved invaluable, and we have many anecdotes of the ways in which our home language teachers were willing to go the extra mile to enrich our family's school experiences during lockdown. As one example, one of our Arabic teachers drove around to every Arabic family in school and left them a present for Eid. The Dutch language teacher ran a board games session every week for all the Dutch-speaking primary students, which required creative adaptations of games that aimed to develop language as well as maintain the community feel of the vertical groupings used during normal teaching.

The early decisions undoubtedly allowed the community to adapt and find new creative solutions to the dynamics of the virtual world. We had a stunning online art exhibition designed to mimic a museum experience, modelled on the White Cube Museum in Hong Kong. Teachers found

creative ways to run a forest school online, organised multilingual poetry chains, challenge days, a whole series of wellbeing activities and events, that all helped strengthen the feeling of community.

ISL was successful in its preparation for lockdown and our move online went relatively smoothly, but it was the unforeseen new initiatives that brought real pride to the community. The support to our families from the home language teachers, the multilingual poetry chain, our initiative to provide hot meals to a local homeless centre, online exhibitions, wellbeing programmes, diverse extra-curricular activities, and the sheer ability of the whole community to adapt to the virtual world were all welcome surprises that nobody had expected.