

Coronavirus: Assemblies online, mentors and hymns as teachers get learning

The closure of schools has been challenging for teachers, pupils and parents alike, but there are positives, writes Nicola Woolcock



After a week of homeschooling many parents and teachers are concerned about pupils' mental health and how to give them pastoral support

[Nicola Woolcock](#) Education Correspondent

The fear of many parents and teachers at the onset of the coronavirus outbreak was that children would fall behind academically once schools closed. After a week of homeschooling, many more are concerned about pupils' mental health and how to give them pastoral support.

Millions of pupils who would normally spend most of their week cheek by jowl in classrooms, running around or gossiping at break times, doing music or sport together after school, are [confined to their homes](#).

[Schools](#) say in the next few weeks that — as well as setting work — they will redouble efforts to make sure that children feel part of the community. At some schools, teachers are trying to phone as many pupils as possible for personal contact.



Pupils have been working on iPads at home over the past week
MAX MUMBY/INDIGO/GETTY IMAGES

While video-conferencing software such as Zoom, Skype or Google Hangouts had been lauded as the saviour of lessons at the start of the outbreak, their limitations are being felt.

Lucy Elphinstone is running Francis Holland School, an independent girls' school in central London, from her kitchen table. "The worldwide demand on servers and the internet has meant that our plans for rolling out video lessons have been frequently thwarted [but] countless creative initiatives have been born, not only to enhance learning but also to support wellbeing," she said.

"Our day starts, as ever, with an assembly, a hymn and a prayer, and the timetable unfolds pretty much as with a normal school day. Upper-sixth students, after the initial shock of not doing their A-level exams, have reached out to younger students with offers of mentoring and support with their studies."

Mrs Elphinstone said that pupils were anxious about the shelving of exams but it was an opportunity to create an innovative curriculum "outside the straitjacket of exam syllabuses".

After a week of trying to educate children remotely some schools have adjusted their methods and expectations. Charles Fillingham, head of an independent school in northwest London, said: "Since the end of last week, it has become clear that we are in for a marathon and not a sprint.

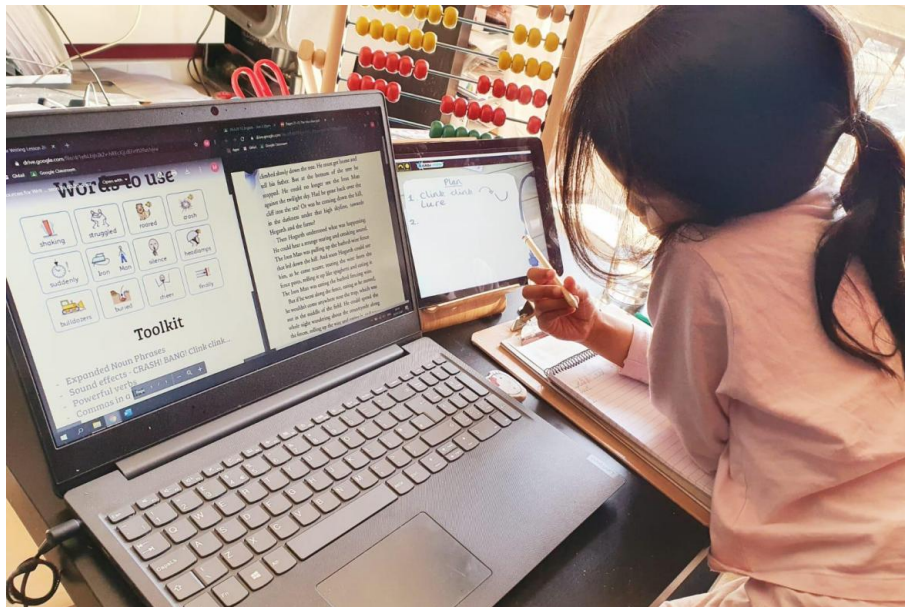
"We are on a steep learning curve and we are struggling to replicate the interactivity of a real classroom. Both teachers and pupils really crave communication. Keeping in touch with each other is massively important."

Desmond Deehan, executive of a girls' grammar and a mixed secondary modern in southeast London, said: "We are considering how we support character education and look after pastoral welfare and personal development at this time. We realise that remote teaching is not enough and there is a need for contact via telephone or other means. Schools are more than physical centres of learning. They are communities and families.

"There are no school events, no parents evenings, no performances or assemblies. How do we replace these? Our challenge is to sustain a sense of school over a prolonged period."

Other educators plan to replace live broadcasts of lessons with pre-recorded sessions that can be accessed at any time. Harriet Shearsmith, founder of the parenting website tobyandroo.com, said: "I'm incredibly fortunate as a working mum to be able to work flexibly around my kids and catch up on work after we've finished homeschooling. However, myself and a lot of other mums from our school have found ourselves confused by some projects — it's been decades since I've had to think about adjectives, adverbials and compound nouns — is it really essential learning or ideal for the home-school environment?"

Ben Newmark, a teacher in Warwickshire, said on social media: "From what I see, the idea teachers can teach classes remotely to the sameish schedule they did when in school is not sustainable. People seem exhausted and fraught during what is already a very troubling time."



Some teachers say that remote lessons have been beset by difficulties

Alice, 15, lives in London and was due to sit GCSEs in May. She has a full school day online on Microsoft Teams but said pupils and staff are grappling with sound and technical problems.

She said: “The lessons have the same content as a normal lesson but they are quite different because discussion is so difficult.

“We started off with all of us having our mics on, but it was a bit chaotic. First no one spoke, then we all spoke at once. Now the teachers have their mics and cameras on and we have ours turned off. It works quite well for subjects like maths where we are doing papers with the teacher there to help — we use chat to ask questions. Discussion subjects such as English and history are more difficult.”

There are some perks, however. “Because we don’t have our cameras on we don’t have to get dressed. I did my maths lesson in bed,” Alice said.

There are logistical challenges for teachers being asked to keep open the school gates for children with special needs, and many must ensure that online counselling and access to free school meals continue.

Sarah Hewitt-Clarkson, who runs a primary school in Birmingham, is among those focused on pastoral support of the children of key workers. She said: “We expected 18, had 9, then 3, then 1. We tried delivering lunches to 108 houses yesterday, to help families stay inside. Seven staff volunteered.

“It was great to see children on their doorsteps, beaming. ‘How did you know where I lived, Miss?’ several asked.

“Teachers will call them at least fortnightly, some twice a week. Teachers’ voices are very important. They need to know they still belong to school, that they are important to us and we can’t wait to see them again.”

Many parents have rallied around, dropping off free school meals to those who normally qualify or families that are self-isolating.

Nick Soar is executive principal of two secondary schools in deprived parts of north London that introduced an entirely new platform in two weeks, demanding “immense” logistical support, from meals for vulnerable families to setting up digital accounts and training staff.

Pupils had embraced the changes with little fuss, he said. “Hopefully we’ll see the pupils more and more get really stuck in as they, too, get to grips as much as the staff. The pupils have dived into remote learning seamlessly.”

However, many pupils lack easy access to laptops and printers. “The need for clarity of communication with students and parents has been a challenge — how often, what format, making it into a format that pupils can actually access,” Mr Soar said.

Parents also complain that many schools are being too ambitious in what they ask pupils to achieve, creating more anxiety for teenagers missing their friends.

Esther Rolinson, 48, an artist from Hastings, has a daughter in the last year of primary school and a son who was due to take his GCSEs. The primary school has set work but she said: “We’ve taken a view that this is a stressful and unusual situation and why wouldn’t children be affected by that? A teacher friend advised us not to get too stressed about trying to act like this isn’t happening, so I’ve taken a much broader view of what education can be.”

Philippa Perry, a therapist, said in advice to parents new to homeschooling: “Get them [children] to teach you something, anything. You then will model how to learn and listen. Also, teaching something to someone else helps them to learn it. This is great for all ages.”

In response, one mother of three said: “We’ve been sent a timetable that details each activity and even the amount of minutes it should take. I feel stressed just looking at how much should be crammed into the day.”

However, the change of circumstances has not been a negative one for all families, with parents reporting that their children are enjoying quality time at home — no uniform, no commute, more time to play. Some have even spoken, anonymously, about feeling guilty that they are relishing spending time with their children, during a time that is so stressful for others.