COVIDSafe Education
What's next for our K-12 classrooms?

Introduction

As schools reopen and Covid-19 restrictions continue to ease, bursars and educators face some big questions around how to adapt to the "new normal" of socially-distanced classrooms, blended learning environments, and rapid policy changes required to keep students safe.

Schools have already digitised their learning environments and processes to some extent. The next step for most will be to examine the effectiveness of these digital efforts in creating a classroom that's engaging, transparent, and adaptable – which in turn gives schools new sources of competitive advantage and tangible value-add in the increasingly competitive education market.

Ricoh has had the privilege of working with K-12 educators and school leaders on digital transformation for many years. Through this, we have identified some key issues, considerations, and checklists that may help your school navigate this extended period of transition – and tap into the opportunities that it presents.

"As you design something, you need to be so explicit – because there is so much of what teachers do in a classroom which is almost intuitive. Thinking you can just translate that practice into online… there's a bit more to it than that."
– DALE PEARCE, PRINCIPAL, BENDIGO SENIOR SECONDARY COLLEGE

> "So many of my staff have said they haven't used webinar or virtual class platforms before, but by the end of that remote learning experience, they loved it and understood the purpose behind it. Now, you've got this great confidence (amongst educators) about what technology can do, and even a willingness to increase their risk profile and have a crack at it." – DAVID SOEDE, DIRECTOR OF ICT, CENTRAL COAST GRAMMAR SCHOOL

Redefining the classroom environment

Schools have embraced home-based and online learning at speed, and must once again pivot into a (likely permanent) partial return to physical classrooms, one where students and teachers can expect further switches between blended and entirely home-based learning if further Covid-19 outbreaks occur. Principals, educators, and IT will need to deliver a blended learning experience that's engaging for students, sustainable for schools, and achieving of academic outcomes, by considering the following:

- **How seamless is movement between in-classroom and home-based learning?**
  School IT leaders will need to consider integrating different digital learning technologies – like interactive whiteboards, video conferencing, and e-learning platforms – to produce as cohesive an online experience for students as possible. At the same time, educators will want to ensure equal levels of quality across both physical classrooms and home-based learning environments.

- **Where can digital technology create opportunities for deeper learning?**
  Blended learning environments offer the possibility of learning well beyond school hours, like making interactive experiences available on-demand to students, or supplementing core content with extension resources, and so on. These can enhance options available for avid learners, and in doing so differentiate their pedagogic quality and academic performance from other schools – keeping in mind that students retain 25-60% more material when learning online. At the same time, schools that can deliver a more equitable digital experience to students in lower-connectivity areas will gain advantage when it comes to public funding.
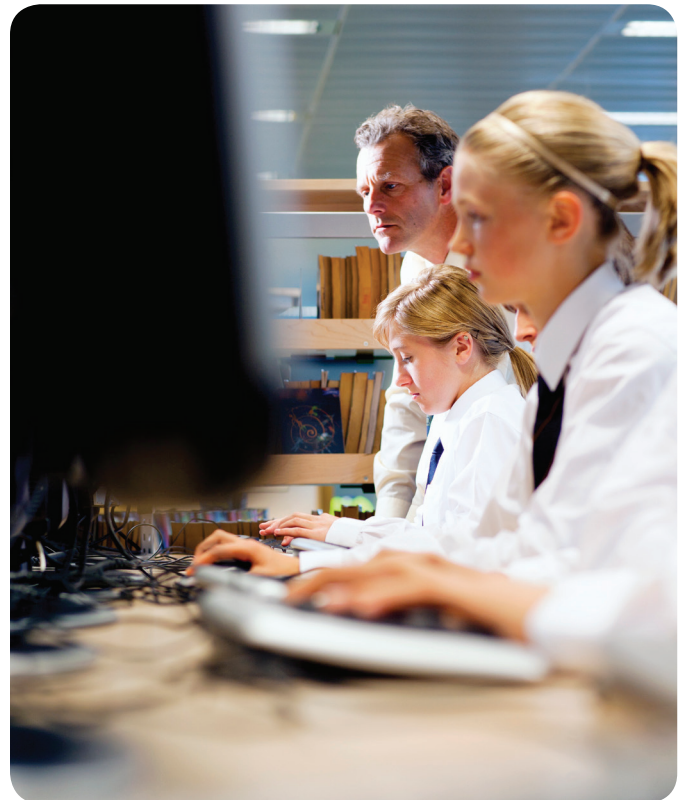
- **What pressures will blended learning put on infrastructure?**
  School IT teams will need to consider the impact of newly-designed experiences on bandwidth, network reliability, and systems integration, ranging from unified comms and software to streamlined access processes like Single Sign On. Such considerations apply to both onsite infrastructure and students' at-home digital environments. This is particularly relevant to tackling issues of digital equity in schools: ensuring students in rural, lower-income, or otherwise less-"wired" areas have the required bandwidth and devices to keep up with their peers from home.

Transforming campus operations

With risks around reinfection and further outbreaks high, the return to in-classroom learning requires schools to adopt rigorous compliance techniques like attendance tracking and contact tracing. At the same time, educators and other staff will need new ways of working together (and with students) that don't require face-to-face contact – especially for the many teachers who fall into the at-risk category of Covid-19. For digital processes and systems to meet these needs, bursars and IT staff should think about:

- **What existing systems must be digitised immediately, and how?**
  Paper-based and manual records struggle to meet the compliance needs of COVIDSafe classrooms. That means systems like attendance tracking and visitor screening require more urgent digitisation, while schools may also require new systems like digital signage or contactless sign-ins to keep those onsite safe.

- **Where does the school need to change or even replace processes?**
  Installing digital systems doesn't mean that staff will adapt workflows or processes which they've followed for years. Principals may want to take this opportunity to streamline and redesign forms and workflow processes that have typically caused slowdowns in operations – like lodging finances, tracking permissions, or managing incident reporting. These changes should improve cost-effectiveness while also supporting a higher-quality blended learning experience – earning loyalty and advocacy from students and parents alike.

- **Can staff work together outside the physical staff-room?**
  Teaching, administrative, and support staff are more geared to work remotely than ever before – especially with many staff concerned about whether their safety is being fully supported. Principals have an opportunity to unite different "tribes" across departments and demonstrate genuine support for teachers' health concerns, with new platforms that support real-time discussions and collaborative decisions virtually.

- **How secure are these processes and systems?**
  In the bid to digitise school processes and classroom experiences, it can be easy to forget the cybersecurity risks attached with doing so. Principals and bursars will want to consult with IT and third-party experts to "bake in" security and privacy as they adopt new tech standards and systems, keeping in mind that such concerns will increasingly influence how parents assess schools' duty-of-care standards and enrol their children accordingly.

> "We've sent our kids back into an environment at home where you can't see them, can't check on them…it comes back to that connection you have with those students, not necessarily via technology. It might be a simple phone call to check that kids are okay, they're safe, they're alright."
>
> – DEBBIE MURRAY, PRINCIPAL, DUBBO SCHOOL OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

www.ricoh.com.au

Restoring parents' trust and loyalty

In the "new normal", it is inevitable that parents will hesitate to put their children into high-contact social settings – schools included. Educators can restore this trust by doubling down on transparency and communication. Doing so effectively will see schools gain greater market- and mind-share amongst parents whose enrolling decisions will increasingly factor in health security and the quality of the blended/digital learning experience.

Principals and bursars may wish to keep in mind:

- **What channels can parents connect with teachers through, and how?**
  These will likely include a range of channels including email, SMS, and teleconferencing, covered by a unified communications strategy for timely and transparent updates. Ideally, this strategy supports digital equity for parents who may be less willing or able to use bandwidth-intensive channels, offering alternatives that encompass families from all socioeconomic backgrounds without distinction.

- **How should schools adapt services like after-school care or extracurricular activities?**
  Such services play a key role in supporting parents' care commitments, adding depth of school experience, and differentiating schools from their competitors for greater market share. Principals may want to identify new ways of managing after-school care (and its providers) with at-home students, or offering new extracurricular activities via digital channels that uniquely enrich students (and the school's value proposition to parents).

- **What is the opportunity cost of maintaining the *status quo*?**
  To justify investment in new technologies or processes, principals can build a strong case around the risks of sticking to "business as usual". Schools that fail to deliver a blended learning experience which matches their pre-COVID value proposition will see significant fee erosion. Those that succeed, however, will reinforce parent confidence in the school "brand" and build greater loyalty that can stretch across families and even generations.

Tracking engagement in blended learning

To maintain academic rigour and ensure accountability to parents, schools are employing a range of measurements to track student progress, including:

- Returned work (assignments, tests, and quizzes, including those embedded in videos or lessons)
- Collaborative work (tracking participation in exercises and shared documents)
- Learning management system (LMS) analytics for content consumption
- Conversations between teachers and students

Turning the "new normal" into the exceptional

Many of the leading educators we speak to have stressed their desire "not to let this crisis go to waste". With situations remaining fluid, educators should be thinking beyond the "new normal" and to the "next normal" – focusing on embedding agility and adaptability into every aspect of lesson, classroom, and learning design. While it may be impossible to predict what shape this "next normal" might take, schools that maintain momentum with digital technology will be able to better support students, staff, and parents alike; and tap into opportunities to make education more inclusive and collaborative.

Doing this takes time, and a willingness to embrace IT as a value-generating function rather than a solely administrative one. Here at Ricoh, we'd love to help you start that journey and maintain momentum – get in touch with our education technology experts today.

Book a free consultation at https://bit.ly/37R8XEm