



Report for Flintshire Education Youth and Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Blended Learning

December 17th 2020

Flintshire Primary Schools

A Blended Learning approach combines traditional classroom practice with online learning activities. It comprises of a variety of methods including face-to-face tuition, activities delivered online (HwB, recorded lessons) and flipped learning with pupils working on tasks at home before discussions in class and during live-streaming in a safe environment. In a blended learning approach, time at school is used to support the activities that learners can complete at home at their own pace. These include guided investigations and extended opportunities to apply new skills, knowledge and concepts. In a 'flipped' learning approach, planning includes opportunities for learners to research, prepare and consider before using contact time with teachers in school to explore and consolidate.

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the introduction of a blended learning approach in Flintshire schools. GwE has provided professional development and resources for all schools in order to facilitate continuity in pupils' education both at school and at home through a blended learning approach. Since March 2020, blended learning has been introduced and used effectively in all primary schools in Flintshire. Schools have developed a shared understanding of blended learning, working both independently and collaboratively to provide a widening range of engaging learning activities for pupils of all abilities. To support Cymraeg, the Welsh Advisory team co-constructed resources with GwE colleagues to ensure high quality, purposeful resources for teachers.

Flintshire primary schools have been proactive in planning and preparing for different scenarios and schools were well prepared for full or partial closures. For example, many schools now routinely operate classes in which a third of pupils engage in independent online activities. This system familiarises pupils with a blended learning approach and pupils have been able to replicate the independent learning when required to work at home. To support blended learning, headteachers have been strategic in their use of additional grant funding to increase capacity such as releasing staff for interventions and deploying Teaching Assistants in KS2 classes to support pupils. Primary schools have been successful in maintaining a sense of normality for pupils. Teachers have gone to great lengths to keep the rhythm of a normal autumn term e.g. Harvest services, Remembrance services and all schools have observed pupils' positive attitude and enjoyment of school.

Flintshire primary schools have planned carefully to ensure as broad and as balanced a curriculum as possible within health and safety restrictions. Schools have promoted active engagement in a range of indoor and outdoor activities in addition to promoting wellbeing. Schools have made effective use of the GwE resource centre, downloading resources before co-constructing their own high quality resources. Flintshire primary schools have been proactive in sharing effective practice and resources e.g. 2 week topics for isolating pupils and co-constructed policies on blended learning. GwE is actively encouraging collaboration and sharing of resources and effective practice. Most schools have extended their use of outdoor learning for PE and across

the curriculum. Most schools have also established online platforms for reading and for continuity of learning in basic skills e.g. Oxford Owl, Lexia Core 5 Reading.

As blended learning has developed, so has home-school communication systems e.g. most schools are making good use of their websites and Twitter accounts to signpost blended learning and to keep in good contact with parents. Most schools have adopted regular topic planning grids which have enabled them to minimise disruption for individual pupils, families or 'bubble' groups that have had to isolate. This has worked notably well where the planning grids are the same for school and home-based learning and are posted on the school website for easy access by any family or group self-isolating.

All schools have experienced a rapid acceleration of IT skills and utilisation of a range of IT platforms. Teaching staff adapted well to a blended learning approach and work for pupils was swiftly provided during the initial lockdown period. There has been very impressive upskilling using a range of IT platforms e.g. Seesaw, Google, TT Rockstars, Oxford Owl, which has facilitated an effective blended learning approach. Parents in many schools have also been supported e.g. offering parents bespoke IT support in order for them to better support their children at home.

All clusters and all schools have observed improved cooperation and collaboration between individual members of staff, schools and clusters i.e. co-constructing and sharing resources. Schools have accelerated the introduction of aspects of the New Curriculum for Wales e.g. reviewing pedagogy and teachers adapting to a role as facilitator of learning. Most schools have used the circumstances of the past few months as an opportunity to strengthen home-school learning links with parents e.g. creating 'How to' videos for parents to help them support their children. Nearly all schools have also made good use of video, Twitter and platforms such as SeeSaw to keep parents well-informed and engaged about children's learning in school e.g. 'Virtual Nursery Induction' video. Individual schools have used 'virtual' resources well to enrich the curriculum for children e.g. music workshops. Blended learning has been very successful in moving towards the purposes of the new curriculum e.g. pupils are more independent, collaborating more and taking greater ownership of their own learning.

As the current health crisis continues, schools are being called upon to deal with continuing challenges. For example, ensuring equity of IT provision for pupils remains a challenge for schools. Schools also have to manage inconsistent engagement of some families, despite the schools' best efforts. It is difficult for teachers to ensure continuity and progression when cohorts need to self-isolate at home for extended periods of time.

Traditional quality assurance methods are not practicable while schools need to follow the current strict health and safety protocols e.g. formal book scrutiny is no longer routinely carried out. The informal monitoring by headteachers visiting classrooms and speaking with pupils has also been reduced. School Improvement Advisers (SIAs) are not able to visit schools and monitor standards of work as they did prior to Covid-19.

It is a challenge for headteachers to release staff to engage in professional learning e.g. it is not possible for supply staff to cover different classes without an appropriate gap between contact with another cohort of pupils. In response to this challenge, GwE is providing regional and bespoke support for schools, including webinars that staff can replay when it is convenient to do so.

Flintshire Secondary Schools

Since the announcement of the reopening of schools in the summer, and the urgent need to ensure that learning could be constructed and delivered through a 'blended learning' format, there has – across all Flintshire Secondary schools – been an intense focus from the summer on upskilling staff with an appropriate repertoire of skills to engage the pupils effectively in digital learning. This has taken place formally through training days, informal and often voluntary training from teachers outside the school day, 'on the job' and through 'trial and error' approaches! School training days have also helped schools and teachers prepare for the challenges. We have supported this training in GwE through sharing ideas around blended learning in

headteacher and teaching and learning forums and supporting digital training through demonstrations of HwB tools such as Screencastify and Flipgrid, in addition to individual discussions with leaders and teachers. The GwE resources centre also houses models of learning and a range of resources, both of which have been accessed by schools. These sessions have been very well supported by schools and levels of engagement have been high.

This has been supported by a parallel focus on the nature of teaching and learning. Through discussion around and engagement with blended learning approaches, teachers have often had to recalibrate and reformulate their own approaches to teaching and learning e.g. how to question effectively, how to feedback to learners. As one teacher, with more than 35 years' experience, said recently 'it's like being an NQT again!' He meant it positively; digital learning has, in some ways, made novices of us all and the resulting professional learning leap has been massive. The work, undertaken over a very short period in Flintshire is hugely impressive. One head commented: 'We have learned more about teaching and learning in the last ten weeks that in the previous few years'. Necessity has truly been the mother of invention.

Schools are using flexibility in the delivery of blended learning. Some schools are opting to 'live stream' all lessons for larger groups of pupils when in isolation and have had very high levels of pupil engagement; other have taken a more 'blended' approach – some live lessons, some asynchronous learning via pre-recorded videos or PowerPoint and tasks set through the virtual classroom. Generally, lessons for Years 12 and 13 have been made 'live' and also, for the most part, year 11 too. One school chose during the firebreak, for example, to livestream lessons for Year 10 as they had missed two previous weeks due to isolation. Other schools have not livestreamed as much but used online learning platforms to deliver tasks and asynchronous learning. All schools comment very positively on the input from teaching staff, particularly their commitment to the learners and their willingness to adapt to new teaching approaches.

Schools have adapted to the needs of learners and teachers over the course of the term in their approach to learning for pupils in isolation or in the week of the 'firebreak'. In one school, for example, a team inexperienced in livestreaming were given a demo lesson by the Assistant Headteacher who taught the whole of Year 11 himself with the other colleagues supporting. Colleagues have now gained confidence to deliver to their own classes; others have found that doubling up classes allows for both economy of input and also greater teacher flexibility in delivery (one teachers delivers; another feeds back through 'chat'). Schools have commented that pupil engagement thorough live mediums has been excellent as learners are not inclined to disengage and become distracted. Feedback from learners and parents has generally been very positive. Parents are keen on livestreaming – it enables them to know what is going on directly and simulates a classroom experience – but schools are working hard to emphasise the validity of learning and not focus solely on this method of delivery.

Teaching has been underpinned by a very robust pupil engagement strategy. Most schools have followed the school timetable through the week for groups of pupils when isolated (or modified it slightly in some cases – e.g. shorter lessons). Lesson attendance has been rigorously monitored through the school's school information management system (SIMs) and followed up with calls home if not learners are attending. In some cases these calls have been made by Senior Leaders and Headteachers to emphasise the importance of this. Engagement has been strong. One school reported that 94% of Year 11 learners were attending online learning during the firebreak week – slightly higher than their attendance at school in the previous weeks. Others reported attendance of high 80%/ low 90% over the same week; other schools have had strong uptake with higher ability sets but lower levels of engagement with lower ability groups. Some pupils remain difficult to engage when not in school.

The upgrading of school IT infrastructures by the LA over the term has helped hugely with blended learning approaches. Schools are now generally reporting far fewer issues with connectivity at the school end and the capacity to deliver live lessons and upload videos and other 'large' files has been significantly enhanced. In very large schools with high numbers accessing online learning simultaneously this can still, however, be problematic at times. Nevertheless, there is increased confidence to deliver learning within a digital

structure. The Local Authority and schools have worked together to try and ensure access to devices for all learners who may have not previously had access. One school has delivered over 100 Chromebooks to learners at home. This work is not yet finished and some challenges remain – e.g. access to digital learning for some families, but there is increased access than prior to the summer.

Next Steps

Most schools intend building upon digital skills as a focus, linked to the new curriculum. Preparing for the new curriculum and the forthcoming reforms for Additional Learning Needs are a major focus for all schools. Schools are also planning for how they can best use the GwE Professional Offer to support these areas. GwE will be providing a combination of generic and bespoke support for schools to further develop blended learning. Schools will also have the opportunity to share co-constructed resources to help ensure statutory requirements are met. There will be further development of cluster working and the development of internal monitoring and quality assurance arrangements in schools. The national leadership development programmes have also been adapted to be delivered electronically and will commence next term to support leaders at all levels.

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