



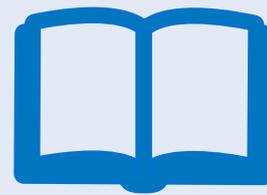
Learning the Lessons of a Pandemic

Improving Blended Learning in the Irish Education System



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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted the traditional Irish education system, almost overnight, when the decision was made to close schools under public health advice. Schools and educators found themselves quite suddenly under intense pressure to adapt and continue to deliver education across multiple platforms, to a dispersed student body.

Students and parents also faced serious challenges to maintain learning and education in a home environment, an unfamiliar experience in a familiar place. Our research showed that 62% of parents described their children's digital learning experience during the school closures as difficult.

As a stop gap, Wriggle moved to increase its training for teachers on platforms during COVID-19 as an interim measure and we have trained almost 10,000 teachers since schools closed in March, in order to help them adapt.

As schools, parents and teachers continue to adapt to changes brought about because of the pandemic, this report looks at the initial phase, to understand their collective experiences when schools first closed. It also maps out what learnings were identified and what steps should be put into place to help teachers, students and parents deliver a consistent educational experience both inside the classroom as well as digitally.

Context: Using COVID-19 to Transform Education

This report sets out to show that while COVID-19 disrupted our traditional education model, it also presents an important opportunity to learn from these lessons and to improve it.

The report also recognises that teachers are the unsung heroes in maintaining learning. But in doing so they faced serious challenges, which they identified as training, platform indecision, and support, which is largely unmanaged. These challenges need to be addressed to help them adapt to an evolving education model.

It is important to emphasise that digital learning will compliment and not replace the classroom or the teacher/student relationship.

At Wriggle, our goal is to integrate digital learning as part of the educational experience. We have always advocated a hybrid approach to learning, where technology complements traditional learning. But these elements need to be closely aligned.

We need to recognise the issues the report and research identified, if we are to address them:

- **While technology has helped sustain education, it was a reactive and badly implemented** stopgap measure that put massive strain on teachers, parents and students.
- **It has exposed major gaps in digital education in schools,**

which will continue to widen across all levels of education if not addressed, compounding the problems for everyone involved and undermining the very thing that will help if there is a second wave of the pandemic. In addition, there are risks relating to data privacy failures (GDPR), due to uncertainty surrounding remote teaching and learning policies.

- **Consistency and standardisation of platforms** has shown increased levels of engagement amongst staff and students. Those schools that have planned this element well have seen the benefits for their wider school community.
- **Parents have had to step in.** They have experienced firsthand the challenges of navigating a multitude of platforms and lack of guidance, putting them and their children under added stress, impacting their education.
- **Digital learning is learning.** But the experience is inconsistent with challenges like student engagement, staff comfort levels with technology, lack of experience with online teaching and lack of prep time for remote learning sessions, further complicated by broadband and device access.

Technology cannot solve this alone: it is going to take more than just technology to adapt, we need all those who were affected to come together.

The Role of Technology in Education

Wriggle specialises in digital learning for education. We support the enhancement of teaching outcomes and equip schools with the best blend of resources, support and technology to ensure they successfully adapt to the needs of 21st century skills development. Wriggle enables principals and teachers to effectively integrate new technology in order to deliver the best education journey for their students, both now and into the future. We have a presence in over 500 schools nationwide – which splits 50:50 across primary and secondary schools. We have worked with schools at all levels to integrate technology as part of the educational experience.

It is important to emphasise that technology is not here to replace the traditional classroom, the important teacher-student relationship, or face to face education. It is not a binary option, but a complementary part of a student's educational journey. This should be a tailored approach based on the needs of the school, teachers and - most importantly - the students.

Done well, digitally blended learning serves to enhance the student's experience while equipping them with the digital skills needed for their future careers. In fact, research from [Microsoft and the Economist Intelligence Unit](#) in 2019 showed that when used well, technology can not only enhance the educational

journey, but enables teachers to focus more of their time to help a student's emotional intelligence and wellbeing.

As an example, Wriggle has successfully worked with Coláiste Bhaile Chláir in Galway, where we have supported the integration of technology (Windows devices) in their school environment where content used for curriculum delivery is created by teachers. In addition, Wriggle has created more tailored solutions for Malahide Community School in Dublin, again supporting the integration of technology in their school environment by using a blended learning approach, whereby the school utilises both devices (iPads) along with eBooks and physical textbooks.

Rationale for the Research

As specialists in digital learning for education, we were keen to ascertain a more in-depth understanding of the impact this unprecedented crisis was having on educators, parents and students.

Utilising our presence in schools, we conducted research with 371 schools (181 primary and 190 post-primary) - speaking to principals, deputy principals, teachers and support staff.

Wriggle also commissioned omnibus research amongst 2,128 parents of

both primary and post-primary pupils to ascertain how the closure of schools and classrooms was impacting them in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19.

Wriggle traditionally guides schools, assists educators and supports parents and pupils as they adapt to new technology and manage change, which is often integrated into their traditional education experience on a phased and incremental basis.

However, the COVID-19 situation utterly changed circumstances overnight

and forced stakeholders to adapt to new processes, with little notice.

We believe our research has highlighted the gaps that came to exist, but has now offered a focus on where students, parents and educators need support to deal with this new reality. While officials plan to reopen schools this Autumn, it is important that educators and pupils are supported to ensure minimum disruption to their education in whatever circumstances may arise in the future.

Key Findings

Despite the fact that in mid-March, classroom doors were closed and lights in schools went out, education did not stop as educators did their best to implement blended learning strategies in these unprecedented circumstances.

Our research found both parents and teachers are calling for better supports, standardisation of learning platforms and training to ensure a

clearly defined and robust blended digital and traditional education system is in place post-COVID-19.

In the aftermath of schools closing in March, we conducted two separate pieces of research:

- We interviewed 371 schools (181 primary and 190 post primary schools), this broke down to 196,

principals, 49 deputy principal, 43 ICT coordinators and 83 teachers

- We commissioned Amarach Research to ask 2,128 parents nationwide with children in primary and secondary school about their experiences of digital learning during the period of March to May 2020.

Remote & Digital Learning: What the Schools Said



50%
of schools say they have a policy around using online platforms

- Only 57% of schools say students have devices fit for remote/digital learning
- Nearly a third (31%) of schools do not have a central online platform for creating and sharing resources and lessons
- 54% only started using these platforms since March 2020
- 44% use Microsoft Teams, 30% use Google Classroom with 31% using Zoom

Policies: Policy Gaps Emerging Which Could Expose Student's Data

- 35% of schools don't have or never created a policy around remote learning or teaching
- 44% of schools say their remote teaching and learning processes are GDPR compliant



60%
of schools feel their digital learning plans helped them successfully teach remotely



95%
of schools use email



76%
use text messaging



66%
use the school website to communicate to staff, parents and students

Remote Learning Challenges:

Student Engagement, Teacher Training, and Access

71% of educators saw student engagement as a big challenge with remote learning

62% said they had no previous experience of online teaching

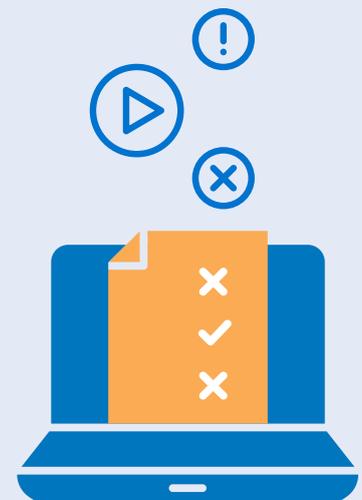
55% said they were not comfortable with remote learning technology

54% said lack of time to plan for remote learning was a challenge

41% saw lack of equipment as an issue

51% saw access to broadband as an issue

33% say management keeping track of technology is a challenge



What Do Teachers Need to Better Work in a Blended Environment: Training, Access and Standardised Approach



74%

want regular training to ensure they can deliver digital learning



60%

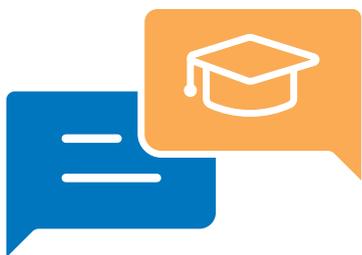
want to ensure students have access and devices



60%

want clear policies on remote/digital learning

What Benefits Did Teachers See from Digital Learning: Engagement, Collaboration, and Better Skills



86%

see increased staff engagement

52%

developed a new way to cater for students' needs

84%

see increased IT skills

51%

see enhanced communication

59%

see increased collaboration

What Parents Said: Remote Learning Experience

3 in 5 parents

describe their children's remote learning experience during this period as 'very difficult/difficult'



- Parents have a range of concerns when it comes to their children's remote learning, with 40% feeling pressure to become a substitute teacher
- Children use a range of resources as part of their learning, from more traditional resources such as pencil and paper (70%) and textbooks (68%) to emails (49%) and eBooks (26%)
- Nearly half of parents (49%) would like to see standardised technology platforms for education
- 28% saw inconsistent communications from the school
- This is followed by better support on digital learning platforms for parents (45%) and clear guidance from schools on remote and digital education policies and procedures (40%)
- 26% of parents had broadband issues that interrupted lessons
- 22% felt there were too many platforms and apps for them to manage

How Children Are Remote Learning:

A Mixed Experience, Children Use a Range of Resources As Part of Their Learning

70% pencil & paper

68% textbooks

59% online homework platforms

49% email

33% video

32% video conferencing with teachers

25% ebooks

What Parents Want:

Consistency of Training and Platforms

49% standardised technology platforms

45% better support for parents on remote learning platforms

40% clear guidance from schools on remote & digital education policies & procedures

33% better broadband connectivity

30% better and more frequent upskilling of teachers digital practices

29% more equality of access to devices for children

26% upskilling of students on remote learning platforms

Conclusions and Suggested Next Steps

As the pandemic caused a major disruption to the traditional education model, it also highlighted gaps that exist and need to be examined to ensure that parents, pupils and educators are adequately supported should any similar scenario arise in the future.

The traditional learning model in this country has been disrupted and action must now be taken to futureproof our education system. Nothing will ever replace the relationship between a pupil

and a teacher, but plans must be implemented to enhance, support and safeguard that in any future periods of disruption.

The lights in the classroom may have gone off, but learning continued despite many challenges.

Steps must now be taken to eliminate as many of these challenges as possible.

Now is the time for all stakeholders to examine the lessons learned

from our recent past and use these to transform our education system, improve it and prepare for the future.

Wriggle believes there needs to be a shift towards a well-defined blended learning system - one which integrates technology into the classroom, with all the necessary supports and training for teachers, pupils and parents. This will equip all of these stakeholders with the tools, skills and confidence to ensure a seamless transition to blended learning where required.