



Where there's a will, there's always a way

The staff and students of St. Leo's College are certainly living proof of this. As Principal, I am just so proud of the commitment, innovation and absolute determination of both staff and students since our school closed almost two weeks ago. Colleagues in other schools might agree when I compare the past fortnight to a whirlwind. It is really important and helpful for us all to step back momentarily, to reflect and take stock.

The word 'coronavirus' first entered into our vocabulary in January and grew in prevalence at a rapid pace in February and early March as the virus spread across Europe and crept even closer to us. Constant media coverage coupled with regular school intercom announcements on the importance of proper handwashing and correct coughing and sneezing etiquette, impressed upon all of us the increasing seriousness of its reality and potential impact. And yet in the face of it all, it was incumbent on us as leaders to allay fears and maintain structure, routine and a sense of calm throughout the school day.

As a school community we had been actively preparing for the inevitability of school closure for several days before the Taoiseach's announcement on Thursday 12th March and felt somewhat 'prepared' for the commencement of distance teaching and learning. Formal preparations for potential school closure ranged from very basic email and password checks with the entire student body, to a revision of instructions for accessing the Microsoft 365 suite. Class Tutors from first to sixth year delivered a 'Staying Connected' PowerPoint presentation, and a 'Staying Connected' journal insert on which students recorded teacher names, email addresses and the revision/study topics was distributed. Our Digital Strategy Team facilitated lunchtime refresher workshops and prepared practical resources for teachers. In order to facilitate ongoing connectivity between teachers and students, we considered Microsoft Teams an ideal platform to connect with students, to send and receive work. The vast majority of staff and students were already proficient as we have been using it for some time now.

Students had ample opportunity to clear lockers on Thursday. It also gave me an opportunity to compose a letter of reassurance for parents detailing our preparations and the plan going forward to ensure educational continuity. Teachers and students returned to their homes that evening armed with teaching and learning resources, the rest was down to effective leadership and technology.

From Day 1 of closure, communication with all stakeholders has been my primary focus as Principal-students, teachers, parents, ancillary staff and Board of Management. Our ancillary staff are also working from home and communicate via a bespoke Administration Team. Daily and weekly tasks are assigned and work diaries submitted by each member at the end of each week.

In addition to publishing a weekly school newsletter, important information is posted on our school website, Twitter and Instagram. We have set up a dedicated Leos Community Team for all students and teachers which we update every day with key information and advice. Our Guidance department upload useful documents to the Wellbeing folder such as how to optimise the home learning environment, hope to cope with the impact of coronavirus, how to manage anxiety and stress. Our PE department has put together a suite of resources for 'Drop Everything and Exercise'. Our Music department has posted a selection of Karaoke options for 'Drop Everything and Sing'. Staff and students have been encouraged to participate in both and send their videos/photos for Twitter and Instagram. There is a real emphasis on physical and mental wellbeing as well as academic progress.

We continue to put every measure in place to facilitate ongoing connectivity between teachers and students. Both have been encouraged to communicate regularly online and to structure their day around the school timetable. Students are required to use their own initiative in terms of revision and study. Our Digital Strategy Team provide regular online support for all and send a 'Supporting online teaching and learning newsletter' every few days containing questions, suggestions, videos and links to assist teachers and students in their work. There are so many examples of highly effective practice, even at this early stage. Several teachers are live streaming their classes using the online/video meeting option in Teams. I have also encouraged teaching staff to collaborate and complete subject department planning work during the school closure period including a review of subject department plans, subject specifications and assessment guidelines, child protection guidelines, analysis of results, reading of school inspection reports and an exploration of the possibility of conducting virtual SLAR meetings.

Adapting to this new educational format is a challenge for all of us. Having sought feedback, I know that some students are finding it quite overwhelming and struggling to keep up to date with work assigned. Third and sixth year students are coming to terms with the cancellation of their oral and practical performance tests but must now look forward to the written examinations, project and coursework. For our Leaving Certificate students the change is huge and they need constant encouragement and reassurance.

We are cognisant of students who have no/limited access to internet and those who are simply not engaging. I have asked teachers and year heads to report online attendance concerns to one of our Deputy Principals who is making contact with parents of these students as the need arises. On Thursday 12th March we said goodbye to many of our international students. Some students made the decision to stay in Carlow and we thank their host families for creating a 'home away from home' for them. Two of our teachers are maintaining contact with all remaining students.

Our SEN department and SNAs are communicating with SEN students and their parents via telephone and Teams. Guidance counsellors, our HSCL teacher, Deputy Principals, Year Heads and I have undertaken to connect with and support our most vulnerable students, those with mental health issues and complex family circumstances. I am conscious that for some students school is not only a place of learning, it is where they receive much-needed personal support including breakfast and lunch/dinner. We are currently researching options to continue providing such assistance for those most in need.

It is important that we do our very best to reach all students on both academic and pastoral care levels. The CEIST core values are being lived out through this experience, in our attempts to support and nourish all members of our school community. As Leo Varadkar said during his televised address to the nation last week 'We are in this together.' There is a wonderful sense of unity and collegiality that will sustain us all in our minds and in our work throughout this period of challenge and uncertainty. Never have technology and the partnership between students, teachers and parents been more important in education. Our collaboration is key to the realisation and success of distance teaching and learning.

Microsoft Teams is really wonderful. As a staff we are trying a live staff break time meeting on Teams and Zoom. It is another opportunity for me to connect with teachers and acknowledge their commitment to ensuring that learning moves forward every day, albeit in a very different format.

It's hard to believe that we are almost two weeks into closure now and with no end in sight as of yet, it is timely that we conduct an evaluation of experiences and practices. We need this to gauge what exactly is going on, how people are feeling about it all and how we can best move forward. A simple Microsoft 365 Forms survey for all stakeholders with a 'what's working well, even better if...' approach

will help us to streamline planning and approaches. It will also help us to further identify who is really struggling.

There is no template for this unprecedented event, no handbook entitled ‘What to do in the event of indefinite school closure due to coronavirus’ but we are living it now and writing it every day. I am heartened by the conscientious efforts of so many but acutely aware that not everyone is at the same level. We must mobilise the troops and make every effort to reach them. It is critical that we, as school leaders and CEIST school communities, work through this together with the interests of our students at the centre of our thinking and actions. The support of CEIST, the school management bodies and professional networks are valued and appreciated, now more than ever.

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