

## **Digital Technology in Education**

### **Background from the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA)**

The Independent sector is a sector comprising 145 Independent schools, and as we are not a system AISWA does not direct schools but provides advice, support, professional learning and access to a range of resources. Each school makes their own decisions about how they respond to circumstances and COVID was certainly an unusual situation and continues to be.

AISWA's membership consists of the long established high fee schools (11), a number of large low fee schools, Montessori Schools, Steiner Schools, many faith based (Christian, Islamic and Jewish), secular schools, 14 remote Community Aboriginal Schools and seven Curriculum and Re-Engagement schools. The sector is very diverse and different schools had greater capacity to respond to the pandemic than others.

Schools did need to respond very quickly and did vary a lot in their ability to do so. Some schools had quite sophisticated learning management systems that enabled an almost seamless transition to online learning where students could work online at their own pace with access to their teachers online for support and advice. Most schools delivering online had a teacher touching base with students a couple of times each day and some schools delivered quite a few classes with the teacher in class streaming to students at home. The mode of delivery also varied with the age of students and the educational philosophy of the school.

Some schools, including a number of Montessori and Steiner schools, preferred physical packs to be collected by parents which included a range of deep learning activities often not requiring access to a computer other than for some possible research and production of a digital product. Philosophically Montessori and Steiner schools do not use digital technology in the early years so only the older primary students would have been exposed to this at school. There are also a number of Community schools, particularly in regional areas, where access to computers is limited at school and not common until the later years of primary.

As a sector we do not have a sector wide learning management system, it is schools that develop those often using a range of commercial products as the basis for this. We did have reports from some of the older students they preferred online learning as they could progress at their own pace, were not distracted by other students and had access to teachers when they needed to.

What was identified early on were the equity issues where some families had a number of devices and strong internet access and others possibly one device at home for a number of children, and possibly a parent working from home, and insufficient downloads for effective access. Schools often purchased devices and dongles to send home to students so they could continue to work. There were demands for Apps that did not use the internet due to connectivity problems. We had reports that some families used their month's internet download capacity in the first week so no access after that.

The independent sector also has a number of Curriculum and Re-Engagement Schools that cater for secondary students at educational risk. While there are seven CARE schools, the largest of these, Alta-1, operates 16 campuses, two of which are in regional areas. Many of these students do not have access to technology at home and often have very unstable home lives and living arrangements. For these students they wanted the schools to stay

open, and some did, as school is often the safest and most secure place for these at times very vulnerable students to be.

The great majority of schools followed the advice provided to government schools regarding school closures and opening at the start of Term Two. Some schools continued with remote learning for a few weeks whether students were at school or at home. A lot of work had gone into developing these materials, whether digital or work packs, and if a teacher had some students home and others face to face in early Term two it did mean all students received a similar standard of education. Within a few weeks almost all students, other than boarders were back.

For boarding schools the situation was quite difficult. Boarding houses closed quite early and it did take a long time for National Cabinet to develop protocols for the gradual re-opening of boarding. Many boarding schools had to make building modifications to ensure a double room was divided to separate the students. All boarding schools developed very comprehensive risk management plans. In May when Year 12 Semester One exams were held many schools found Perth homestays for their older boarders so they could be at school for the exams. Even after guidelines for boarding had been developed many students took a long time to come back due to problems with travel arrangements and insufficient flights and biosecurity arrangements in Aboriginal Communities. For a number of the boarders, particularly those from Aboriginal Communities, working upon return to community was hard due to lack of connectivity in the community and lack of facilities for the students to work as most of the schools in community are primary only with a few secondary students.

In the sector there are four Aboriginal Boarding schools. One outside Esperance, one outside Meekatharra, one in Coolgardie and one in the Fitzroy Valley. The students left schools quite quickly and are slowly returning but many of these students remained in community long after it was deemed safe to return. Again transport was an issue and crossing boundaries while available to students, their supervisor was going to have to isolate for 14 days.

In summary the shift to remote learning was relatively easy for the well resourced schools and while the majority of these are in higher socio economic areas not all are. The King's College in Wellard had an excellent online learning system which both teachers and students found worked very well and they continued using that for the first few weeks of term 2 before returning to face to face after a few weeks. In another school, In contrast, Court Grammar in Serpentine Jarrahdale, while they supported students at home many families had poor or no connectivity and limited devices and while the school helped families, when the school re-opened Day One of Term 2 over 90% of students arrived. Some schools bought devices for some of their families to ensure students had access.

In the unfortunate event of a second wave, schools will be much better prepared than in Term One. Many schools have reviewed their Pandemic Plans (most were developed when we had H1N1) and we have had a lot of advice from Health and have worked with the Department of Education and Catholic Education of WA to ensure consistency of messaging.