Obstacle or Opportunity: Defining your school’s new normal

School leaders and teachers have responded positively to new ways of working but how do they capitalise on what they’ve learnt for the long term?

The start of the 2020 school year for NSW independent schools has been like no other in living memory. Bushfires, floods and the spread of COVID-19 have impacted schools and communities significantly. School leaders and teachers are currently working in ways they never have before. Navigating ever-changing health and education policies, using technology on a scale not planned for, implementing social distancing practices, planning a phased transition back to face-to-face teaching and all the while delivering quality learning-from-home experiences for their students and families: the complexity has been daunting.

School leaders are faced with the unenviable task of working with what is being recognised as new norms while grappling with how and when to return to established ways. We know that the impact of COVID-19 will be far-reaching, but what might it mean in the longer term for your school?

Although there have been challenges in recent months, school leaders and teachers across the globe have responded rapidly and positively to new ways of working. While society more broadly craves a return to its familiar ways, as do school communities, there is an opportune moment right now for school leaders to take ‘time to consider which parts of normal are worth rushing back to’ as stated by respected coach and commentator Dave Hollis. This particularly resonates in the education sector where the core business of schools is to better equip students for success in the digital and global world they will inherit. Have we equipped them as well as we can? Was this the pandemic we had to have?

In responding to COVID-19 in your school community, what has worked for your school to date may not be sustainable or may not be able to be replicated in other schools. In a rush to return to normal, it is paramount to take stock and actively reflect on the adaptability of your school and the agility of your teams during this time of disruption.

COVID-19 presents the perfect opportunity for schools to think, act, reflect, evaluate and celebrate successes; to identify next steps and to sustain effective new ways of being and doing. In a recent McKinsey & Company article Beyond Coronavirus: The Path to the Next Normal, which explores how organisations can navigate the new norm post-COVID-19, authors Kevin Sneader and Shubham Singhai suggest five stages - resolve, resilience, return, reimagine, reform - for thinking and acting that would allow leaders to redraw their map in the next normal.
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The stages can be easily framed for purposeful reflection, discussion and action in your school. There are enormous possibilities to be gained from positive, proactive reflection on forced change and what can potentially grow from this. In adopting a positive mindset, you and your school team can determine a new normal.

Key questions for each to begin a reflective process in your school:

- What actions are required now? What changes are necessary? What are we being forced to do?
- What impact has this had on our students, staff and families? How can we support those within our care? Are we financially secure and what if we aren’t?
- What actions are required to return to effective operational practice? How do we re-establish our normal?
- What insights have we gained? How can reinvention be positive for us? What do we reinvent? What do we keep? What do we lose? What do we change?
- What changes/initiatives we were forced to implement could provide substantial growth/improvement if adopted permanently?

Considering these questions helps to unpack and examine the experience of the whole school community, rather than just living it. Your observations and thoughts become the evidence needed for visioning and promoting a case for change in your school. Working through the questions addresses the needs of your current reality, the process of leading your school back to operational efficiency, and the opportunity for a new horizon.

In the rush to return to normal, use this time to consider which parts of normal are worth rushing back to.

AISNSW School Improvement Opportunities

AISNSW School Improvement consultants assist schools to navigate change and grow from every experience. In response to COVID-19, AISNSW is offering tailored facilitation, advice and support to help your school leadership team act on opportunities created by new ways of working.

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