Podcast Transcript

Fiona Elliott (FE) – Education Consultant at AISNSW
David Jones (DJ) – Principal of Carinya Christian School, Tamworth

(FE) Hello, I’m Fiona Elliott, Education Consultant in the Student Services Team at AIS New South Wales. Today, I will be talking with David Jones, Principal of Carinya Christian School in Tamworth New South Wales. As you listen to David, you will hear the different ways the team at Carinya are ensuring that teaching and learning is still the focus despite the current challenging situation. David discussed the ways they have adapted resources to meet needs, and the importance of communication with both families and students. I am sure you will enjoy listening to the many ways the school has adapted to keep learning happening.

(FE) I’m joined by David Jones, who is the Principal of Carinya Christian School in Tamworth. David, thank you for your time today. Can you tell us a little bit about your school and the community?

(DJ) Yeah, sure. So, Carinya is a Christian school and we’ve got just over 700 kids in our school, not including our Pre-school as well. So, we’ve got our Pre-school right through to Year 12, all on the one campus here located just on the fringe of town overlooking a beautiful quiet spot.

(FE) Lovely, and I know that I have come and visited you there and it is a really lovely school in a lovely area. We’ve now started back in Term 2, can you tell us a little bit about how you have responded, as a school, to the current learning at home environment?

(DJ) Look, there is no doubt that it’s been quite a challenging and evolving process. I think for us, as we’ve tried to consider how we approach teaching and learning at this particular time and have been trying to be quite careful thinking about the short term and the long term and realised that, while our teaching and learning environment has changed, our purpose actually hasn’t. Our purpose remains: it’s still about teaching kids the best that we can with explicit teaching strategies which are staying on as an important part of that and so we’ve been trying to balance that as well. For us in the school we are using the Google Suite which includes Google Classroom, Skype and Google Mail as well as conferencing systems that were used here as well. We have also been providing students with hard copies that are being sent home. Lots of reading materials for kids as well and we are really trying to work as much as we can with families. We are trying to facilitate them in the online environment as much as we possibly can. Also recognising that for some families that may not work, so hard copies of work have also being
made available for them. This is quite a journey as I'm sure it has been for everybody trying to navigate through this path.

(FE) It sounds like you have taken a few measures to try to address those very situations such as providing students both with those hard copy packs as well as online. So that's really terrific. What instructional strategies have you and your team put in place to support student learning?

(DJ) Yes, as I said, we tried to really remain as true as we can be to what we've learned through the NSW Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan (LNAP) program and so that explicit teaching, we've really tried to maintain that in our approach to teaching and learning, and during this time of disruption with collapsed classes, it's actually provided us with a great opportunity as instructional leaders to demonstrate lessons and for lesson observations to occur during that as well. So, for one of the new staff in, we have used lots of demonstrations using devices. We've really seized that opportunity. And also for the leaders in the school to demonstrate the different tools, the online, has probably come more important than ever with directing the staff.

So I think that instructional leadership is really essential at this time as well as the communication of that information. And again, coming back to our purpose, what is good teaching and focusing on that. Not focusing solely on the technology. It's about the teaching and learning. So, with that, we have used the flipped classroom idea a little bit for pre-recorded daily reviews and warm-ups. These are being uploaded on Google Classroom as well as PowerPoints that have been sent out that teachers have used previously for things like their warm-ups and reviews. These have been uploaded onto Google Classroom for parents to use. And then funnily enough the parents have been watching the pre-recorded reviews that our teachers have done and they almost act as demonstrations for the parents who are now starting to learn our explicit teaching practices. So, it's certainly been an unusual time where it's actually drawn parents into what we're doing in the LNAP program regarding explicit teaching. Certainly, having those pre-recorded reviews we have found to be an effective way of being able to communicate that information quickly.

We also use the Google Meets, as well, which is really important because engagement is essential online, and so we have really had to think about what are the best ways to engage. So we can kind of get creative with in terms of pre-recorded lessons and reviews, but unless you have those relationships still happening, then it gets difficult. So we make sure we touch base regularly, throughout the day, using our Google Meets, For K-2 our timetable has been a little bit flexible. It gets sent home or posted the night before so parents can check it and then the information is uploaded and includes scheduled times for meetings throughout the day with the kids. So it really does require, particularly for Kindy and Year 1, the parents playing a part in that.

I think really, chunking down material as well is important. So there’s nothing that is going to go for too long with that explicit teaching model. We've also sent whiteboards home as well, so when
we’re doing the Google Meets. We’ve taught the parents too how to use the whiteboard regarding checking for understanding. So, they’re still ‘chinning’ their whiteboards like they would in the classroom, but they might be doing this on the screen for a Google Meets or to their parents as well. So we’ve got lots of kids in the Year 1 and 2 becoming the teacher at home!

(FE) That’s lovely and really terrific that you’ve been able to see the silver lining as well as harness some of the opportunities as you talked about with instructional coaching as well as getting the parents on board and showing them some of the things they can be doing to support their students at home and working really closely with the parents.

You’ve covered a little bit there about checking for understanding and feedback and submitting work. Are there other strategies you are also including about how to check for understanding in that?

(DJ) We use the whiteboards using Google Meets. We also have students using gestures and putting their thumbs up. We also get parents to take photographs of student writing samples – their hard copies at home – and then emailing them or posting them on a Google Classroom.

(FE) That sounds really terrific what you’re doing for those students and focusing in on the importance of giving that feedback and knowing what they’re responding and how they’re completing the work. Do you have any kind of procedure for students who aren’t keeping up, or who you’re not getting those response from?

(DJ) We have worked out a process for that. As I said, we touch base with parents. If there is a student who is not keeping up, we have a conversation with them that always starts with, “Are you doing ok?”, “Is everything ok there?”, “Is your technology working?”, “How you’re going at home as a family?” and those kind of questions. In Kindy, Year 1 and Year 2 the focus is very much on talking to the parents, good communication with them, setting out our expectations for them clearly and then working with the kids as best as we can.

(FE) Thank you, David. That’s really interesting. I can really hear the way that you are working very closely with the school community around communication whilst supporting the students and that’s been really terrific to hear. The team at Carinya there are doing a really great job adapting to this really diverse and challenging situation trying to see those benefits for both the teaching situation, coaching but also for the students and making the most of it.

So thank you so much. We really appreciate your time today and it has been fantastic to hear about the great work you are doing in this challenging environment.

(DJ) My pleasure, Fiona. Good chatting to you.