Fiona Elliott (SC) – Education Consultant at AISNSW
Nicole Sleeman (NS) – Lower Primary Dean at Kempsey Adventist School

(FE) Hello, I'm Fiona Elliott, Education Consultant in the Student Services team at AISNSW. Today, I'm joined by Nicole Sleeman, Lower Primary Dean at Kempsey Adventist School. Nicole will be sharing about the school's journey over the past few months and the way that teachers have continued to adapt to their approach to learning at home. I'm sure you will enjoy listening to the way the school has responded to boost student engagement as the students have continued to learn from home.

(FE) Nicole, thank you so much for your time today. So, I wondered if you might start by telling us a little bit about Kempsey Adventist School.

(NS) Sure. As you know, it's a Seventh-day Adventist school, so we're a faith-based school and we're located on the mid-North Coast. We have a population of five hundred and eighty students from pre-kindergarten through to Year 12 and 290 students from PK to Year 6, with an Indigenous population of 20%.

(FE) Thank you Nicole. That's really interesting to hear. I know you've been on quite a journey because last year, of course, we had the fires which caused some school closures and now this year we've had the learning at home situation where you've been adapting to that change. Could you tell us a little bit about that journey, particularly in the recent time?

(NS) It's been a big journey again with the fires that impacted on our community where we had to close our doors for almost a week at one stage and the teachers really pulled together in making things work slowly transitioning the students back into the classroom. The leadership team worked very hard with making decisions about when it was safe for students to come back. So, we worked together. It was a real team effort. Then we've moved into our new transition of having to adapt again with the COVID-19. So, the leadership team has met regularly throughout the holidays to make new decisions as to what was happening this term. Teachers have been very adaptable and very flexible. So, we're really lucky in that sense that teachers have been able to do that. In the transitioning of having students coming back now, and the online learning, now we're slowly going into more face-to-face learning as well.
(FE) That’s really interesting Nicole, it’s certainly been a challenge and I can hear that you have really worked as a team to provide support for your students. So as you’ve gone through that process, what instructional strategies have you put in place for your students?

(NS) That’s been a work in progress. Before the holidays we talked about how many students would be here, how many students aren’t going to be here. It was a very natural progression for teachers. They wanted to keep the instructional strategies continuing because they knew that that’s what the students were used to, and now our teachers are used to teaching that way. So they’ve implemented pre-recorded videos and uploaded them on Seesaw using the strategies such as I do we do you do. Now we’re progressing more into face-to-face learning where the teachers are still using the instructional strategies and recording that so that they can upload for students that are still in the remote learning phase. They are also doing a Zoom check-in every day with their students to maintain that contact between the students and the teachers which we think is really important and also it’s a good time for questions from parents as well as the students.

(FE) That sounds great Nicole and I can hear that the teachers are really adapting and changing all the time, it’s quite amazing how the steep learning curve has come into play as teachers have adapted. You have talked about how you’re implementing the ‘I do, we do, you do’ as much as you can in this remote situation particularly with recorded lessons. How have you been able to check for understanding and provide feedback as you do that?

(NS) Seesaw has been a wonderful tool where they have been able to upload their videos. We’re also recording lessons on YouTube, having it unlisted so it’s not open to everybody. So through the Seesaw lessons the checking for understanding, teachers ask in either the Zoom sessions, or they can put Q&A on the Seesaw. Students can also ask questions through Seesaw and in the Zoom sessions. Students can also take photo evidence of their work.

Students are also given warm-up packs which can be collected from the main office. There’s extension and scaffolded activities in there for them. So, we use the warm-up packs with the whiteboards so that they can be used by teachers to check in to see how they’re responding. They think-pair-share with their parents at home. Some teachers even say turn to your pets and have a chat and talk to them about what your understanding is. They use track with me with everyone’s fingers up while I’m reading and recording of student explanations for problem solving so if there’s some problems to be solved, the students actually record their understanding of the task and the steps that have been taken to solve the problem.

(FE) Wow, what a lot of work that’s going on there. I can see that the teachers really do want to know if the students have learned it as well as what they are doing to support them even in this environment. So, thank you for that. As you’ve described already you’ve got some students
learning at home in remote learning and you've got some coming back. So how are you providing support across those different methods as well?

(NS) Something that we've really maintained is the phone calls home. So, we have allocated chaplains or staff, especially in the leadership team, that maintain calling home. The teachers are also doing that as well via email. We also have some chaplains that are giving home visits to people that have disconnected either through the remote learning ways, e.g. Zoom sessions or Seesaw. If we are not seeing students there regularly, we check in with them. So, our chaplains will actually go to their home with a work pack and check in to see how they are going.

We've also done a lot of student and parent surveys to get some feedback on how things are going at home, how they're feeling about the face-to-face learning/remote learning types of activities. So from that feedback, we've found that some students don't have any internet access as well. Therefore that's when the phone calls and home visits have come in. We've had some discussion with parents around their children not coping with the online learning in regards to understanding the tasks, as well as the parents, so therefore we are following up with that and having those phone calls through discussion on how we can help them at home. Listening to what parents and students are giving feedback on and differentiating the instruction.

(FE) Oh thank you Nicole, I can really hear how many different things that you are doing. How have you adapted the learning from home approach to boost student engagement across these last few weeks?

(NS) From the feedback that we have received through the student and parent surveys, home visits, phone calls and emails, we have taken note of, especially in the secondary school but there are some in the primary school, as well, that have disengaged. The attendance rate was quite high at the beginning, before the holidays. And then as the holidays were getting closer, we found that the disengagement began. So again, we came back as a team and discussed this and we decided that we would have our regular literacy and numeracy block, as it is so essential for learning, in the morning session between 9 and 11 and then we have planned PBL. For example, for the first two weeks since returning back from the holidays, we have project-based learning across the whole school, including a family project such as creating a machine that does different functions. We decided to make it a family project because younger siblings can work with the older siblings at home on the project building the machine. We found the engagement level has increased and so we've been able to embed technology in other different areas of the curriculum as well. So we found this re-engaged families and has been some fun. From week 3, we have new PBL, so each stage will have a different PBL that they'll be working on after lunch right through the day so we're finding that that's engaging the students a lot better rather than just sitting on computers all day long watching videos from teachers and working that way.
Oh, that's great and thank you for sharing. I can hear how hard the team are working. So, Nicole, I just really want to thank you for your time today and really appreciate you being open in sharing your journey of learning at home so far.

That's a pleasure, thanks very much Fiona.