(SC) Hello, I'm Sue Cairns, Education Consultant in the Student Services Team at AISNSW. Today I will be discussing remote learning with Robyn Clear, Head of Education Support Services at Wenona, a school for girls in North Sydney, New South Wales. Wenona had moved towards remote learning from mid-term 1 as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic became known. To do this, as Robyn explains, the school had rostered days where a year group would learn from home so that platforms and access issues could be resolved. As Robyn says, Wenona is a school that places great emphasis on connectedness and relationships, and this was reinforced through daily pastoral care face-to-face meetings with each class from K to 12. There was adherence to the daily timetable with face-to-face sessions with teachers. Robyn shares her many insights into remote learning and its impact on students with additional needs from the manner in which the school structure the day; the use of technology, which has had a positive impact, such as having face-to-face video sessions recorded; and the need to continue to support teachers to make adjustments in the manner in which lessons were delivered. Robyn discusses some of the lessons learned during this time of remote learning and how these will be utilised as the school moves back to face-to-face teaching and learning. I am sure you will enjoy this discussion with Robyn.

(RC) Sure, we are a school where every student from 7 to 12 has a laptop and quite a few students in the Junior School have an iPad as well. So, technology was, we were fairly well set up with the girls being able to use the technology and take technology home. Towards the end of last term, probably about four or five weeks before the end of last term, we started a rolling roster of students staying at home for a day a week. So, in the first week it might have been Year 7 who stayed home on a Monday and Year 9 on a Wednesday, where we did remote learning with them at home while the rest of the school was here.
SC) And did that give you an opportunity to trial the technology and also the students, I guess, to practice using it?

RC) Definitely, we needed the opportunity to practice it and to trial it. We learned quite a bit. We decided early on to, the technology team here, decided to use Zoom as the main way of video conferencing with the students. We also have access to Microsoft Teams that we were using, again, with the students. You know, we put out a lot of documents about guidelines for remote learning and we've modified them and modify them and modified them as the weeks went on and I think probably about the third or fourth last week (of term), we had the whole school at home for one day to trial before we committed to it as a full-time from the next week.

SC) And how has that been? How do you feel that the students reacted? How the parents reacted?

RC) The students have reacted quite well with it. We are a school that focuses on relationships and on wellbeing, and we undertook this by keeping the same timetable that we have at school, which starts with a pastoral care check-in every morning at 8:15am and it was interesting; he students coming together on Zoom for that pastoral care check-in, they were delighted to see each other and some of them look like they were just getting up and some of them were already well and truly ready for work. I think the main feedback, and we've got a lot of feedback from parents, which is overwhelmingly supportive of the school and positive of the changes we're implementing. The feedback is that the girls are very tired looking at the screen, that is very tiring. It is very much a changing and evolving situation where you're responding to feedback that you're getting. I guess even if you think about it, if you don't set a Zoom video conference that you ask a student to work, a lot of the work is online anyway, so they're still looking at a screen for a lot of the time.

SC) Yes, and I think most people are finding that quite exhausting over a full day. So for students, and particularly as you are a K to 12 school, some of your younger students may find that particularly difficult.

RC) Definitely, I think our Kindergarten to 2 staff are doing an absolutely amazing job in what they are preparing. We prepared packs for our Junior school students so they had the chance to come in and pick up or else we would post to them quite a lot of resources and a lot of fun activities to work with so they could Zoom with their teacher and then they could, they also had hands-on materials to go and work on.

SC) Robyn, how has the school, or what role, have you asked parents to play in in the remote learning situation?

RC) We put out some guidelines for parents early on. The main thing to start with was that we were going to stick to the timetable and we hoped that the parents were supportive of that. They
were quite proactive in enforcing, “Yes, my daughter is going to be on screen at 8:15am for pastoral care to start the day”, so they were really supportive in that way. We have asked parents for a lot of information and feedback, and they've certainly been forthcoming in that, it shows it was mostly positive, and just a few suggestions about, “Can we cut back the days, shorten the day”, things like that. We asked parents that we wanted the students in their sports uniform so that they were still part of the school community and we kept that feeling of belonging.

(SC) Robyn, with the students that have got additional needs in your school, what sorts of supports have you been able to provide for those students and their families?

(RC) That has been really challenging. Initially we weren’t Zooming one-on-one with the student. We’ve put more things into place and now we’re doing it more often, but we use breakout rooms on Zoom, so a lot of our Support Team teach with the class teachers. So first of all, there’s a lot of planning and preparation, so we’re working a lot with classroom teachers, and then using breakout rooms where if we’re co-teaching with the teacher we put students into a smaller group and work with them that way. There is also been, if students need some additional help, we can check in with a Zoom session or a phone call. There has been quite a few emails as well between us. Next term we are moving to more of a Helpdesk situation where the students can contact us and generate a ticket that they need support and I will allocate my team to them as a Helpdesk situation.

(SC) That sounds like a really good systematic way to do that. What about students who perhaps have got poor literacy skills that may be either in the Primary or Secondary? How are they managing with remote learning?

(RC) Yes, that’s challenging as well. The whole remote learning is challenging. My team has collaborated on a document we’ve put out to all teachers at the school, and it’s just called Tips for remote learning with students with additional needs. So it’s just reminders of the strategies that work in the classroom of making sure you don’t give students too much written information. If you’re giving instructions write them down on the board, maybe use a different colour, put heading, highlight things, don’t have a page full of words and reading for a student to do. I think one of the beauties of having video teaching is we are recording it so the student can actually log back in and listen again, which is fantastic. There are lots of guidelines about using the immersive reader functions on your laptop and in the software. So, students with literacy problems, I think are managing OK. We have brought in a few students in the last week of term. We brought in a few just to check because a few students were saying, “I can’t flick between Canvas and Zoom and I’m a bit lost with OneNote and just changing between them” and once you sit down and look at a child page at what they’re looking at, you’re able to identify “Oh ok, so there’s actually too much text there”. We then meet with the teacher and have a chat about how to modify and think about what you do in the classroom, what are you doing remotely?
It sounds like the students feel very safe and confident about asking for that assistance and pointing out what they can and can't do, which goes back to what you were saying about your school being a school of connectivity between staff and students. Do you think there is going to be lessons learned going forward? Do you think there may be some tools that are being used in remote learning that may be used more often once face-to-face teaching comes back?

I think the recording of introductions to lessons, to set up for lessons, some of our teachers are recording things and the students can play it on Canvas and get that direct instruction or that explicit instruction online, and then they can go back and listen to it several times. I think that’s something that, moving forward, is going to be really helpful and I’d like to see that stay in a way because in a classroom when you are face-to-face, a student, you can tell by the look on their face, they’re a bit puzzled and you might try and explain it in a different way and you still have the other students sitting there listening. I just think that having that, being able to go back to that recording of it is really informative and a parent who is trying to help their child as well, can also listen to what’s being said and maybe help them. I know sometimes we give out an assessment task, say to a Year 9 or a Year 10 student, and I’ll have a phone call from a parent, “My daughter doesn’t understand the assessment task”, and the teacher will have talked about it quite a lot, but we haven't recorded that when we're face-to-face, and I think the beauty of having it recorded, I think that's going to be really helpful.

That's a great point, Robyn, and I think that we have to look on the positive that will come out of this very complex situation that we're in.

It’s also been an opportunity where quite a few teachers in the school have stepped up and done amazing things. Our last two days of term one were staff days where we had one day where different teachers just presented a half-hour session that you could log onto and, “This is what I'm using, I might be using Padlet to do this”; so different forms of technology that they were using which was just amazing to see people sharing.

So, perhaps the silver lining might be that use of technology can add to the richness of our educational frameworks. People are already using it, but perhaps it's going to be generalised a lot more.

We've also learned that the lessons need to be shorter, and I think teachers... we've got a policy now we've put into term 2 where we're backing off homework from Kindergarten through the Year 8.

Robyn, thank you so much. It's been a really informative chat today and I look forward to hearing more from you in the months ahead about how these things are panning out. I do hope that you and your team are all safe and well, and we look forward to a really positive Term 2. Thank you for your time.

Thank you very much.