

INSIGHT

How Effective Partnerships Can Help Schools Cope with COVID-19 Disruption



Schools were closed in different parts of the world to prevent the spread of the coronavirus disease. Photo credit: ADB.
An e-school in Scotland provides lessons on how to shift to remote learning.

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Introduction

Before the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) struck, some education stakeholders questioned the value of remote and digital learning. They saw it as the thin end of a wedge in which computers replaced educators.

However, the closure of schools because of the pandemic has demonstrated that the ability to educate remotely adds resilience and minimizes the social costs of interrupted education.

Effective Partnerships

An example is [e-Sgoil](#), the remote teaching ecosystem established in 2016 for pupils in rural communities scattered across Scotland's Western Isles. It has demonstrated the value of [blended learning](#), which combines home and school-based learning. E-Sgoil uses the national digital education platform [GLOW](#) and commercial education collaboration software [Vscene](#).

Partnerships with the public- and third-sector developers of curricular resources, such as [Scotland's National Centre for Languages \(SCILT\)](#) and the [Confucius Institute \(CISS\)](#)—both based at the University of Strathclyde, [Keep Scotland Beautiful](#), and [SCHOLAR](#), have enabled it to launch a wide range of language, environmental, and cultural content to pupils in Scotland and beyond. Uptake by pupils—often without prompting from their own teachers—has been high.

The most recent [initiative](#) in response to school closures related to COVID-19 is fully subscribed, so too is a parallel program of professional development for teachers. While parents were being bombarded with websites that could help, these partners in e-Sgoil recognized the need for a learner's structure within a timetabled real-time teaching experience.

From a standing start and at little additional costs, a new school was created for Scotland, where some classes were oversubscribed within a week. By 6 May, 15,364 learners aged 5–18 from all 32 local government regions had been involved in this new school, almost 500 were on a waiting list, and just over 300 teachers were enrolled for professional development activities.

Lessons to be Learned

What lessons can we draw from this and other examples of good practice?

The first lesson is that education systems that already had an embedded digital culture made the transition from blended learning to remote learning far more smoothly and effectively than those who found themselves making the transition from traditional learning as an [emergency measure](#). E-Sgoil provides an excellent example, so too does [Plan Ceibal](#) in Uruguay.

A second lesson is that there is no need to spend time and effort in developing bespoke content and platforms—high-quality educational resources are widely available on digital and broadcast channels, such as [BBC Bitesize](#). Virtual learning tools, such as [Moodle](#), [Padlet](#), and [Google Classroom](#), are easy to adapt to local context and curriculum. Connectivity solutions can always be found and need not be digital, as the examples of Pakistan and [Uzbekistan](#) show. The appeal with e-Sgoil has been the real-time pedagogic interface between the educators and the learners and curriculum offerings that are interesting and recognizable in their educational systems.

The third lesson is the importance of partnership. E-Sgoil leveraged its partnerships to provide educational resources. The government's commitment has been crucial, allowing e-Sgoil's small team to focus their energy on developing teaching methods and equipping teachers and pupils with the skills

needed in a remote learning environment. As in every educational setting, the degree of success is a function of the skills of the teacher. While some sources [highlight concerns](#), e-Sgoil has identified some [key points of guidance](#) for effective remote teaching.

The fourth lesson concerns coordination and management. Teachers operating in the “new normal” have commented on [how the balance of their workload has changed](#) and highlighted the importance of effective communications with parents and pupils, especially in areas of high deprivation and when supporting the most vulnerable pupils. There are opportunities for efficiency though, such as by ensuring that pupils all use the same online platform. For example, the use of GLOW was found to be patchy across Scotland, and this had to be addressed for pupils outside the Western Isles accessing e-Sgoil. Coordinated timetabling is essential for remote teaching across multiple schools as is a technical backup in the first few courses lessons when a human error can impact on the learning experience.

Looking Ahead

Traditional education systems have evolved over many decades and are generally poor at coping with emergencies. The COVID-19 crisis has precipitated innovation and change.

It is very likely that in many educational systems the “new normal” will be around for many months. It is hoped that one of the positive legacies of COVID-19 will be an acceptance of remote learning and blended learning as tools to ensure access to education.

This article is adapted from [Lessons during COVID-19](#) published on the Caledonian Economics website.

Resources

M Finnigan and B Robertson. 2020. [Lessons during COVID-19](#). *Blog post*. 29 May. Caledonian Economics.

[E-Sgoil website](#).



Martin Finnigan
Education PPP Specialist

Martin works on public-private partnerships (PPP) that enhance education infrastructure. Based in Scotland, he has for 20 years helped the country develop and adopt new infrastructure PPP models, including in education. He has helped develop education infrastructure PPP policies and programs in Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Oceania. He has researched global best practices for the Asian Development Bank, and works on ADB projects in Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan.



Bruce Robertson

Visiting Professor, University of Strathclyde

Bruce Robertson, OBE was Director of Education in the two largest rural education authorities in Scotland and an adviser to government. At the University of Strathclyde, he works closely with the National Languages Centre and the Confucius Institute for Scotland's Schools. His experience in education includes system change and improvement; large PPP and capital investment projects; policy and infrastructure planning; and digital learning and pedagogy. During the COVID-19 crisis, he acted as strategic adviser for e-Sgoil.
