



Tackling the challenges of online learning:

## How MALVERN COLLEGE HONG KONG is supporting pupils through times of school closure

**H**ong Kong is certainly off to a rough start heading into the Year of the Rat. Not only have last year's prolonged public movements considerably affected residents' day-to-day lives, the recent coronavirus outbreak is now causing serious concerns for public health and safety. Malvern College Hong Kong (MCHK), like all other schools in the territory, is dealing with its second period of school closure in the course of this academic year.

While last November's shutdown was relatively short, pupils had to stay home throughout February – and, at the time of writing, the planned reopening of schools on March 16 remains uncertain. This situation is challenging for all parties involved: the schools, teachers, parents – but most of all, the pupils.

It is of utmost importance to MCHK to support its pupils not only academically but also from

a pastoral care point of view – be it during regular school times or in times of adversity. During this challenging period, MCHK has put a comprehensive online learning programme into place. The Education Bureau's announcement to close all schools was published just after the Chinese New Year holidays started, and many of MCHK's staff worked tirelessly over the holidays to ensure a swift and smooth roll-out of the programme. "We are keen to emphasise that the online learning programme is not just about filling time – it is meaningful planned learning," says Dr Robin A. Lister, Founding Headmaster of MCHK.

"We strive to manage the workload carefully as it is not healthy for children to be sitting in front of their screens for hours a day," he adds. "Balancing the workload is a key priority in order to avoid anxiety in an already stressful period."

Among the many factors impacting

the success of an online learning environment is the age of the child. While older children will be able to manage online learning more independently, this is typically not the case with younger children who require more support. At MCHK, flipped learning pedagogy is used in the form of instructional videos that are created by the teachers. This enables pupils to (re-)watch the videos, multiple times if necessary, to comprehend and digest content. Teachers subsequently follow up with personalised comments, online chats or video conferencing on school-endorsed platforms, suitable to the age of the child. This pattern, in effect a 'flipped' version of what often happens in the classroom, has very real educational benefits and ensures that engagement with the teacher is highly productive and focused on individual needs.

MCHK benefits from its relatively small class sizes and low teacher-pupil ratio of only 1:10 in that all teachers are available online for



real-time support of their pupils during their school day.

Building on the lessons learnt during last year's school closure and the parental feedback received, MCHK has tweaked its approach. Conscious that parents have varied expectations when it comes to online learning, MCHK has put in place a balanced and flexible programme. "Many households feature two working parents who are not in a position to support their children with accessing online learning throughout the day. Our teachers therefore have taken the level of pupil independence into account when designing their programmes," explains Dr Lister.

"Moreover, we realise that the absence of regular human interaction in the classroom and around the school increases the learning intensity. Our response has been to adapt the length of learning blocks and bite-size related activities carefully. Above all, we want to ensure quality learning

experiences while minimising the risk of disengagement which can easily happen when pupils are working independently.

"It is important to emphasise that in this period of uncertainty and anxiety, the school's concern with providing pastoral support for its pupils is as important as ever. One-to-one check-ins with pupils are key, and our school counsellor continues to be available online."

It comes as no surprise that online learning can be an isolating experience. Allowing children time for relaxation and other activities – especially plenty of exercise – is paramount. MCHK places great emphasis on children's wellbeing especially during times when normal school routines are disrupted. "Parents can greatly enhance their children's learning

experience by creating a structured environment at home. Adherence to routine will make the transition back to school easier for both parents and children," Dr Lister points out.

"We do not believe that there is a viable long-term alternative to face-to-face teaching in a school environment with its natural interaction which happens in a classroom setting. However, there are also real benefits to online learning experiences, such as the development of self-management skills," Dr Lister concludes. "Pending the government's decision on when it is safe to readmit pupils to school, MCHK is embracing the development opportunities home learning provides and has established the strong foundations for a successful online learning experience for as long as it is required." **B**

#### FIND IT

- Malvern College Hong Kong, 3898 4688, [admissions@malverncollege.org.hk](mailto:admissions@malverncollege.org.hk), [www.malverncollege.org.hk](http://www.malverncollege.org.hk)