



Keeping parents involved - moving on with Facility

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Technology College Co-ordinator John McGowan
Cardinal Wiseman Catholic Technology College

Keeping parents involved

When Cardinal Wiseman Catholic Technology College first opened its student records through the internet there was an immediate positive reaction from parents. They logged on through Facility ePortal to check personal details, attendance, lateness and achievement but It soon became obvious that maintaining parental involvement would require a new phase.

Praise from parliament

Technology College Co-ordinator John McGowan said:
“Phase one was getting the parents on board but we’ve now got past the ‘wow’ factor of simply being able to do it. Now we’re thinking about the quality of what we supply and what else they need.”

The 11-16 specialist school in Kingstanding, Birmingham has 670 pupils. It is in one of the city’s more impoverished areas and not all parents have home access to computers so ePortal is just one aspect of a parental communication plan. There are also weekly and termly newsletters, annual reports, a website and a truancy-alert system.

Cardinal Wiseman had national recognition when schools minister Jacqui Smith addressed a conference on raising achievement through parental involvement. She cited the positive outcomes the school has achieved.

As college co-ordinator John’s role is dedicated to making technology work for the school. He addressed the same conference and afterwards was asked by several heads for his job description because they felt a similar post would benefit their schools.

Attendance and punctuality

The school has ensured that all 46 staff have laptops and has installed a terminal in every classroom with access to ePortal through the Net. The classroom machines were drawn from old computer stock and programmed with limited data to act solely as internet terminals.

After a trial period operating with a test group of parents and then just year 9, the school quickly offered ePortal access to all parents. Parents receive a permanent record of their secure log-in because details are sent out with students’ annual reports.

There was an almost immediate improvement in attendance once the system was working across the school. Total figures went up by 3 per cent and in year 11 – traditionally a time when students tend to drift away from class – there was 95 per cent attendance.

More information for parents

In the first phase of ePortal use parents focussed mainly on their children’s personal information and event logs so the school decided to concentrate on making more detailed information available. John said; “Phase two was to update data more often, especially assessments, and put it into a more readable form, in ways that parents can easily understand.”

The school uses Facility document storage to attach items such as praise letters and achievement certificates to a child’s record. “We now design documents more carefully because parents will see them. They aren’t just columns of data.”



Parents can check their children's timetable and ensure they are prepared for lessons

Another advantage of ePortal access is that parents can check their children's timetable and ensure they are prepared for lessons. It gives them more sense of involvement in their children's day. John said: "Parents are involved in planning so the children arrive with their PE kit or ready for food technology lessons."

The school has also revised its event logs to ensure that drop-down lists include good behaviour as well as bad. Staff CPD sessions ensure that comments added to logs are professional and considered. "It is always in the back of their minds now that parents will see what they have written so they keep things professional and concise."

Assessment

Increased electronic assessment recording now makes information more easily available to parents as well as boosting progress. At the start of year 11 students were asked what they expected to achieve in each subject and teachers recorded a 'working at' level. Staff set an exam-type task each month that can be assessed and recorded alongside an effort grade. DfES forecast grades were also included as well as mock examination results. Monthly reviews are drawn up and added to student files through document storage so parents can see at a glance how their children are progressing.

John said: "We can see immediately who is and isn't progressing as expected in particular subjects or across the board. We can also organise the information by teaching group so subject teachers can analyse the same data. If you identify someone who is having a problem in that subject it's a simple matter to check the other data and see whether the problem is isolated or school-wide."

Over the last year teachers have been encouraged to convert mark books to electronic versions. The scheme began by discussing each department's requirements, what they wanted to record and how often to take summative data. Then a template was drawn up for each department to enter information directly. The results are therefore available to parents through ePortal. "It gives them the information that's necessary for them to help their children to make progress," John said.

Reports

For annual reports every child receives a single page per subject that discusses effort, classwork, homework and targets. With a letter from the head, a page showing full attendance data, a list of staff who teach the child and a front cover, the document can be collated through Facility and sent straight to a printer. Including binding, the whole production process takes much less time.

Three times a year at mid-term pupils have targets set for the coming weeks. School is closed for lessons and each pupil has a personal appointment with a member of staff where they set academic, personal and organisational targets after an informal discussion. Youngsters choose their own aims from a comment bank in Facility that has been drawn up in pupil language.

John said: "We use teachers and teaching assistants so it is possible that the reviewer does not know the pupil well. Thanks to Facility they have all the information they need to have an informed conversation with the pupil and to set relevant targets." Once the targets are agreed they are printed onto sticky labels and pasted into children's homework diaries. "It is one of the finishing touches that make the system work – and it really works."

At the next session the targets are discussed again to see whether they have been achieved and whether new aims need to be established. It is helping to boost attainment as well as tackling behaviour. The academic target is planned to improve pupils' core skills in numeracy, literacy and IT so that all subjects are boosted. "It's designed to promote improvement in learning and it is really effective. We have shared the idea with other schools and it has been recognised as a success. What impresses people most is that the information is available to both the child and the parents."

Parental involvement

Keeping parents informed has given the school a new dimension. Not all parents have access to computers at home but John estimates that around 60 per cent do. Within the first six months around 50 were logging on regularly and that soon rose to around 150. Some check two or three times a day to see what their children are doing. Others check in daily or weekly.

The success brought recognition when Cardinal Wiseman won the Paul Shoesmith Trophy for innovation in ICT, awarded by Birmingham Learning and Culture IT, for its communications strategy.



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