

Parental Engagement Case Study

Woodlawn School, North Tyneside

About the school

Woodlawn is an all-age school for pupils with broad range of severe or complex special educational needs often linked to a medical condition or a physical disability: other needs include speech and communications problems, sensory impairment and other complex needs. The school is able to cater for pupils who are working below their chronological age as well as those with mainstream ability but with other complex needs.

The school was designated as a specialist special school for communication and interaction in September 2009. It has a national reputation for work with ICT, eSafety and Parental Engagement. Members of staff have participated in a number of Becta projects, the Head Teacher is a member of the Leading Leader's Network and has spoken at regional and national conferences. The school has won a number of Northern Grid Awards over the last 10 years.

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The school's engagement with parents and carers ... [is] outstanding.

The school has established a well-deserved reputation as 'an outward looking centre of excellence', particularly in its use of high-quality information communication technology (ICT)

The teachers make effective use routinely of communication aids and other forms of technology designed to promote independent learning, communication and interaction.

The school is at the forefront of the use of innovative technology to augment learning, communication and interaction

The Challenge

The school's main aim was to give pupils a voice: increasing the children's participation in and enjoyment of learning.

Only 4 of the 76 parents come in to school, other pupils are bussed in so there is little face to face contact. The school wanted parents to have a better understanding of what their child did in school

The Project

The school uses a range of technologies to aid communication; all of these are used on a daily basis in school so pupils are familiar with them.

Pupils of different ages use different approaches:



Early Years Foundation Stage /

Primary: the staff works with pupils to produce narrative home school books, eLearning journals and simple talking books. They also use ICT to record achievements and create materials for pupils to take home.

Secondary: pupils also use VOCA (Voice Output Communication Aid)

While the school already had very good relationships with parents, using technology has enhanced this. Parents were given training and this enabled them to engage more with their child's learning and get excited about what the pupils were doing at school. They were more likely to take on this learning at home and work with their children on similar activities.

The school also provided support for parents on eSafety. Parents often don't know what their children are doing with technology and a parents evening was arranged where they used role play and scenarios to explain the issues. This project was Highly Commended in the Northern Grid PHSE Award 2010. (www.northerngrid.org/awards2010)

Benefits

Pupils in control:

One child regularly wiped their parents' comments before they got to school, instead of seeing this as a problem the school recognised that the child was simply doing the same thing as pupils who may choose not to pass on messages.

Information is focussed on the child:

Much of the information schools send home is about the school or class. This project meant parents had access to the information they are most interested in: their own child's activity and experiences. Information can relate to achievements or be reassuring. One example was a parent leaving their child at school for the first time being very anxious, by the time they got home they had a text from the school reassuring them that the child had settled in well and there was no reason to worry.



Communication comes from the child:

Parents are able to find out what their child has been doing directly from the child and can share the learning journey. There is none of the frustration that comes from having to get the information from a 3rd Party. Parents find out what their child enjoyed and what they are interested in. This leads to projects continuing at home.

2 way commutation:

Parents can keep staff informed of what the child has been doing at home. While not all parents have access to ICT or photos to record this other objects (e.g. metro tickets) can be shared to start the conversation.

Attainment:

Attainment was not a priority for this project but some users have clearly benefited from learning about the available equipment and how to make best use of it. The school plans to build on current activities and to introduce hand held devices. Measuring attainment will become a higher priority.

What next?

Sustainability:

The school makes use of a wide range of technology, some is very cheap and easily accessible but some is high tech and individual items can cost as much as £7000. The LA has been very supportive in helping the school to access funds and some funds have come through Specialist Schools Status and Communication Aids Project. Funding is going to be an increasing issue in the current climate.

Learning Platforms:

The school has access to the Local Authority Learning Platform. It has been used and some parents have been trained to use it but it has not been as successful as other methods. This could be because of the lack of time for staff to update it or because it is not the best method for the parents involved. It has been more successful with older pupils and the 6th Form Forum. The school plans to review their use of the Learning Platform.

Where to start / Top Tips

1. Start simple and work up, don't be afraid to use things that can look very basic, some of the best equipment is cheap and can be bought from supermarkets and garages. Sales around Christmas time are good opportunities for staff to find resources. The important thing is to have the vision to see how it can be used. Having complex equipment can mean not all functions will be used and pupils and parents may not be confident users.
2. If you don't succeed try again. Failure is part of the process and there will be something that will work. Every child and every parent is different and may need different approaches.

3. Don't be precious and don't worry about things getting broken. It is much better for things to be used than for them to be safely stored away from pupils.
4. The pupils come first; you need to identify what they need. When you know the value the technology will bring you'll find a way to provide it.

More information

A video about the parental engagement project was created by Becta and is available on YouTube

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFGDkNaDnrA>