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Blatchington Mill: Parental Engagement Case Study



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SCHOOL

Blatchington Mill School and Sixth Form College is a large secondary school with 1,800 students, aged from 11 to 18 years. The high-performing school serves a diverse area of Brighton and Hove and has specialist status in performing arts, mathematics and computing, and applied learning. Recently, the school added an additional provision for gifted and talented students. At the last Ofsted inspection, in 2007, it was given a "good" rating.

Understanding the importance of parental engagement to student achievement, the school has worked to build parent relations through community activities, and parent organisations and consultations. The use of ICT has considerably strengthened these links. The Blatchington Mill School (BMS) Portal is a key factor of this undertaking.

Parental Engagement at Blatchington Mill

Technology for parental engagement is most effective when it builds on sound foundations—and it's clear that Blatchington Mill pays careful attention to its relationships with parents and the whole community. The school's Web site routinely spotlights parent and community events on the home page, and the online newsletter, which is also available in print form, is an engaging and rich source of information for families and students. Providing parents with easy online access to the learning platform—and to data and information about their children—seems a natural development.

As Mark Leighton, ICT Director and an Assistant Head Teacher at Blatchington Mill, explains: "Much of the initial impetus for online engagement came from the parents themselves. About five years ago, parents were giving us feedback that they weren't happy with the level of communication with the school, particularly compared with what they'd been accustomed to when their sons and daughters were in primary school."

This was particularly frustrating because Blatchington Mill, as a specialist performing arts college, had lots to tell its parents about productions and events. At about the same time, in 2004, the school was awarded specialist status with accompanying extra funding. Leighton says: "We were also looking at new ways of teaching and learning, so we wanted some kind of learning and communication platform that could serve both purposes."

Staff had been using laptops for their work since 2002 and an e-mail system was well established in the school, so it made sense to look for a more integrated, easy-to-use system for handling information, communications and learning materials.

The school decided to build a portal based on Microsoft Office SharePoint Server, giving

parents, students, and staff controlled access to information. At the same time, Leighton ensured that parents could use the same log-on details to access more specific information about their own children held on the school's Capita management information system (MIS).

But reaching that point took some time, beginning with setting up the portal. Leighton says: "We spent a year working on it, setting up portals and testing it with students and staff. After a year we knew what we wanted to do, so we abandoned what we'd already done and started again using a methodological approach, to build something that could evolve as our needs changed."

Progress was gradual, working year group by year group. "Before, the database was only accessed internally. Now that parents were going to see it, we needed to tidy things so it could be published more widely," says Leighton. Felkin agrees: "It was a matter of staff knowing that their written judgments would be understood by parents and taken in the right spirit. They needed to feel secure that what they were recording was being translated properly at home."



Building the Portal—with Staff

To ensure teachers would embrace the project, Leighton and his team worked with lead teaching and learning professionals in each subject area. Early doubts among members of staff who weren't convinced of the need to change the practice in an already successful school were addressed. And soon the advantages of the portal—better informed parents and more engaged students—began to show. "Once teachers could see the benefits, it became quite easy to get everyone on board," says Leighton.

James Russell, Assistant Head Teacher in charge of community involvement, harboured early doubts. He was already a successful teacher and was concerned about having to learn a new way of working. However, he changed his mind when he started working with the portal. "I started as an IT novice. I was a bit sceptical of the learning platform process, but it seems to have had a positive influence on me. It makes me feel I can reach out and communicate with the community with which I'm working," says Russell.

Building the Portal—with Parents

Given that parents had been pressing for better communication, it was doubly important to keep them informed about progress from the start, and respond to their feedback. "In some cases students were bringing in parents to see us to solve problems, but in the majority of cases parents contacted the school. We had a dedicated phone line at peak times, dedicated e-mail support, face-to-face support on parents' evenings, and an open access ICT suite for parents after school," says Leighton. Students also played a key role in helping parents to learn how to use the portal.

"Feedback ranged from 'About time too!' to 'I'm not sure I understand it but I'm willing to learn,'" says Leighton. Inevitably, there were technical issues for parents, mostly connected with equipment in the home, and with setting up passwords.

The Portal Now

The main BMS Portal has five sections—staff, students, governors, community, and parents. The Staff Portal provides administrative information and notices, forums, teaching resources, and student assignments. The Student Portal has an online student homework diary, notices, forums, social networking, information about the Every Child Matters agenda, learning resources by subject, with helpful links and access to data on progress, attendance, and behaviour. The Community Portal contains school newsletters, notices and picture libraries, information on work experience, community links, and collaborative courses and projects. The Parent Portal offers the same access to learning materials as the Student Portal, as well as access to their child's homework diary, and MIS data on performance, attendance, and behaviour. All sections share a central noticeboard and calendar with targeted information.

Some other popular areas were directly requested by parents. One of these is the Exam Centre, which collects information—dates, course work deadlines, consultation meetings, and revision materials—about external examinations taken by students.

The school trip blog was also requested by parents. Photographs and stories are posted on the blog so parents can keep in touch while their children are away. "Most of the residential trips have their own blogs, with information such as preparatory work and contact details, as well as daily information during the visit," says Leighton.

Parents are also beginning to develop parent-to-parent networks or forums. At Blatchington Mill, forums work best at form-group level, with parents of children in one form exchanging ideas and sharing information. A whole-school forum, by contrast, has been less successful. It seems clear that parents are happier sharing ideas in a smaller group of parents with common interests, than in a bigger more anonymous forum.

Using the Portal—Parents and Students

Parents are glad of the opportunity for closer contact with the school, frequently mentioning how they enjoy the ability to check on students' assignments. Jacqui Stevens, whose daughter Emma is in Year 10, says: "If I'm not sure what her homework is, I can check on the portal and help her keep on track. I can also contact the teacher directly through the portal. That's brilliant—very useful." Often, she and Emma look at the portal together. "She shows me any rewards she's been given. It's a direct way of letting the parents know and that's tremendously beneficial," says Stevens.

Emma appreciates the informed contact with her mum. "I talk to my mum a lot about the work," she says. "It makes me try harder because I know she knows what I'm doing, and it helps her because she understands what I'm working on."

Emma's been able to help with the technicalities, too. She says: "I help her to log on to the portal but she's quite good, learning more about the portal herself. It's easy to access because the buttons are all there."

For the parent of a Year 7 child, the portal is particularly important in easing the transition to a new, bigger school. "It's a big step. A whole

year group here is bigger than her entire primary school," says one parent. "There's so much going on and the portal gives you an overview, keeping parents informed so you've got an understanding of the school."

Maintaining the Portal

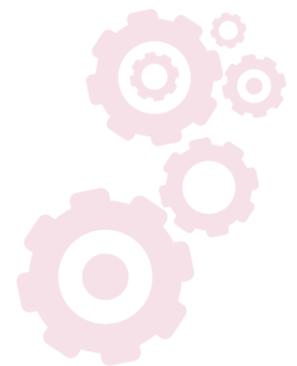
Staff quickly discovered that the portal has to be kept refreshed if parents are going to continue to use it. At Blatchington Mill, the task of keeping the portal up-to-date falls to a full time Web Administrator, Catherine O'Regan, who had an important role in helping and training staff through technical issues.

The portal is updated every day—new content added and old content archived. "When parents log on, they almost feel like they're in the school, as if they're walking into reception and seeing the notice boards. Keeping information fresh is the key to success, and Office SharePoint Server is proving an effective tool for doing that," says O'Regan.

O'Regan regularly attends meetings of the school parent-teacher association, called Friends of Blatch, to note feedback about the portal. "The idea for the Exam Centre came from there. It was a brilliant idea," she says.

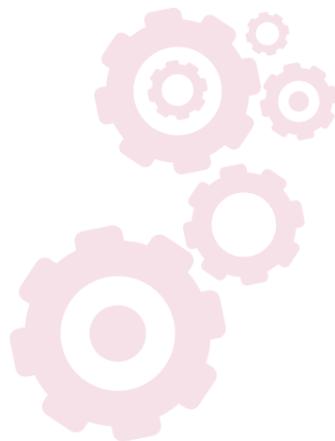
"It's a direct way of letting the parents know and that's tremendously beneficial."

Jacqui Stevens, Parent



"An effective home-school partnership is essential to a child's achievements in the classroom."

Janet Felkin, Head Teacher, Blatchington Mill



“Having communication open all the time can stop small issues from developing into significant problems.”

Janet Felkin, Head Teacher, Blatchington Mill



Impact

On Workload

The need for accuracy of registration and other data means that staff need to take time and trouble to get things right. This will be beneficial in the long run. Other fears—that e-mails would flood the system, for example—haven’t materialised. Felkin says: “Staff manage that side of it incredibly well. Having communication open all the time can, in fact, work as a preventative measure, stopping small issues from developing into significant problems.”

On Parental Engagement

The main effect has been to improve the quality of the discourse between teachers and parents, reducing tensions and removing misunderstandings. The role of parents in suggesting content for the portal is clearly important in this.

At the same time, parent–student dialogue is also improved. Parents don’t have to press for information. “I can talk to them about things that I know are going on rather than waiting for them to tell me,” says the father of two students.

On Attendance

Attendance has risen from 91 per cent in 2004 to 94 per cent in 2009. Small percentage increases at the top of the scale are hard-won in secondary schools, and the leadership team is certain that the availability of data to parents via the portal has been a significant factor.

On Teaching and Learning

It’s difficult to isolate the effect of the BMS Portal on the school’s continuing improvement, but as Leighton suggests: “With improved data and

communications, we can intervene earlier where there are problems, and this has a significant effect on learning.” In the same way, a more informed and supportive body of parents adds extra impetus to classroom performance.

Key Messages

- Engage staff first, seeking out and addressing concerns that may not have been expressed.
- Work with key staff as “early adopters.” At BMS, lead teaching and learning professionals were important.
- Keep parents informed during development.
- Take feedback from parents at every opportunity, and be ready to use their ideas.
- Expand the portal gradually, and take time before making it available to parents.
- Attend to “housekeeping”—tidying up the content and accuracy of information, seeing it through the eyes of parents, and being particularly aware of confidentiality issues.
- Traffic into school—by e-mail, through the portal—will increase, but not as much as may be feared. An advantage is that e-mail messages can be dealt with more carefully than phone calls—and frequent communication prevents issues escalating and becoming more demanding of time.
- Ease of use—the one-stop shop—and frequent updating of content keeps parents engaged with the portal.
- Even in a popular and successful school, where parents are supportive, building the portal improves engagement and gives it more focus.
- Students appreciate parental engagement, which takes some of the reticence and embarrassment out of sharing their work and achievements at home.

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