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Hawes Side Primary: Parental Engagement Case Study



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SCHOOL

Hawes Side Primary School serves 550 pupils from a wide and socially diverse area in the Borough of Blackpool, United Kingdom (UK), with slightly higher than average deprivation levels. Curriculum test scores have improved significantly in recent years, and are above local and national averages.

The school is a member of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) family of schools, and is one of only four schools nationally to have received the Trust's Award for creative and innovative use of communication in education.

Hawes Side Primary School has a distinctive topic-based approach to teaching across the curriculum that draws in parents and the wider community. This is a school where parental engagement goes beyond simply sharing information—it includes active participation in school life and learning. The distinctive form of parental engagement at the school works on several levels.

The distinctive form of parental engagement at the school works on several levels to encourage students to enjoy learning and take their newfound enthusiasm home so parents become interested and engaged. It also creates opportunities for parents to engage with the school and support their children's learning. Information and communications technology (ICT) expands this engagement by helping parents with their ICT skills and by using ICT to communicate with parents.



Building Parental Engagement

Administrators and teachers at Hawes Side agree that parental engagement is essential to a child's success in school. Lee Glyn, Deputy Head at Hawes Side Primary School, says: "The moment you actively involve parents with the school, children's engagement improves." For Head Teacher Michael Shepherd, this is the key to continued school improvement, because he believes there's a limit to what can be achieved through curriculum initiatives alone. He says: "By involving parents in children's learning we can improve standards even further." Shepherd sells that message strongly to Hawes Side parents. "We always say to our parents, even if you just discuss school with the children when they come home, it tells the children that learning is important—to be treated with respect," says Shepherd.

When Shepherd arrived at Hawes Side in 2005, he found that parents were interested in what their children were doing at school, but he felt they were not engaged. He worked hard to transform that situation, with coffee mornings, welcome evenings, and a home-school group.

Two of the most effective strategies were:

- The Everyone Reading in Class (ERIC) programme. Parents participating in ERIC come to the school and read with students. Participation in ERIC has steadily increased and plays a significant role in improving the quality of relationships across all sides of the home-school-child triangle.
- Learning Logs. Students create personal project folders to work on at school and at home.

In 2007, efforts to improve engagement were further boosted when the school was invited by the SSAT to take part in Engaging Parents to Raise Achievement (EPRA) project, which provides a toolkit for parental engagement.

But there were barriers to overcome. Shepherd says: "Some parents' ideas about school are based on their own memories, which can cloud their attitudes. We have to ensure they feel welcome at the school, and help them understand how their children learn."

A key strategy in overcoming these barriers was to listen and respond to parents' requests. Parent-lead initiatives include numeracy and literacy classes and workshops to help parents engage with the school's approach to learning. "We're currently running some ICT workshops for parents, where students get the opportunity to help parents with software they commonly use in school," says Shepherd.



The Role of Hawes Side Students in Parental Engagement

Much of what happens at Hawes Side—in and beyond the classroom—begins with the students. Pupil-led working groups include:

- The Teaching and Learning Group, which researches theories of learning.
- The Podcast Group, called The Poddies, which provides items of news, often directing people to the school blog.
- The Web2 Group, a team of six students who seek out and recommend Web 2.0 applications.
- The News Team, which runs the school blog, an important vehicle for parental engagement.

This student-centred focus is important for parental engagement, because students who are inspired often fire up the same interest in their parents. For example, Learning Logs have been well received. They are an excellent example of how hand-made books can be supported with the use of software such as Microsoft Bing for searching, and Microsoft Office Publisher for making documents. They're filled with cuttings, pull out sections, collections, all focused on a specific topic and built up by students, with the support of proud parents. Logs have been so successful in strengthening the home-school link that the school plans to provide opportunities for parents to work on them at school with their children.



“The moment you actively involve parents with the school, children’s engagement improves.”

Lee Glyn, Deputy Head,
Hawes Side Primary School

Parents Join the ICT Learning Loop

Teaching and learning at Hawes Side is heavily enriched with ICT. Staff are well equipped to ensure that the students have the necessary skills. They're encouraged and taught to use a wide range of publishing, writing, and multimedia software. These skills play a large part in motivating parents who want to keep up with their sons and daughters, and also want to be able to use technology at home more effectively. This has particularly been the case with the use of IT to handle images and video. The Learning Logs play their part here, because although they're paper folders, they invariably show evidence of considerable online research. They also provide an opportunity to exercise ICT publishing and text and image handling skills.

Bradley, aged eight, explains how although his mum and dad help him with his reading, writing, and numeracy, they in turn need support from him with IT. He says: “I've been on Windows Movie Maker and I like making Photo Stories, but my mum doesn't know a lot about computers, so I'll be there to show her how to use it.” Rachel, Bradley's mum, is happy to confirm this, but explains that she's learning fast—although she sometimes has to ask Bradley to slow down.

Rachel, along with other parents, asked the school to run a course for them. Deputy Head Lee Glyn explains: “We have a home-school group that meets to discuss issues, and we often start with some of the work that children are doing with video or audio. One of the parents said, ‘My son came home and he'd done one of those and I wish I could do it.’ So we set up a series of workshops based on Microsoft Photo Story 3 for Windows, a creative tool that we use a lot in school.”

For Rachel, it's been a revelation. “It's switched on a light bulb for me. I use the computer at work and at home for basic stuff, but now I'll use it more. I want to keep up with Bradley. We'll be able to take photographs and make a Photo Story and e-mail it into school. It will keep him in the learning cycle, especially over the summer holiday,” she says.

ICT and Home-School Communication

Hawes Side uses e-mail and text messaging services for routine communication with parents. Text messaging permits easy selection of groups or individuals, and is popular with the parents who find it familiar and informal. They and the children like to receive encouraging “well-done” messages.

The most innovative use of ICT for communication at Hawes Side, however, is the school blog, which began three years ago and continues to develop. The blog began as teacher-driven tool for use with pupils, developed with the SSAT, to encourage lower ability writers by giving them an online publishing presence.

Joint ICT Co-ordinator James Maloney, however, soon extended the blog to become a “front of house” service by using it to publish notices, in conjunction with newsletters hosted on the school Web site. He could see, though, that this wasn't enough. “It worked but it wasn't really embracing the creative use of IT. It was just regurgitating what was available on paper,” says Maloney. The way forward, he concluded, was to give students control of the blog.

A group of children called the News Team took responsibility for content of the blog, gathering news and ideas from other groups and individuals around the school. It became

an instant success and a way for students to engage with each other on a different level. For example, one student who was bright but less socially involved was encouraged to make some blog pages about his interest in the game Warhammer. The rest of the class saw him in a new light and that way he gained respect. “His mother was so happy to see how her child was developing socially,” says Maloney.

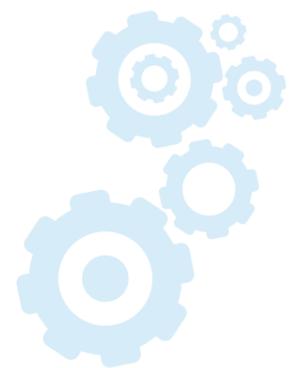
Parent forums were introduced to the blog to encourage discussion among parents and between parents and the school. Parents use the blog mainly to ask questions and pass ideas to the school.

The next stage is to give each class its own blog. This will develop into a true shared space for students, parents, and teachers of each class. Maloney says: “We want to post as much work as possible. That's the way it's going. Children want to share. But they're not always keen to talk about schoolwork at home—when it's up on the class blog, parents can see it for themselves.”

Relieved of the responsibility of providing content across a school-wide blog, the News Team is becoming a support team that helps all the classes with the technical aspects of their blogs. To further educate staff and fellow students, the News Team created a “how to” Microsoft Office PowerPoint presentation, which it shared with neighbouring schools wishing to create and run a school blog.

“It's switched on a light bulb for me. I use the computer at work and at home for basic stuff, but now I'll use it more.”

Rachel, Parent



“Our goal is transparency between the practices in school and out of school.”

James Maloney, Joint ICT Co-ordinator
Hawes Side Primary School



Impact

On Parental Engagement

The school's use of ICT in the curriculum leads parents to seek the same skills so they can work with their children. What's important about this is that it becomes much more than a school delivering adult learning to parents. When parents are comfortable with the relationship they have with the school, they can use it to benefit their children and their own learning. As a result, the home-school-child triangle is strengthened.

On Pupil Achievement

Shepherd believes it's not possible to isolate one single driver of school improvement. But given that parental engagement is recognised as vital to a child's success—and that published test results at Hawes Side have improved from below to above national average during Shepherd's headship—it's reasonable to infer that parental engagement must play its part. He's certainly seen an enormous improvement in children's attitudes to learning. "There's a desire to learn—a real enthusiasm," he says.

Shepherd knows that student writing in particular has improved enormously. A strategy including writing across the curriculum, into every subject, has played its part, as has the opportunity to write for a wider audience that includes parents. "Writing for an audience is always much more motivating than writing in a book for the teacher's eyes only," says Shepherd.

The Future

Online Reporting and the Vision of the Shared Space

Together, the blog and the parent forum are helping to create transparency and increased engagement. Maloney says: "Our goal is to have a shared area online where you can have your say and find information—where there's transparency between the practices in school and out of school, and where teachers and parents can communicate and respond." He wants parents to engage with teachers about their children.

Key messages

- Building good relationships comes before the application of ICT.
- Improved parental engagement offers the best chance of continued school improvement nationally.
- Giving parents online access to their children's work and assignments makes conversations with their children better informed and more supportive.
- Parental engagement is best when it's sold to parents by their children.
- Student voice can grow to become ownership of significant parts of school life. This strengthens the link between home and school.
- Online reporting has to be absorbed into the existing values and practice of the school. ICT can help schools accomplish this.

For more information, please visit:

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<http://uk.partnersinlearningnetwork.com/>

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