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Monkseaton High School: Parental Engagement Case Study



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SCHOOL

Monkseaton High School serves the North Tyneside communities of Whitley Bay, North Shields, and Wallsend. With 760 students aged 13 to 19 years, the school's specialist status is computing, science, and in maths. The school became England's first trust school in 2007, and was rated "good" by Ofsted at its last inspection in December 2008.

Research conducted by Dr. Paul Kelley, Head Teacher at Monkseaton, and other staff makes Monkseaton a leader in the practice of how young people learn. Kelley's expertise has led to many innovative techniques, including the use of spaced learning techniques, where short bursts of learning are interspersed with exercise. The school day is currently organised around the different body rhythms of growing learners. The careful gathering and analysis of data—including measures of health, fitness, sleep patterns, and attitudes towards learning—support this work.



Parental Engagement at Monkseaton

Parental engagement plays a major part in the innovative educational practices at Monkseaton. Ever since he arrived at the school in 1994, Head Teacher Dr. Paul Kelley has worked with his colleagues to establish an effective home-school partnership.

In 2004, the leadership team decided to involve parents more closely in setting the children's individual learning targets. This made it essential to have as many parents as possible coming into school for conversations with teachers. Consultation Day was established, devoting a whole day that is now attended by 90 per cent of parents, and plays a key role in parental engagement at the school.

As a result of this concerted effort, there are now three closely related strands to parental engagement at Monkseaton:

- Face-to-face contact at scheduled consultations and by individual arrangement
- Paper reports, letters, and e-mail communications between teachers and parents
- The school Web site, which leads to the learning platform and the Parent Portal

The Parent Portal

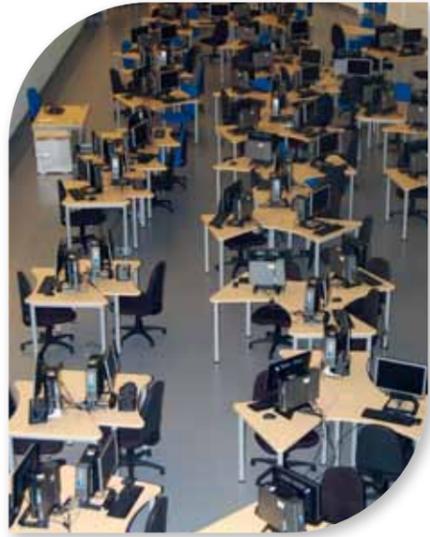
The portal's origins can be traced back to 2003, when the school adopted Microsoft Office SharePoint Portal Server 2003 as an environment for anytime, anywhere collaboration between students and staff. Assistant Head and ICT Lead Simon Thompson says: "SharePoint was the only solution that did what we wanted. We were having more and more lessons in the information and communications technology (ICT) suites and

there was no way of transporting them home. Parents were given password access at that time so they were able to see lesson materials and fully engage with their children's work."

Then, in the second half of 2008, the Parent Portal was developed, making online reporting data from the management information system available to parents. "Parents told us their children could access things online, so why couldn't they?" says Thompson. SharePoint Server made it easy to create a separate portal for parents.

The Parent Portal gives parents a range of information on their children—measuring well-being by helping students self-assess their sleep patterns and attitudes to learning, and providing them with the opportunity to measure and improve their physical fitness. All of this data is available to parents along with the more conventional measures of attendance and learning grades. "Parent focus groups suggested things we hadn't thought of—for example, publishing timetables online so they can see what their children are doing during the day. That's a big hit," says Thompson.

Another parent-friendly feature is the tagging of lesson material so parents can see which subject the lessons refer to and when they are being taught.



Technical Support

At Monkseaton all technical support has been developed in-house. The key technical person—Andrew Johnson—was supported through an Apprenticeship Degree programme as a sixth former at the school, in partnership with the Open University. During his studies he developed the school's IT infrastructure. Now, still in his early twenties, he's an experienced IT developer and network manager, leading a team of four apprentices of his own.

Three-Way Consultation

Thompson emphasises the need to keep staff, parents, and students engaged in the development of the Gateway. "We began by asking staff if they had concerns about workload and the safety of the online medium. Then we consulted students in an online survey about providing parents information online. They were very positive about that. The three-way partnership between staff, parents, and students is very important to the school," says Thompson.

Engaging Parents with the Gateway

The first consultation meeting, at the start of the academic year, provides the opportunity for parents of new students to engage with the Gateway. They sit with an administrator who checks their identity, provides them with a log-on password and gives a brief demonstration of how to use it. "We ask them if they have access at home and whether they're confident about using the Web to get information," says Thompson. "A lot of them are, and the ones who aren't are trained by students (often their own children) who show them how to access the information. It's a really effective system."

Network Manager Andrew Johnson and his team have worked to make the system as user friendly as possible, including visual key performance indicators and the students own self-assessments.

Addressing the Digital Divide

The community Monkseaton serves is generally well equipped with computers and broadband access. The school has played its part by making sure that the Gateway is easy to use and by providing computers where necessary. Says Deputy Head Howard Kemp: "We've just moved into a new building with lots of new computers, and we've made the old computers available to parents." The school offers training for parents

using the Microsoft Digital Literacy Curriculum. And, of course, the students are the main source of ICT support and training for their own parents.

Keeping the Engagement Alive

Opening a Parent Portal inevitably generates interest at the beginning, but if parents find that they're logging on and seeing the same material, they soon lose interest. To address this, Monkseaton, draws attention to the portal with targeted e-mails notifying parents about key updates.

Another way teachers promote interest in the Gateway is by posting up-to-date comments about individual student achievements. Teachers also add brief "well-done" comments—for example, "Good answers in maths today, Gemma"—which are instantly available to parents and students online. This approach motivates students and engages parents and teachers. Thompson says: "Parents may read posts two or three times a week, and can see that the content has been updated. It's been very well received and has a positive impact on parental engagement."

Impact

On Staff Relationships with Parents

Because the learning platform makes it so easy for teachers to share information, their engagement with parents is more professional and informed. Teacher Lizzie Pentland, for example, explains how her role as a form tutor and the home-school partnership are together enhanced by the portal. Pentland points out that she can come to a parent consultation having collected information from teachers across all subject areas about individuals in her tutor group. That considerably strengthens her ability to be a source of counsel and help. And because that same across-the-board information is also available to parents, they, too, come to the table ready to ask good questions. "With this system, parents can work more closely with their children to correct issues," says Pentland.

On Staff Training Needs

Staff Continuing Professional Development (CPD) at Monkseaton is, in fact, carefully planned and carried out. There's a regular morning session each week, but the main thrust, says Thompson, is to personalise CPD to match teachers' varying skill levels.

Kemp emphasises the need for training to help staff be committed to parental engagement. He says: "There were some training needs to get staff on board. A few were nervous about using electronic registration and about being available all the time via e-mail but providing support eliminated many concerns."

Some staff train as coaches through the Microsoft Peer Coaching Programme, and the school implemented a triad system where teachers work in threes to create, test, and share teaching and learning strategies with colleagues.

The key, says Kemp, is leadership: "Without clear vision and leadership, I don't think we'd be where we are today." There's leadership at all levels at Monkseaton, but there's no doubt of the drive and energy coming from Head Teacher Dr. Paul Kelley, who is committed to both parental engagement and the role of ICT. "To have the parent, the child, and the school all pulling together to make education better is what we've dreamed of. It's always been my passion. Now, with ICT it's really happening, and I'm immensely proud of the way that the team here at Monkseaton is helping us to use the technology for the benefit of our students and their families," he says.

On Staff Workload

Kemp refers to the fear of round-the-clock availability. In practice, it doesn't seem to work like that. Monkseaton has always had good parental engagement. In the past, that often meant responding to telephone messages after lessons. Responding to an e-mail message, however, takes less time and the teachers have more control over when and how they respond.

Teachers, as a result, have more time for teaching, more understanding of students' problems, and more support for parents. Students have increased motivation, and parents are more engaged. There's a strong argument, in fact, that teacher workload is considerably reduced by the portal in general, and its role in parental engagement.

On Parent Relationships

The Gateway has been registering a steady increase in use by parents. Thompson says: "Parents say it's improved their dialogue with their children. They can see what their children are doing and immediately engage with them."

One parent is convinced that the support she's having—both face-to-face and through the portal—is helping her daughter stay on track. She says: "I try my best to get involved with the work she does at school, and recently made a joint agreement with her teacher to get support so she can get the grades she's capable of. On my own, I'd never be able to get her to agree."

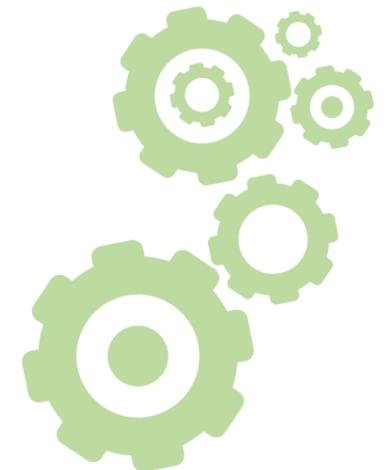
It's increasingly clear, in fact, that as well as basic information about grades and attendance, parents want broader involvement with their children's learning. Taken together, this adds considerable meaning to the face-to-face engagement that Monkseaton High School values so much. Parent Paul Rogerson explains how this works with his son in Year 11. He says: "There are all sorts of supporting materials that he needs. We can get access to tutors and ask questions relating to course work. We can post questions and get the information back easily. It's almost self service."

"Parents say it's improved their dialogue with their children."

Simon Thompson, Assistant Head and ICT Lead, Monkseaton

"Without clear vision and leadership, I don't think we'd be where we are today."

Howard Kemp, Deputy Head, Monkseaton



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Parent and university student Nicola McWilliams, whose daughter has just started Year 9, has high hopes of being able to build a solid relationship with the school to help her daughter. Nicola’s open about her own negative experience of school, and the fact her own parents didn’t pay attention to her progress. Now, though, she’s taken up the Monkseaton parental engagement agenda with enthusiasm, determined that she’ll work with her daughter Charlotte and help her succeed. “They ask for our comments a lot and that’s a nice feeling. Charlotte and I do a lot of work together. Yesterday, she was showing me her points for good work. I’m looking forward to being able to help her. She helps me with my work, and I can help her. So we enjoy those times when we can discuss things,” she says.

Feedback from children shows that they like their parents knowing about their work. Charlotte, in Year 9, feels that the portal makes it easier for her mother to understand her work and to help her with it. “When I do my homework I show my Mum and she checks it over and tells me what to improve on—I like the fact that she understands what I’m like at school,” she says.

On Student Achievement

GCSE results and attendance show steady improvement at Monkseaton. It’s difficult to isolate one factor driving school improvement, but the school’s leadership firmly believes in the essential part played by parental engagement. Parents can see their children’s attendance record and how attendance correlates with achievement—and both attendance and achievement are improving. From 2005 to 2009, the proportion of students attaining five A* to C grades, including English and maths, rose from 32 per cent to 49 per cent. And attendance over the three years to November 2009 increased by 3 per cent.

“Students are happier, too,” says Thompson. “We can measure the improvements through self assessment of attitude to learning.”

On Anytime, Anywhere Learning

When Monkseaton moved to its new building, the school closed for a week. Learning, though, was uninterrupted, thanks to the ability to continue lessons on the learning platform, and the engagement fostered with parents. This could only work smoothly in a climate of existing good home–school relationships, with parents accustomed to being engaged with their children’s learning.

Key Messages

- Leadership has to be committed enough to parental engagement to persuade reluctant staff of its value.
- Staff need training that’s individually tailored to their specific levels of confidence. A “buddy” system can help.
- Students often have more IT knowledge than their parents, so families can work together to overcome challenges.
- The Gateway should be easy to use, with a single point of access.
- Encouraging e-mail contact can make life easier rather than harder—making contact more controlled and manageable. It can help build productive staff–parent relationships.
- Experience shows there’s no “open floodgates” effect.
- Face-to-face contact is still the ideal. Electronic communication makes it more informed and professional.
- It’s necessary to provide good CPD opportunities for technical support staff.
- IT literacy varies enormously from school to school, but students play a big part in helping their parents.
- Students are generally enthusiastic about parents having access to their work.

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