Twynham School:
Parental Engagement
Case Study

Microsoft

fast facts

SCHOOL

Twynham is a state comprehensive school in the coastal town of Christchurch, Dorset, in the United Kingdom with 1,500 students aged from 11 to 18 years. Designated "outstanding" by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), Twynham now has specialist school status as a cutting-edge training school, and a technology and music college.

The school holds a British Educational Communications Technology (BECTA) Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Excellence Award for Learning Beyond the Classroom, a prestigious honour awarded to schools that integrate technology into education in creative ways.

Staff, students, and parents at Twynham use a highly developed Learning Gateway to connect with each other. The Twynham Learning Gateway was introduced in 2003, but the deployment of Microsoft® Office SharePoint® Server 2007 brought a new level of functionality, unleashing the potential not only for "anytime anywhere" learning, but also for greater involvement of supportive families.

ICT EXCELLENCE AWARDS 2008 WINNER

What Does Twynham Mean by "Learning Gateway"?

Twynham Learning Gateway provides a working environment for students and teachers in and out of school. Students can access their schoolwork and the curriculum materials needed to complete tasks at any time, from any location with an Internet connection. Students can also collaborate with each other and with their teachers.

The installation of Office SharePoint Server 2007, has further improved the Learning Gateway, making it more interactive and accessible, starting with separate sections for specific user groups. Each set of users—staff, students, parents, and governors—has a password-protected log-on. This ensures that users can see only what they're permitted to see. For example, generally shared content, such as lesson materials, will be accessible to more users than sensitive data, such as information about individual students.

Although the Twynham Learning Gateway offers extensive content and services, it is essentially one resource that responds differently to each user's needs. For example, the Parent Gateway is the route by which parents visit the portal, accessing only parts of the Learning Gateway that they have permission to view.

Building the Parent Gateway

Long before parental engagement became a national focus, Head Teacher Terry Fish and his colleagues worked to develop a structure of newsletters, consultation meetings, focus groups, and paper reports to help them learn what parents of their students wanted from the school. For Fish, the development of the Parent Gateway is an extension in line with parents' requests, and government legislation on parental access to key pupil performance data.

The initial reason for creating the Parent Gateway was to provide the information parents needed to know about school trips, key dates, and extra-curricular activities. Mike Herrity, Assistant Head Teacher and Director of e-Learning at Twynham, says: "The idea came from the parents themselves. We held parents'

focus groups for six months, talking about the key things they wanted. Relations have always been good here. Parents value the school, and we've always had questions from home— parents asking 'how can I help, how can I really know what my children are doing so I can support them?'"

The partnership between Herrity, who shares Fish's commitment to parental engagement, and ICT Manager Dave Coleman has been crucial to the development of the Learning Gateway. Together with teachers and technicians, they've developed the Learning Gateway to the point where it has 3,000 users, and 80 per cent of parents have log-on access. How, though, has this level of parental engagement been achieved?
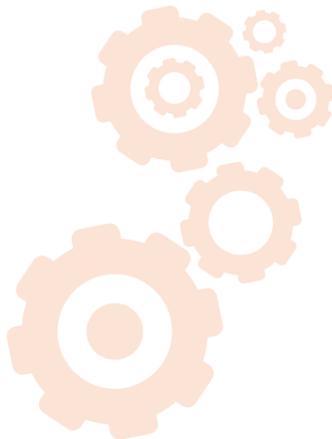
Engaging Parents with the Learning Gateway

The growth process was slow at first, and involved striking a balance between providing a simple interface, yet giving parents all the information they needed. Herrity says: "We worked with the parent group on what they wanted. We didn't want to overburden them." According to Herrity, it was necessary, "to initially work with the early adopters—that's far more effective than forcing everyone to use it from day one."

At each stage of development, Herrity and his team got feedback from a parent focus group and staff e-learning group. And, even now, the way in which parents use the Learning Gateway is constantly monitored. Introducing new features, and adjusting existing ones, is a continuing process. Fish says: "It's a constant dialogue. Sometimes we're asked to extend functionality, and we have to say, 'It's possible, but technically difficult, so we try to build it into future development.' Generally, people understand that."

Tracking parents' use of the Learning Gateway produced a surprising conclusion. Although parents obviously check on grades and progress, they spend a lot more time than was expected looking at the resources that their children are using. "They are using it to become better informed and support their children more effectively," says Fish. Herrity sees this as the, "removal of the vacuum that exists when children go home and parents don't know what they've been doing in school."

Throughout this process, the school has offered training for parents, with demonstrations at parents' evenings, focused workshop evenings, and a telephone helpline.

While learning resources, newsletters, and general information can be open to parents, access to a child's personal data, grades, and attendance records needs a high level of password protection. At Twynham, this meant careful testing, with a limited group of parents all closely connected to the school. Passwords are provided during face-to-face meetings at the regular parent consultations.

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>
> Mike Herrity, Assistant Head Teacher and Director of e-Learning, Twynham School

The Twynham Parent Gateway

The Twynham solution goes much further than just providing the statutory right of access to student performance and attendance data. From the Parent Gateway homepage, there's access to:

- Key details for all parents and carers, including notices, letters, newsletters, and audio and video material.
- A range of multimedia resources, including audio and video files as well as rich media Web applications, Microsoft Office PowerPoint® presentations, and other documents.
- Curriculum materials that students use through the Student Gateway. This includes a Revision Gateway, which helps parents and children select their GCSE options, as well as providing revision material.
- A section called My Child, which provides a link to children's online reporting pages, with details of attendance, grades, and targets.

Feedback from parent groups has driven—and continues to drive—the features and functionality of the Parent Gateway.

Parents' Use of the Learning Gateway

It's easy for parents to use the Learning Gateway to see assessment and attendance data, and they certainly do that, particularly when there's a specific issue. However, the school also encourages a broader approach, where parents and carers assess the general picture of their child's progress over time. Parents do this by taking an interest in their children's use of the Learning Gateway at home and by logging on to the Learning Gateway themselves. Staff and parents say that both approaches have a beneficial effect on parent–child relationships. Teenagers may often be reluctant to talk to their parents about what they've been doing in class—giving parents an alternative, reliable route to this information reduces tension in the family.

David Hole, father of Charlie in Year 12, says: "It gives me the ability to start a conversation with Charlie in a way that isn't nagging. And when he's done particularly well, he's keen to show me."

Martin Wassall, parent of a sixth former, agrees: "Being aware of exactly what they are going through makes family life easier. When I was at school, there was a separateness—parents were only involved on parents' evening, rather than by engaging day by day." But he was unsure of the Learning Gateway at first. "When my daughter Jo started to use it, I wasn't sure what it could do and what the benefits were, but now, with my younger daughter Katey, we use it much more naturally. When options time comes around, because we've had some experience using the system already, we'll be much more confident. I think our expectations are being raised," he says.

Twynham maintains and values its regular parents' consultation evenings. However, they're considerably more productive now that parents can arrive armed with information and questions. The parent–teacher consultation can focus on learning plans, assessment grades, and attendance issues—all of which the parent has a chance to study in advance. Hole says: "Because you can view everything online, there should be no surprises when you go to the meeting."

The Students' Perspectives

Wassall speaks of the "separateness" he experienced between home and school life when he was a schoolboy. Perhaps that divide—a sense of privacy—is something that students miss, now that the Learning Gateway brings school into the home? In fact, Fish disagrees: "This generation is growing up in an environment where they share so much—Facebook, photographs, communicating with mobile technology. So, as with any parent–child relationship, they manage it the best way that they can, and probably to their own benefit."

The students themselves seem to reinforce this view. Sarah, in Year 13, says: "My parents see the work I do through my reports, what I tell them, and through the Gateway. They look at my attitude to learning and if they think there's a problem they try to help and encourage me. My mum is brilliant with that."

Martin's daughter, Jo, who's in Year 10, found that using the GCSE options section of the Learning Gateway, together with her parents, meant that they could agree on what was best for her. She says: "They really enjoyed using the portal, helping me weigh things up. My mum was against one of my choices of subject, but using the portal encouraged us to talk about it and she realised that I'd enjoy it and it would benefit me."

The Learning Gateway and GCSE Option Choices

In their summer term, Year 9 students at Twynham—together with their parents and teachers—choose optional subjects for their external examination studies in Years 10 and 11.

What makes the Year 9 option choice system particularly challenging is that some of the courses on offer will be new to the students—business studies, for example, starts in Year 10, as do several vocational courses. Parents and students also need to understand the structure of learning "pathways" if they're to make good choices. As a result, there's always a risk that a student will want to change to a different option after the course has started.

As a result, schools have to work hard to make sure that option choices are well informed. At Twynham, in the past, the information was provided through a combination of leaflets, presentations, open evenings, and one-to-one consultations. Even so, some Twynham students ended up in difficulty. Assistant Head Teacher Rob Palmer, who's responsible for the 14 to 19 year age range, says: "We often found that at the beginning of Year 10 some students wanted to change course because the subject they chose wasn't what they thought it was."

In fact, up to 10 per cent of students were asking to change their options, introducing delay, worry, and uncertainty that could affect their final performance. The answer was to build a section of the Learning Gateway specifically for option choices. There's video coverage of teachers and students talking about courses, sample lessons, and a continuous reminder of key dates for making choices. There's a strong element of students talking to students—giving their impressions and experiences, and the reasons for their own decisions.

This area of the site is highly interactive. For example, when students have face-to-face interviews in school about their choices, the results, with any important notes, are fed back to the Web site for parents to log on and review. They then have the chance to e-mail the school with further questions.

Wassall describes using the options section of the Learning Gateway with his daughter. Like many parents, the GCSE structure of periodic coursework and interim exams was new to him and the Learning Gateway filled the knowledge gap. He says: "We looked together at the Learning Gateway and talked about it with her—asking questions such as, 'Where does this lead you, what doors would it open?' The portal offered information answering these questions, 'This is what the course work is, this is the exam structure, this is what you'll cover, this is how it will pan out—is this what you want to be?'"

Palmer is delighted with the result. He says: "We've measured the success by the number of students wanting to change course in Year 10. It's gone down from 10 two years ago, to none this year. And we know the Web site's being used more and more because we used to give out 230 information brochures, but now we give out only 20 brochures—everyone else is using the Web site. And the feedback from parents has been extremely positive."
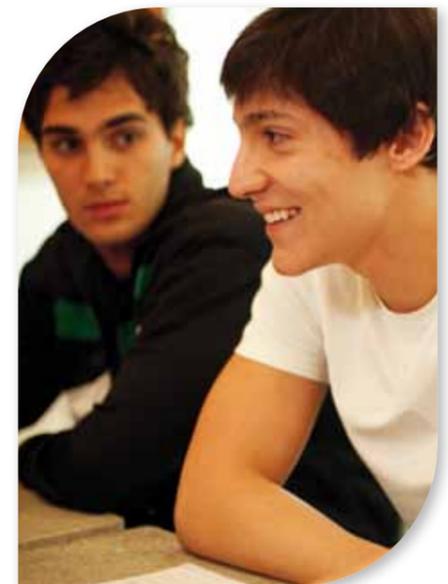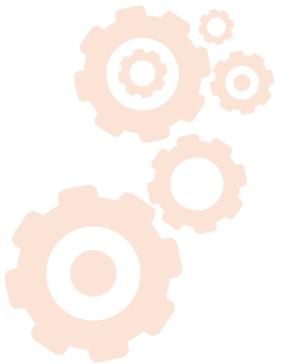
Impact

Twynham's examination results have improved steadily in recent years, and are now well above the national average. Results in 2009—both at GCSE and A Level—were the highest in the school's history. Attendance is also above average, and exclusions have shown a dramatic decline in recent years.

It's clearly not easy to isolate one factor in this improvement. However, staff are in no doubt that the combined sense of purpose supported by the Learning Gateway plays a major part.

On Parental Attitudes

Parents are enthusiastic about the insight into their children's learning made possible by the Parent Gateway. A good measure of this is seen in Twynham's most recent inspection report. The OFSTED inspection process involves sending a standard questionnaire to parents. Both the level and nature of responses vary markedly from school to school, and is an important indicator of the general health of the school. The published OFSTED report on Twynham says: "The views of students, parents, and others involved with the school are actively sought. The vast majority of the parents commented very positively in response to the questionnaire."

The 'W' Word

As the Learning Gateway develops, it increases the amount of communication among staff, students, and parents. Does this affect staff workload? The answer is not straight forward. Learning Support Co-ordinator Karen Dadds says: "The portal has changed parental expectations. Because we've

made ourselves available, they feel they have the right to ask a wide range of questions, and that can be demanding."

But Herrity doesn't believe this will increase teacher workload: "We haven't experienced the opening of the floodgates that people feared. For one thing, Terry Fish is determined it won't happen." The few parents thought likely to send a large number of email messages are, he believes, the ones who'd be sending lots of letters anyway. Also, teachers point out that answering e-mails rather than listening to phone messages and returning calls at the end of the school day, means that they can manage their time more effectively.

The Future

Herrity and the ICT staff see the potential of Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2010 to add to the functionality of the Learning Gateway. There's work going on, too, on the possibilities of mobile technology. The school's testing a greater use of netbooks, and there's a reduction in the provision of fixed workstations.

For parental engagement, there's a plan to make it possible to send concern notes and praise e-postcards directly from class teachers to parents. Previously, school policy has been that messages regarding behaviour come from middle and senior leadership, not directly from class teachers. This will be a change of policy—in a sense, loosening management control.

Conclusion

Fish says: "Throughout all my years of teaching, I've seen that if parental support isn't there, the job is much harder. If that support exists, the students can't lose. And there's a whole generation of research that shows it's important that children are guided, helped, and supported by a partnership of school, home and parents—not simply told what to do."
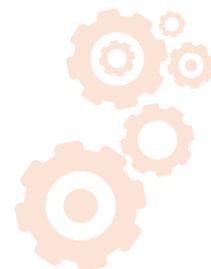
Key Messages

- Each school is different.
- Audit existing home–school relations and make sure what you already have is working well. ICT works best when it enhances and enriches good home–school relationships.
- Don't expect online engagement to replace face-to-face contact. Twynham has the same number of parent consultation meetings as before, but each contact is now more efficient, better informed and less likely to be stressful.
- You'll rightly assume that parents will want access to student performance data, but the best value comes from engaging them in a broader understanding of what and how their children are learning.
- Parents say that when they can see and understand their children's work, the relationship with them is less anxious and confrontational.
- Twynham found it best to work with early adopters among both staff and parents, allowing the project to grow from there, rather than trying to engage everyone from the start.
- Plan the content and organisation of the Learning Gateway—Herrity calls it "the taxonomy"—in the knowledge that demand on it will probably grow more quickly than anyone thinks.
- Two of the most replicable and effective parts of Twynham's Learning Gateway are those dealing with GCSE option choices and academic mentoring of "marginal" GCSE students.
- Providing parents with e-mail access to staff doesn't produce a flood of e-mail messages— parents are busy people too—and the points raised are helpful to both sides.
- An effective ICT team, with a senior leadership team member in charge and an eye to future planning, is key to the process.
- Senior leaders needn't be technical experts, but they should demonstrate commitment to the value of open inclusive communication in general, of parental engagement in particular, and of the role of ICT in the process.

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