

Real-time rapport

Taking advantage of the internet's potential to provide parents with their child's performance at school.



Parental pressure

The Government's deadline on introducing real-time reporting is one incentive for schools to reach out to parents but the demand is building from parents themselves.

As Steve Jackson points out, "We are at a significant watershed because as soon as some schools start offering these services to parents, then everyone will want it.

As people become ever more used to keeping track of their lives online, doing their banking, shopping and socialising in cyberspace, it is no great leap for them to expect to follow their child's education on the web. As Mark Leighton points out, "A number of our parents are almost expecting to be able to do this, they know the technology is out there and they are not surprised when they find the school is starting to implement this. It was on the cards as far as some of them were concerned."

"The more that parents know about their child's engagement in school from academic progress through to participation in extra curricular activity, the more success that child is likely to achieve."

Steve Jackson, Headteacher, The Blue School



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The internet has most certainly changed the way we do things. If we need to send flowers to a loved one, we go online and if we want to look up old school friends, then Facebook or Friends Reunited are far more reliable tools than our own address book. How much are schools truly taking advantage of the internet's potential and the access that many parents have to it?

Parents can check the progress of their money at their bank day or night but may only receive one report a year on the academic progress of their most precious asset, their children.

The benefits of communicating

All this is set to change. By September 2008, the Government expects all secondary schools to provide information to parents covering achievement, attendance, behaviour and special needs at least once a term. By September 2010, all secondary schools will need to offer parents real-time access to this information (the deadline for primary schools is 2012).

The benefits of improving communication between parents and schools should not be underplayed. Research has shown that parental involvement in a child's schooling between ages 7 and 16 is a more powerful force than family background, size of family and level of parental education.*

There is certainly evidence that many parents want to become more involved with their children's education. According to the Parents' Involvement in Children's Education survey (2007), 57% claim they would like to be updated

termly or more often and 79% of parents claimed they would find web access to reports on their child appealing.

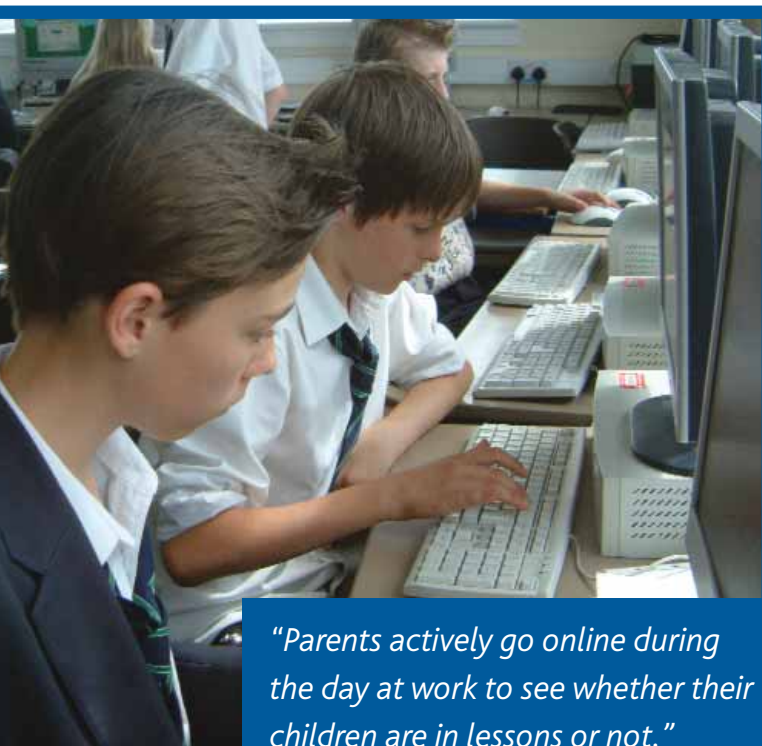
This is certainly the experience of Mark Leighton, ICT Director at Blatchington Mill School and Sixth Form College in Hove, East Sussex, who has developed a Parents' Portal. "Part of the reason for setting the Portal up was in response to parents in the first place," he says.

"About two years ago, we were getting feedback from parents along the lines of, "When my child was in primary school, we knew what was going on and we talked to the teachers often. Now our children are at secondary school it has all gone much quieter". So we thought, if we can start putting more information online relating to their children then it would involve parents more in the school community."

Blatchington Mill and The Blue School

What parents want

Blatchington Mill's parents' site has been up and running since September 2007 and parents have to opt into it by sending the school an email asking for an application form. The take-up of the service has been phenomenal. "Since we started to sign parents up to the service in January almost half of them have chosen to come on board – around 1500," says Leighton.



"Parents actively go online during the day at work to see whether their children are in lessons or not."

Mark Leighton, ICT Director, Blatchington Mill School

The school uses SIMS Learning Gateway technology from Capita which allows parents to view carefully selected information live from the school's management information system (MIS). This saves the school having to import data into the site.

Of the information available through the SIMS Learning Gateway, attendance information is popular. "Parents actively go online during the day at work to see whether their children are in lessons or not."

"What we find is a great comfort to parents is that quite often a child comes in late – with their parent's knowledge – and the parent can check that they went into the second or third lesson of the morning as planned," says Leighton.

Announcements regarding events for pupils are also useful for parents and the school has created its own bespoke system for displaying homework diaries that is frequently visited.

All the teachers at Blatchington Mill were issued with laptops three years ago and they enter the registers online every lesson. The attendance information is available online in real-time.

The Blue School in Somerset also uses the SIMS Learning Gateway. Every classroom has at least one dedicated PC and teaching staff who operate outside classrooms are issued with PDAs. "We have wireless coverage in the Drama Studios, Sports Halls and changing rooms, so teachers can use PDAs to access the school network," says Steve Jackson, the head teacher.

Preparing for real-time reports

Both schools agree that presenting reports online is one of the biggest advantages of the system, although there is work to be done in this area so that the reports are presented to parents in terms that they understand. "We have all the reports and profiles online for students so parents can see those. They remain on the site so parents can view them historically and see progress," says Leighton. "But as a school, we need to work on reducing the amount of teacher-speak we currently use in reports so that parents can understand the information more easily."

The Blue School has done a lot of preparatory work in developing a progress reporting system using the MIS and staff enter the pupil grades online. "We've all experienced queuing to use school computers when report deadlines loom. This doesn't reduce workload but it provides an opportunity to fit work around other commitments. It's just a little more flexibility which helps in achieving improved work life balance," says Jackson.

"We have gone back to what we call 'skinny' reports," he adds. "These we generate from the data available, with a target for every student which is easily understood by parents. We simply say that the student is working above target, on target or below target. If it is below, we request an appointment with the parents." The simplified nature of the reports means that they can be produced termly and although currently issued in paper format from September they will be made available to parents online.

Meeting the deadline

For both Blatchington Mill and The Blue School, a high percentage of their pupils and parents have access to broadband and computers at home. The schools recognise that for the moment, online communication, although extremely important, will be one additional method of reaching parents rather than a complete replacement of traditional methods.

"I think we are in quite a fortunate position in that we are ahead of the game. We set this up quite a long time ago and our parents are demanding this information," says Leighton.

He imagines a day when he will be able to integrate other schools in his area to the Blatchington Mill Learning Gateway. "We have some quite big primaries here who feed into us and it's not a big leap to have them on the same system. We could have our students interacting with younger students on learning and have staff interacting on teaching," he says. The school has already set up discussion boards so that parents can communicate with each other outside of school and for parents to talk to school governors. "It's about creating a community," he says. "The more we can draw the parents in and integrate them into school life, I think the better it will be for everybody," he adds.

"The more that parents know about their child's engagement in school from academic progress through to participation in extra curricular activity, the more success that child is likely to achieve," agrees Steve Jackson. "I think there are a whole host of things we can share with parents. The attendance technology could be used to monitor a student's punctuality and share that with parents. And we are already using a system that allows parents to pay for a range of school services online, using a credit card."



Blatchington Mill student, staff and parent portal



Blatchington Mill parent portal

"The significant difference at The Blue School is that staff can access the SIMS Learning Gateway from any PC with internet access. When preparing reports many staff now choose to carry out this work at home."

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