

Lines of communication



Doug Dickinson explores the growing importance of ICT to parental engagement in school life...



What did you do at school today?" is one of the first questions asked in homes all over the world as children return from a hard day at the school-face. The usual response is a grunt, a withering look, or at best a single word answer that implies "Please..." Maybe that's a cliché, but it highlights a serious issue: how do parents find out what happens in school on a global level, on an academic level and, more importantly to most, on a personalised level? How do schools let them know what they want to know in a way that makes sense to them, and how do parents respond to the information? To use a catch-all term, it's all about parental engagement.

Encouraging parental engagement in children's education should be a priority for schools, not just to meet governmental

expectations but because it is in the interests of all concerned. It's worth noting here that there is often confusion between reporting and engagement – just passing on information does not mean that anyone is engaged; the process of engagement being, hopefully, multi-faceted and including the children in a key role.

Currently (the arrival of a new government might bring changes) there is a directive which states that, by September 2010, all secondary schools should be reporting online throughout the year, in 'real time', on attendance and behaviour (both positive and challenging), progress and attainment, and special needs. All primary schools are expected to achieve the same goal by 2012. What's more, schools were expected to have begun working towards this from September 2008 (online, 'real time' reporting, that is, not written reports, letters home, newsletters, parent evenings and the like; I think this is an 'as well as', not an 'instead of').

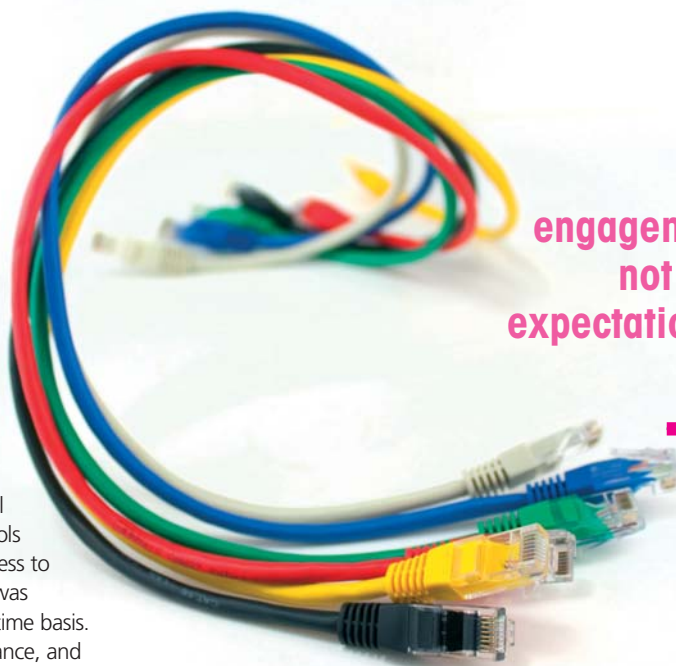
The mandate to front and develop this was in the hands of Becta (British Educational Communications and Technology Agency). Its aim was to make it easier for parents to keep in touch with their children's education without adding greatly to the burden on schools and teachers, and the end goal was to integrate all online reporting into the virtual learning environments of schools so that parents could have access to the information that they felt was important to them on an any-time basis. What will happen to this guidance, and where the push will come from for implementation, only time will tell.

Harnessing technology

So what are schools doing to support these ideas, and what technologies are available for them to use? (Although technology is the focus of this article, the excellent 'soft' engagements of parents helping in school plays and concerts, visits, use of parent 'experts' open days etc. should not be forgotten, obviously.)

It's important to bear in the mind that, before the means, there has to be a buy-in by all concerned. Ownership of the ideas, and the actions that will implement the ideas, needs to come from the community for them to be sustainable. With that caveat in place, there are several ways in which ICT can be harnessed to improve parental engagement.

Perhaps the ideal solution, making collaborative, negotiated use of their learning



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section of our parent population was represented. Parents learnt how to use the platform and then decided what information would be useful to them. Once the platform was created, the same parents introduced it at an opening launch and then led additional parent workshops to coach other parents in 'how to use the learning platform'.

"Parents throughout the school access the platform with growing numbers each term. There is time planned for regular evaluation by the working party of parents – they ask other parents for their views and redesign the platform to suit the needs of those people who are going to use it: the parents themselves. In order for the parent population to engage, parents need to be confident and feel empowered. When the process has involved parents, rather than if they feel that it is something that has been done to them, more will take up the offer of its use."

Onto site, into minds

When it comes to utilising ICT to foster engagement, the school website is a sensible place to start, as it has long been an important vehicle for passing on information to parents and other interested parties. Today, many school sites provide far more than the basic

platforms enables schools to inform, engage with and empower parents in equal measures. Kim Neville, headteacher of Heath School in North Derbyshire, describes how such a system can work:

"The focus of parental engagement in ICT for 2009–2010 has been through the introduction of the Kaleidos Learning Platform. We wanted it to be useful to and used by parents, as well as a learning tool for pupils. However, we knew that engagement by parents would be slow. We planned, therefore, to engage parents from its first introductions: to empower them, give them ownership of the platform and so create a shared learning experience so that they would be equipped with both the skills and the confidence to use the platform at home.

"A parents group was set up, facilitated by the ICT co-ordinator. Parents were invited to join and choices were made so that a cross

Stay in touch

TREVOR WRIGHT, HEADTEACHER, TUGBY PRIMARY SCHOOL, LEICESTERSHIRE, HIGHLIGHTS THE IMPORTANCE OF TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION...

"We are a small village school, but very few of our children live in the immediate village. It's important to us that we keep our parents informed but equally important that they can talk to us easily. It has to be a two-way communication.

"We share information, newsletters, events and successes on the school's website, but for immediacy we will send the newsletter and other information by e-mail to parents. We have a dedicated address for this and we actively encouraged the parents to use this in return. Messages are read at the start of the day and then as they arrive. As with any school communication, messages are wide ranging – about absences, dental appointments etc., requesting confirmation of school events, lost property, response to the news letters, concerns about their child or congratulating on successes. Some are easily responded to by the office, but others are passed on to me for a personal response or to arrange a face-to-face meeting.

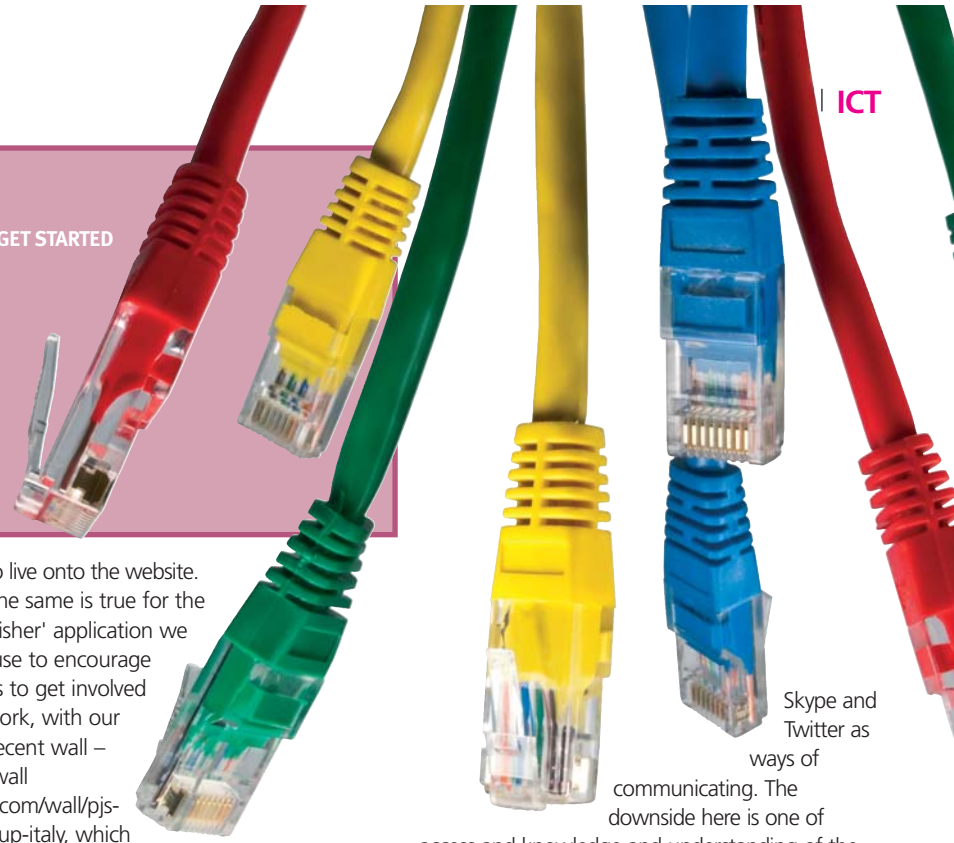
"Parents are now able to communicate with us at any time, day or night; not just when the school is open but when they are able to and need to. For a small school this enables us to be more efficient in our communications and relationships with parents, and most importantly resolve any worries and issues for parents quickly."



Words of Advice

WANT TO TAKE THE ICT ROUTE TO PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT? GET STARTED WITH THESE TOP TIPS...

- Make sure everyone knows what is going on
- Just do it – it doesn't have to be exactly right to begin with
- Get the children involved
- Ask for ideas and try them
- Make sure that there will be some benefit from the action
- Have a vision but take small steps towards it
- Remember your setting is your setting – personalise
- Define the ideas together with all interested parties



contact details and term dates, publishing, for example class curriculum details, diaries and celebrations of success.

The website of Porchester Junior School in Nottingham (www.porchester.notts.sch.uk) is an excellent example of an informational site inside a collaborative portal, as it utilises the power of a website with the combined and protected functionality of a learning platform. Simon Widdowson, ICT subject leader at Porchester, explains the school's policy:

"We encourage parental contributions to the articles we add to the website. When we redesigned our site we wanted to ensure that not only could all staff post information quickly and easily for parents to see, but that parents would be able to respond to what we had added just as quickly and easily. We opted for a website that was built on a blogging platform, and as a result our website commenting system has worked really well, with pupils, parents and friends of the school regularly leaving us comments and thoughts about what has been learnt, or events that have taken place, in school.

Naturally, for the safety of our pupils, all comments are held for moderation before

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they go live onto the website.

"The same is true for the 'Wallwisher' application we often use to encourage parents to get involved with work, with our most recent wall – www.wallwisher.com/wall/pjs-worldcup-italy, which is helping us with research about Italy for a World Cup project – proving very popular."

Engagement on the go

Porchester was one of the first schools to have its own iPhone/iPad app and to offer a selection of ways of accessing the school site away from the home, and the proliferation of mobile technology has certainly opened up many opportunities for communication – both school-to-home and home-to-school.

Mobile phone technology can work both

ways – parents can contact schools on a specific number and schools can text or speak to parents. Schools often use these technologies for simple things (to begin with) such as notification of closure or health problems, but when the technology is embedded then real communication takes place.

Some schools take the Web 2.0 developments further using Facebook pages,

Skype and Twitter as ways of communicating. The downside here is one of access and knowledge and understanding of the technologies, and such a solution could become special and discriminative if it is not seen as part of an overall engagement strategy.

It's important, however, that whatever the communication method adopted it should be appropriate to the particular school setting and in keeping with the aims and ethos of the school. Again – communication should not merely be a delivery mechanism for information but should be the catalyst that opens a true, two-way dialogue.

Finally, there isn't a right answer to how to engage; there is just a right reason to want to do so. Parents want to know about their children and schools should want to let them know, so that they can help and support each other to get the best out of the systems for all young people.

Find out more

HEAD ONLINE FOR DETAILS ABOUT THE ISSUES AND ICT SOLUTIONS DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE...

The Kaleidos Learning Platform comprises a range of products and services that together form RM's learning platform or Managed Learning Environment. It offers an array of teaching resources, a web-based education portal and user-friendly management functionality.
www.rm.com/generic.asp?cref=GP1559452&SrcURL=/kaleidos

Wallwisher is an intuitive notice board maker that provides a fun and functional means of communicating with people online.
www.wallwisher.com

Keep Kids Safe offer a parental engagement solution for reporting unauthorised absence. The system allows schools to send important messages to parents instantly via text, voice or email.
www.keepkidssafe.co.uk

