

Digital Technologies - Primary Case Study B

Linking Home & School

School Context

Beech NS is rural primary school with 5 teachers, situated in the west of Ireland. There are 4 mainstream teachers, 1 Special Education Needs teachers, 2 Inclusion Support Assistants (ISAs) and a part-time school secretary. The principal of the school teaches 5th and 6th class.

The home-school link was primarily maintained by the SEN teacher up until recently, as they would be communicating with parents/ guardians of the children they supported via a home-school notebook in which notes to be written back and forth, generally documenting school activities and instructions for homework. The school had every parent's contact details (including mobile number) if they wished to contact them directly. Parents were also contactable via text message for urgent messages/school alerts.

Approach to Developing Increased Home-School Linkage

Following feedback at parent-teacher meetings and informally, it became apparent that parents would like to know more about what is going on in the school. The staff also felt that this was important and they wished to become more proficient in using digital technologies to communicate general school events to the parent body. They decided to take action. The principal put this on their next staff meeting agenda and, as a whole staff, they discussed ways in which they could reach out to the parents to let them know about what is going on in the school more regularly. A number of options were discussed in this regard and two key actions were decided upon;

1. To create a bi-termly digital newsletter
2. To use the text messaging feature of their data management software package.

Creating the Digital Newsletter:

Importantly, the staff discussed what digital tools they were utilising already that could be used to create their newsletter. All of the teachers and the principal had common email accounts linked to their schools website, www.beechns.ie. and so they were using the associated platform features (such as shared documents, shared spreadsheet files, etc) to collaborate online. They had recently just shared the school's Gaeilge plan on their online platform and were each able to contribute to the current document in their own time, individually and collectively, to update the plan. They felt that a similar process could be adopted to co-create a bi-termly newsletter. Importantly, they could also access this file from any computer in the school so that the pupils could also contribute to the online publication. They decided that it was important to include lots of visuals in their bi-termly newsletter so they sent a permission slip home to the parents for this purpose and updated their Acceptable Usage Policy to reflect this development also. With the necessary steps taken, they then set about creating a newsletter in which each class reflected on recent events, parents could be notified of upcoming events and important local information could also be disseminated. The 5th and 6th class pupils were assigned the role of newsletter 'Editors' and proofed the publication. Once the necessary editing was complete, the newsletter was emailed to each parent in the school community.

Using a Text Messaging Service Linked to their Data Management Software Package:

The school also used a data management software package that allowed them to digitise the school roll, create pupil profiles and communicate internally. A feature of this software also allowed the school to send texts to parents if required. The staff felt that this would be an effective way to remind parents of upcoming school closures and of other very important or pressing information that may not necessarily be included in their newsletter. The principal agreed to pay for the use of this communication service on a trail basis.

Impact of Initiatives

The teachers in the school felt that the newsletter was very effective in creating and maintaining home-school links, allowing the parents to see what was happening regularly in

the school and thus involving them more so than before. The parents responded very well to the increased communication also. Feedback to the principal and teachers has been resoundingly positive. Parents have emailed the school secretary to tell her how great it is to see what is happening in the school and have passed on this sentiment in person to the teachers and principal in a formal capacity also. The pupils also benefitted from the process as it became evident that they were developing digital literacy skills when researching articles, formatting their sections, sourcing copyright-free materials and inserting images and links etc. The pupils' sense of ownership over and pride in their newsletter was also apparent, a feature which motivated all pupils in the classes up along the school to become involved, particularly the 5th and 6th class.

It was also noted that parents appreciated the increased usage of the text messaging service (when appropriate) as they found the reminders invaluable and felt that there was open communication with the school should they need to get in touch regarding any of the content sent out.

Future Plans

In time, the principal and teachers would like to increase the frequency of the newsletter to perhaps monthly and have more of an input from the pupils in creating the content, showcasing their work more prominently (poems, short stories, visual art, etc). The principal also plans to have a section in the newsletter in which she can include important school updates/ links to updated school plans and policies, etc.

The school plan to continue using the SMS messaging service also to communicate with parents regarding more pressing matters, building on the effectiveness experienced to date.

Overall, it was found that the increased communication outlined above has led to increased parental engagement not only in the school, but also in their own childrens' holistic education as they are more informed about their learning through the various school events featured in the online newsletter.