PDST
Professional Development | An tSeirbhís um Fhorbairt
Service for Teachers | Ghairmiúil do Mhúinteoirí

Digital Technologies - Primary Case Study C

Linking Home & School

School Context

Willow NS is a senior primary school situated in a large urban town in the South of Ireland. It caters for pupils from 2nd to 6th class. There are 16 teachers, 4 of whom work in special education needs and an administrative principal in the school. Willow NS have number of children with high and low incidence SEN in the school while also catering for a number of children with English as a second language.

The home-school link was primarily supported via a home-school notebook or 'homework journal' in which notes were written back and forth, generally documenting school activities and instructions for homework. In an effort to communicate to parents the teaching and learning that was happening in the school, the school had initiated the use of SALF (Self Assessment and Learning) folders. The school also 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, combined with feedback from The Parents' Association parents focus group session, it became apparent that the traditional means of homework was becoming problematic for parents, teachers and pupils alike. Parents reported that they were unsure of what was expected from pupils in relation to homework and staff felt it was important to communicate to parents how things were being done in school.

To this end, all stakeholders looked at different options and concluded that effective and meaningful use of digital technologies could be integrated into the process of homework in the school. The school already had a Digital Learning (DL) Team in place who work closely

with the school principal. Google for Education had been set up in the school but was primarily used by staff as storage and to share files and plans with one another. Having explored this further it was decided that the school would create accounts for each pupil. These accounts would be managed by the school, allowing pupils to access Google Classroom. Google Classroom is a free web service, developed by Google for schools, that aims to simplify creating, distributing, and grading assignments in a paperless way.

European Union privacy laws (known as the GDPR) and the Google for Education Terms of Service require that schools get parental consent before using Google for Education with pupils. To facilitate this, Willow NS sent a consent form home for parents to sign up to. The letter used was a variation of: https://support.google.com/a/answer/7391849. The link was also placed on the school's Aladdin platform for parents to access more information in their own time if they wished. The school added this permission letter to the 2nd class enrolment pack for all parents going forward. This ensured that use of the platform was fully compliant with all regulations.

Once permission was granted for children to be on the platform, the DL Team created a managed account for each pupil and their username and password was shared with their parents or guardians. Each teacher created a 'Google Classroom' and each pupil was asked to join using a class code. The DL Team evaluated their school's Digital Plan and decided that the next area of focus would come from Domain 2 of the Teaching and Learning Dimension outlined in the Digital Learning Framework. They selected the following statement of effective practice: "Digital interactions, among pupils and between pupils and teachers, are respectful and positive, and conducive to well-being." The school also updated their AUP in accordance with the introduction of the platform.

Once set up teachers were able to assign homework to pupils using the platform. Clear instruction were given to the pupils and relevant links to resources, websites, and instructional videos were attached. From home pupils accessed their accounts using their username and password and were able to complete the tasks using the platform.

Impact of Initiative

Teacher's reported that they feel parents and guardians have a much better understanding of what is required when it comes to their child's homework. They also reported that the use

of instructional videos either sourced online or created by teachers gave parents a clearer understanding of the way things are done in school especially when it comes to Maths homework. The ease of which teachers can assign differentiated homework to pupils was also reported as major positive of the initiative and the fact that pupils no longer had to copy down homework to their homework journals freed up in class contact time with pupils.

Parents are more aware now of the techniques and activities that children encounter daily in the classroom. They feel that they are more able to support their children with homework and also reported that their children have become more independent while engaging in homework activities. Teacher's use of the comments section on the platform for formative assessment purposes was also seen as a positive for parents as they had more of an understanding of the areas that their children were working well in and areas that they needed to focus on.

Future Plans

Currently Google Classroom is used solely for homework assignments in the school. It is hoped that Google for Education will be used as a tool for Digital Portfolios in the school replacing the SALF folders methods they have been using. They aim for each child to carry a portfolio of work from one class to the next with a focus on the process and possible showcase space developed for end of year presentations. Class teachers also hope to use the 'Stream' section of the platform for class reminders and announcements.

Overall, it was found that the increased communication outlined above has led to increased parental engagement and understanding of homework activities and of what is happening in class.