

PRIMARY

Linking School and Home – Primary

The following are three case studies of how different sized primary schools communicated and worked with parents and pupils remotely.

Case Study A

Located in the Midlands with 16 mainstream teachers, 6 Special Education Needs teachers, 6 inclusion support assistants (ISAs)

Case Study B

Located in the West of Ireland with 4 mainstream teachers, 1 Special Education Needs teacher, 2 inclusion support assistants (ISAs)

Case Study C

Located in an urban setting in the South of Ireland with 12 mainstream teachers, 4 Special Education Needs teachers and an administrative Principal.

Digital Technologies - Primary Case Study A

Linking Home & School

School Context

Rowan NS is primary school with 16 teachers, situated in the midlands of Ireland. There are 19 mainstream teachers, 6 Special Education Needs teachers, 6 Inclusion Support Assistants (ISAs) and an administrative principal in the school. Rowan NS has an ASD class within the school catering for a number of children with varying needs. They also have a number of children with high and low incidence SEN in the school.

The importance for continuous home school communication was recognised by all staff, especially those with SEN. Up until now they had always used a special home/school communication notebook to facilitate this. Entries in the notebook captured records from the school day. Parents were contactable via text message for urgent messages/school alerts.

Approach to Developing Increased Home-School Linkage

Following school support from the PDST Digital Technologies team, the school explored a number of options to increase the use digital technologies for effective home school communication. Staff felt it was important to inform parents of how things were being done in school. The Parents' Association parents held a focus group session on the matter and concluded that wanted to know more of what their children were achieving in school each day.

To this end, all stakeholders looked at different options that could combine home school communication and digital portfolio functions. This approach would allow for record-keeping to be improved, progress to be celebrated in the home and school and a more efficient line of communication from the classroom to the home to be established. After looking at

different systems that could be used, and contacting other schools in similar contexts, it was decided that the school would use the SeeSaw platform as a communication and digital portfolio tool. School leadership ensured that teachers all had access to laptops and a tablet device when needed, allowing them to use the platform effectively.

European Union privacy laws (known as the GDPR) and the Seesaw Terms of Service require that schools get parental consent before using Seesaw with students. To facilitate this, Rowan NS sent a consent form home for parents to sign up to. The letter used was a variation of https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gRkQREpR-r1_O7hUn33nr_CiP-WyvDA0FxDHFv3oxEA/edit. The school also added this permission letter to the Junior Infant 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, SeeSaw was set up in school. The SEN teacher 'set up' a class on the platform, with each child having their own folder in this class. The SEN teacher agreed to have the settings on the platform set to pupils 'only being able to access their own work'. Pupils would use QR codes to sign in to the class, allowing them to upload their work to the class account without needing an email address. This QR code was only visible on the wall of the classroom, and not sent home.

Meanwhile, the teachers sent home family access QR codes and steps to guide them to download the SeeSaw app on their phones/ tablets. Once 'signed into' the app using the QR code, they would be able to see their own child's work and also anything else that the teacher uploaded to their own child's folders. Examples of such records included photo and video footage of the children doing particular tasks in class as well as notes captured during the school day.

Impact of Initiative

Teachers now feel that parents understand much more of what goes on in school each day. Parents are more aware now of the techniques and activities that children encounter and can reply to notes that the teacher uploads. Pupils have been empowered by being able to show their parents what they're doing in school. There is now much more continuity of approach between home and school. Both parents and teachers have been surprised by

how much more pupils are capable of in the different environments of home and school. There has also been an environmental impact, with the teachers reporting less waste of paper/resources as was the case with the traditional reporting approaches.

Future Plans

At the minute the use of SeeSaw has been confined to those children with SEN but now that the school have started to use it they are beginning to use it with all classes. Teachers have seen the number of benefits to having an eportfolio and home-school communication tool in one digital platform. Parents and families are playing a more active, engaged and informed role in their children's education as a result of improved communication.

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 trial 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 benefited 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.

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.