Linking School and Home – Post-Primary

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

Case Study A
A community school in the Midlands with 36 mainstream teachers, 4 Special Education Needs teachers, 3 Inclusion Support Assistants (ISAs).

Case Study B
A rural school in the East with 35 teachers and 5 Inclusion support Assistants (ISAs).

Case Study C
A post-primary school with 36 teachers, five of whom are involved with Special Educational Needs.

Digital Technologies - Post Primary Case Study A

Linking Home & School

School Context

Ash Community School is a post primary school with 40 teachers, situated in the midlands of Ireland. There are 36 mainstream teachers, 4 Special Education Needs teachers, 3 Inclusion Support Assistants (ISAs). Ash Community School has an ASD units 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. 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 contacted via text message for urgent messages/school alerts.

Approach to Developing Increased Home-School Linkage

Following support from the PDST Digital Technologies team, the school explored a number of options to increase the use of 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 held a focus group session on the matter and concluded that they 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 their digital learning platform (G Suite) as a

communication and digital portfolio tool. Up until this point, their digital learning platform had been used for email communication, storage and teacher collaborative planning, with some teachers assigning and receiving homework digitally. School leadership ensured that teachers all had access to laptops and a tablet device when needed, allowing them to use the platform effectively.

Before being able to use their digital learning platform as a digital portfolio, the school needed to review their AUP policy. This was done by the digital learning team in conjunction with the student council and Parent's Association. This AUP was added to the student's journal and a permission letter for photos and videos of the students to be used on their digital learning platform was included for both students and parents to sign. This ensured that use of the platform was fully compliant with all regulations.

It was decided to trial the use of digital portfolios with a TY group. Parents were informed of this at a parents evening and clarification was provided on what this might look like. It was explained to parents that through Google Classroom, they would receive a weekly email from each teacher offering a summary of what their child had been working on that week. The school's digital learning co-ordinator demonstrated how parents might access the showcase space called Sites where their child would upload their best pieces of work and reflect on their progress.

Students had already used the digital learning platform for email communication and homework assignments so training was provided to them in the use of digital portfolios, focusing on the three areas of storage, workspace and showcase. TY teachers were also trained up in the use of digital portfolios and how to generate updates to send to parents.

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. Students 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 students 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

Currently the use of Digital Portfolios has been confined to those students in TY but now that the school has started to use digital portfolios they are beginning to explore using them with all junior classes, as well as the SEN students attached to the ASD unit. Teachers have seen the number of benefits to having a digital portfolio 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 - Post Primary Case Study B

Linking Home & School

School Context

Beech Secondary School is a rural post primary school with a total enrollment of 450 students. 35 teachers, situated in the east of Ireland. It caters for boys and girls who come mainly from the local area. There are 35 teachers and five Inclusion Support Assistants (ISAs).

The home-school links were 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 a mobile number and an email address.

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 the daily business of the school. The staff agreed with this and they wished to become more proficient in using digital technologies to communicate with parents about school events and initiatives. Home school links were added as an agenda item at the next staff meeting. This allowed staff to discuss 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 termly digital newsletter
2. To use social media to showcase school events and initiatives to the wider school community

Creating the Digital Newsletter:

A working group of six teachers was convened to plan the introduction of a digital newsletter. The members of the group met on three occasions to discuss the content, creation and distribution of the newsletter. It was decided that the termly newsletters would focus on a different set of curricular and extracurricular activities in each term. Teachers in specific subject and extracurricular areas were asked to create short entries for the newsletter outlining their recent activities. Where possible, pictures were included with these entries. Two teachers from the working group are responsible for collating this information and creating the newsletter using the school's digital platform. In the last week of each term, a digital copy of the two-page newsletter is distributed to parents' email addresses in PDF format, meaning that it can be read on most digital devices.

Creating Social Media Accounts
The school had previously created a social media account but it was agreed by the staff that it was not being used to its full potential. A working group composed of five teachers and one member of senior leadership was convened to investigate how they could best use social media to improve home school links. The Parents Council were surveyed to find out what kind of information they would like about the activities taking place in the school, as well as the times of the day that they are most likely to engage with social media. Taking this feedback on board, it was decided that regular updates of teaching, learning and assessment activities, as well as extracurricular activities, would be posted to the school's social media account. Four members of the working group took responsibility for posting the content.

Impact of Initiatives

Teachers felt that the newsletter and social media accounts were 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. Parents also responded very well to the increased communication, with members of the Parents Council noting how beneficial it is for parents to gain an insight into both classroom and extracurricular activities their children are engaging in.

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.

Future Plans

Members of school leadership, teachers and parents would like to see continued and expanded use of the termly newsletter and social media accounts. As the social media account now X00 followers, it is clear that there is potential to grow it's popularity. It is also intended to increase student involvement

Digital Technologies - Primary Case Study C

Linking Home & School School

School Context

Oak post-primary school caters for students from 1st year to 6th year. There are 36 teachers, 6 of whom work in special education needs. Oak post-primary school has a number of students taking part in the level 2 learning programme in the school while also catering for a number of students with English as a second language. The home-school link was primarily supported via the 'homework journal' in which notes were written back and forth, generally documenting school activities and instructions for homework. Regular parent-teacher meetings also worked well in terms of communication between teachers and parents. The school also had every parent's contact details if they wished to contact them directly using VSware (enrollment system). 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 students alike. Parents reported that they were unsure of what was expected from students 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 Team (DLT) in place (6 teachers from 6 different subjects). 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 and issue email addresses for each student. These accounts would be managed by the school, allowing students to access Google Classroom. Google Classroom is a free learning platform and virtual learning environment, developed by Google for schools, that aims to simplify creating, distributing, and grading assignments in a paperless way. In terms of GDPR, Oak post-primary school 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 own website for parents to access. The school added this permission letter for all students, including incoming 1st years. This ensured that use of the platform was fully compliant with all regulations. Once permission was granted for students to be on the platform, the DL Team created a managed account for each student. Each teacher created a 'Google Classroom' and each student was asked to join. The DL Team evaluated their school's Digital Plan and saw that it linked with their chosen standard, "Digital interactions, among students and between students 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 using https://www.webwise.ie/aup-2/ as an aid here. Once set up, teachers were able to assign homework to pupils using the platform. Clear instruction was given to the pupils and relevant links to resources, websites, and instructional videos were attached. From home, pupils accessed their accounts and were able to complete the tasks using the platform.

Impact of Initiative

Teacher's reported that they felt parents and guardians had 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. The ease of which teachers can assign differentiated homework to pupils was also reported as major positive of the platform 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 students encounter daily in the classroom. They feel that they are more able to support their students with homework and also reported that their students 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.

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 (sites) as well and looking further into the potential of other features within the assignments part of Gsuite.