Engaging parents

Improving school communications

Managing behaviour and attendance

Making whole-school communications work

Meadowhead School Academy Trust

Background

Meadowhead School Academy Trust is a mixed secondary academy based in Sheffield. There are currently 1,670 students on roll and around 120 teaching staff. Its recent inspection rated Meadowhead as a 'good school' where 'standards continue to rise'.

Meadowhead School has been using SIMS Learning Gateway (SLG) since 2010. On becoming an academy in 2012, Meadowhead moved to a self-hosted version of SLG and also purchased SIMS InTouch. Gary Bragg, the academy's ICT Strategy Manager, has been closely involved with the adoption of the products and using them in their drive to improve communications with parents.

"We previously had an alternative system at the point of becoming an academy and we decided to have everything under the same roof and purchase all SIMS products," says Gary. "We had a system in place for parental communications, but it was only being used by one group of people – our pastoral team. We saw moving to InTouch as a way of spreading out that system across the academy and using it to improve communications."

Engaging parents with SLG

When rolling out SLG in the academy, Gary felt that Meadowhead should run some sessions to help parents understand how to get the most from it. These sessions have proved very popular among parents, as Gary continues: "Every year, we have a progress day where parents and students come into school together. We run sessions in the library showing parents how to log on to SLG and give them the opportunity to answer any questions.

"We've been doing that session for three years now, and last year we had 140 different parents come in to ask for help. On the day that we handed the logins out, we had just short of 400 unique people log in to SLG."

Dealing with low-level behaviour

One way that Meadowhead School is using SLG to engage with parents is by recording low-level behaviour in SIMS. "We have a C3 system. The student's first warning is C1, which is written on the whiteboard; the final warning is a C2 and a C3 is a detention," says Gary. "All we used to put on SIMS was the C3, but now we're recording a lot more.

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>
> Gary Bragg, ICT Strategy Manager, Meadowhead School Academy Trust

"From the register in SIMS, we expect our staff to be adding in low-level behaviour, so if someone is talking in class, or has got the wrong uniform, all of these behaviours are recorded in SIMS."

Gary feels that sharing this information has opened up much more conversation between parents and the academy. "At the last progress day, parents could see all of these behaviours," Gary continues. "This is all due to us having SLG - because we have that information there, we found how useful it was to share with parents. Giving parents more information is really useful to them and has helped change the mentality in the academy."

Sharing homework with students and parents

Meadowhead School is now also using the SIMS homework feature for teachers to record homework that's been set. "Previously, we used to write homework in a planner and now it's recorded in SIMS. It's a simple right click on the register as 'homework'. The teacher fills in when it's set and gives one line of information on what the outcomes of the homework are," says Gary.

"By recording the homework, parents now have visibility of it too. This is now the expected way of recording homework in the academy and we can prove to Ofsted that our teachers are regularly setting homework. We can also filter by department, classes or individual students."

Positive feedback from parents

Gary explains that the feedback from parents has been positive, particularly the wide range of information that parents can access from SLG. "The idea of being able to see that their child is definitely in school at a particular time, what time they got there, whether they were late for that class – parents can see that in real-time," says Gary. "The behaviour element has also been a benefit. We previously wouldn't have contacted home about the low-level behaviour problems and we've had lots of praise about sharing the behaviour information."

Using SIMS InTouch to communicate with parents

Meadowhead School uses the parent communication tool, SIMS InTouch, to send messages to parents and students. The academy uses it for a range of different things, from sending out detentions and exam timetables to general school notifications.

"Because of how SIMS InTouch works, it's easy for us to track what we're doing with it, how many messages we're sending out and who we're sending them to," says Gary. "Because it's also built-in to SIMS and it isn't a separate login or separate system altogether, we've got more people using it than our previous SMS system."

Gary continues: "Our exam officer sends out exam timetables via SIMS InTouch to the students and parents, so they've both got sets. Now we don't have to send out 300 copies of the timetable every year, which has saved us money. There are other things we will now put on our website and send out via InTouch, instead of printing hundreds of letters."

But this doesn't apply to everything – Gary explains that sometimes there are things that make more sense to hand to a student or send to a parent, and the academy makes this decision on a case-by-case basis.

What's next?

When it comes to parental communications, it's clear that Meadowhead School are ahead of the curve with the vast amount of information that they share with the parents. The academy is also looking to go even further and move away from printed reports so that parents can access them online instead.

Gary explains that it's now the mentality of the academy to be entering everything in SIMS: "We've got our training days coming up and included in these are a SIMS reminder session for everyone. It's not just about taking the register - at the point of being on the register, teachers are recording behaviour, achievements and entering homework. Everything has to be done through SIMS."

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