



Schoolcomms



The School Communications System

Schoolcomms is a system that allows the school to communicate with all its members - students, parents and staff, by email, SMS text message and paper

The Minster School in Southwell is a Specialist College for Humanities and Music with 1550 students, covering a large and diverse catchment area. Assistant Head, Richard Pierpoint, describes why the school chose Schoolcomms and how it is working out for them.

"Being a large school on a split site, combined with the demands of the national curriculum, we have very little regular tutor contact with students and few opportunities to gather as a whole school or to even pass notices in class. Effective, quick and reliable communication with students has been a significant challenge for some time and we felt that this was a clear barrier to developing further relationships with parents, something which our parent body had identified as an area that we needed to improve upon.

We were in the market for a product that would enable us to make best possible use of technology, especially email and SMS. In late 2003 we tried to gather parent email addresses through our own website and this proved popular. As a consequence of this response we decided that it would be well worthwhile looking for a commercial product that would allow us to implement a quality solution in a short time. The savings were clear; ridiculous amounts of time spent sealing envelopes, printing on paper that never gets read, giving out multiple notices that only served to confuse the reader, the cost of stamps were all factors. However the keys to any system that we decided to purchase were simplicity, reliability, flexibility and potential to develop the way that we communicate with each other and stakeholders of the school.



Lorraine Bailey and Sue Holden in the office

We chose Schoolcomms as it met the needs criteria that we had set. The support provided by the help desk when we were looking at the product was first class and this has continued to be the case ever since. Other products were available, however the email, SMS and most recently the first day contact attendance features, combined with very helpful management reports, which allow us to see who we need to target for sign up next, really sold the product. The staff at Schoolcomms have always kept us well informed of their plans for further development and they really do want to know what the school requires from the product.

Our initial strategy was to post letters home to students and write articles in our twice termly newsletter – which we post home to almost 2000 people and at great expense!

For a demonstration visit: www.schoolcomms.com



This proved a good start, however sign up peaked after a few days and then drifted. We delivered a presentation to our teaching and support staff focusing on our existing communication systems and Schoolcomms and they were quickly on board. This enabled staff to be able to use the product name with students in an informed way and, crucially it empowered staff to be able to see ways in which the product could be used to help their communication with students.

We needed to offer a system that required opt in. It was not perceived possible to say that everything would only go out through electronic means due to equal opportunities issues and not having the necessary data. A month after having the product launched in school, we decided to set up sessions where all students would be shown how to sign up using their email and SMS details. The idea behind this was to sell the product to the students and give them the skills which they could cascade to their parents when they got home. This has proved to be our most successful strategic move. It has taken a few weeks to get all of our students through, and some real energy from key staff, especially those in the ICT Department who used it as a starter activity in their lessons. Once we had the students' details, it proved easy to remind them about showing parents/carers how to sign up and this has taken off really well.

We are continuing to send home paper reminders to parents and an article about our efforts in the local paper has helped boost interest. We plug the product at parents' evenings and other activities where the school is on show. We expect to have 80% of our parents registered with Schoolcomms by the end of the year.

We decided to make links to the Schoolcomms site from our own site using a specific section set up for EMinster activities. This helps users to navigate to the right section of the Schoolcomms site and also helps remind them of our school website, which is a crucial tool in our communications strategy with the outside world.



Year 10 boys receive the football team selections

We decided that a major culture shift needed to be led from Leadership Group level and our Assistant Head with responsibility for ELearning has provided the drive and much of the energy for the product in school. Having someone who can identify some quick wins for staff, who can support staff who are using the system, is a real bonus. In the crazy climate that schools tend to work in, little time is afforded for thinking outside of the normal routines, even though you know there must be a better system out there somewhere. Once we had identified Schoolcomms as the system for us we knew it would need a push from the top to really make a difference. We started sending out messages about updates to the website, then some letters. We really used it well in conjunction with a Carnival event that the whole school was participating in. The attendance feature implemented in September has given us a daily focus for the system. Once staff saw the reliability of the system and word spread around the parent community, it really has

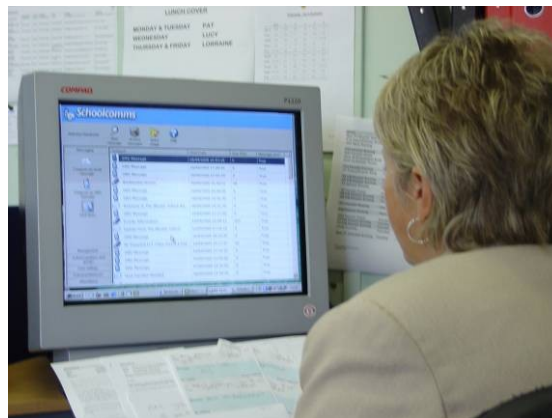


started to be a cultural shift. One teacher has trialled this as a system for emailing cover work to students. This has been a real success, three of the students even did all of the work before the lesson!

Once you reach a critical mass of users then time is certainly saved. A clear communications strategy is needed to make most effective use of the system, so that staff get used to how information is sent out on the Schoolcomms system. This does take a little time and some real energy and direction, however once you get there, then the benefits and savings in time and money really will start to show.

Three days after signing up to Schoolcomms a Y10 student came to see the member of staff who had taken her class through the sign up process. She said, "Sir, you know that text thingy we signed up to the other day, it is a pain as my Dad now knows what is going on all the time".

The attendance feature is a really fantastic tool that will save a massive amount of time and yield quick returns. Our vision with this element of the system is that almost all parents/carers and students will have provided us with SMS or email details in the very near future. We shall then, especially through the use of SMS, be able alert them to any unauthorised absence in very quick time. We have already had some excellent responses from parents/carers with this system.



Sue Holden sends SMS messages for First Day Contact

Those with students who may be regularly late or have poor attendance figures, have been keen to provide us with the necessary contact details. We may start using this system with the students themselves, however we have not done this yet as we want to encourage sign up not put them off!

A parent, who happens to be a teacher herself and whose daughter was missing from school, emailed the school office when she received an SMS alert about her daughter being missing from school. She wrote:

"Thanks for that - hopefully now 'xxxxxxx' is aware that attendance is monitored closely we will be ok!! I am impressed with the process you have in place - I wish the college was this efficient in chasing up my absentee students!!"

Richard Pierpoint, Assistant Head - The Minster School, Southwell