

Abbey Primary School ICT improvement plan – case study

Having already achieved a huge improvement in the fortunes of The Abbey Primary School in Northampton, head teacher **Renuka Popat** is now embarking on phase two of the project – using ICT to enhance learning and teaching...



It's all part of her mission to ensure her pupils are well prepared as learners for the future. "Although they are only young now, we want them to be lifelong learners and to be ready for the heavily digital environments they will encounter at their secondary schools and eventually in the 21st century workplace," she said.

Ultimately Renuka wants her school to be a paperless society: 'It will make us all work smarter, as well as



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helping the environment', she said.

There is some way to go, but little doubt she will get there. Renuka has already achieved a massive turnaround at the school, having taken over the headship – her first

– in 2006 with a big job to do.

Children from the surrounding area typically joined Early Years classes with below average skills and the CVA (contextual value added) was cause for concern at

98.6. Perhaps unsurprisingly it was under subscribed. On top of that, as part of Northamptonshire County Council's reorganisation of its old three tier (first, lower, middle) system to a new primary system, the school was going through major building works and Renuka was based in a mobile cabin in the playground.

However, the job became bigger than she thought when Ofsted inspectors visited for the first time in five years just months after she joined the school and issued a 'notice to improve', highlighting a legacy of inadequate teaching in KS2.

"It was all rather more than I had bargained for," said Renuka. "It felt awful to get that rating, but actually it did help me to move forward. The inspector was very nice and told me that she could see green shoots so I took

it from there.

"At that point I had been teaching for 19 years, latterly as a deputy head and I knew that I needed to shore up the leadership team as quickly as possible, which I did by promoting two senior teachers to become assistant heads.

"Equally high on my agenda was tackling teaching and learning – I hated seeing children coasting along; able children sitting in uninspiring lessons. I was astounded to discover that there were teachers happy to be rated as 'satisfactory'. Happy to be satisfactory? Satisfactory is not a happy word to me!"

The new senior leadership team spent a 'gruelling' year working hard to make the necessary improvements, supported in the basics by the local authority, and when Ofsted inspectors returned a year later, they ranked the school as 'satisfactory'.

"I was pleased, obviously, but I wanted more for us than to be 'satisfactory'," said Renuka. So when



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Northamptonshire local authority set up its Area Improvement Partnership, Renuka was quick to sign up.

The local authority had appointed EdisonLearning, providers of a range of frontline school improvement and educational services in the UK, to work with them as their strategic partner on the Area Improvement Partnership. This was in response to a number of challenges facing Northants schools - the aftermath of the school system reorganisation, the changing demographics of the school population, a large number of schools causing concern, and increasing numbers judged to be failing by external inspections.

"I liked sharing best practice with other schools in the Northants cluster, and it's made a huge difference here," said Renuka. "Everyone here shares the same values and it's reflected throughout the school in the language we use, the attitudes and the behaviour of all the pupils - and the staff."

Subsequent work on the school's learning environment has been key

to its recent success.

Ofsted recognised her efforts when its inspectors returned in July 2012 and raised the school's ranking to 'Good', remarking that 'Pupils achieve well because of good teaching and their own positive attitudes to learning'.

However, the inspectors also

noted that although pupils' ICT skills were good, the school's unreliable equipment had limited the use of ICT to support learning in different subjects. In order to improve further, the school was given the target of providing its pupils with more opportunities to use their ICT skills to 'support their learning in lessons

across the curriculum, by increasing the availability of reliable equipment that can be used in the classroom'.

So, targeting ICT in the school development plan, The Abbey invested in a learning platform, 32 laptops for use throughout the school and various software programmes to enhance teaching and learning. Some of its most popular activities come from Espresso Primary - a cross curricular learning service which combines video clips, multimedia activities, planning tools, printable resources and a 'News Bites' service. In an independent academic evaluation using evidence from over 330 user schools, Lancaster University highlighted three key positive effects of using Espresso in the classroom; the resources encourage deeper and wider learning, that earlier use of Espresso is associated with higher achievement in Key Stage 2 SATs results and that it takes half the time to search, vet and assess a resource on Espresso compared to the internet.



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"Our ICT offering is really paying off for us now", said Renuka. "One of the major benefits is that the children can access the software at home as well as at school, so it's a great way of getting their parents involved to help with learning at home which improves the children's engagement, interest and motivation. For example, with our early readers we are doing a lot of work on phonics and parents have been a great help supporting their work with sounds."

The teaching and support staff are really engaged with ICT as well, planning their lessons to incorporate

online resources to ensure they are used meaningfully at home and at school. They report the increasing use of ICT makes learning more practical and fun.

"It's all skill-based and not treated as a discrete subject," said Renuka. "Although we still have our ICT suite, there are many more lessons involving the laptops being taken into classrooms and used across the curriculum.

"The staff and I also share information using Google Docs on Google Drive so that we can safely access anything from anywhere

and by using the cloud we are not clogging up the school's server."

Next on the agenda is redevelopment of the school website, incorporating links to the software. Before long, Renuka wants all her staff to begin blogging.

"We want to be completely e-literate. The children may be young, but it's certainly never too early – and from the staff's point of view it's never too late either. Teacher's proficiency in ICT can vary and some of the staff have needed more support than others. We've had great success with an ICT skills swap here. Our ICT co-ordinator Emily Price organised us into random pairs and each member of staff shared an ICT skill with their partner. We covered everything from how to download a picture from a digital camera, to using Excel spreadsheets, to preparing some really impressive interactive presentations using Prezi software.

"It was amazing how much we achieved simply by talking to one another and sharing skills and

knowledge for the school's benefit. It worked really well and I would recommend it to any primary school seeking to move ICT higher up on their agenda.

"We now have a clear vision and strategy for ICT and home access that is paying dividends."

While the children may well be the best advert for the school, Renuka can back up her success with hard measures. As well as an improved Ofsted rating, the school's value added score (replacing the CVA measure) is now 100.3, with all children making the required two levels of progress in English and Maths.

Also, The Abbey is now full for the first time; where there were 24 applications for 45 places back in 2006, there are now 60 pupils in two form entry, plus a waiting list. The staff room is full too, with Renuka finding it easier to attract good teachers.

"Best of all I have lots of positive, happy and pleased parents," she said.

