



School Harnesses Portal Technology to Transform Learning and Meet Targets

Overview

Country or Region: United Kingdom

Industry: Education

Customer Profile

Shireland Language College is an inner-city school in Sandwell, England. It was rated as “outstanding” by OfSTED in 2006. Of its 1,200 students, 36 per cent are eligible for free school meals.

Education Rationale

Shireland wanted to develop a learning portal capable of supporting personalised learning and improving parental engagement and be offered to partner schools on a managed-service basis.

Solution

Shireland worked with Microsoft® Gold Certified Partner Teksys to deploy the Microsoft Learning Gateway and develop it to meet additional government requirements.

Benefits

- Schools can meet government requirements.
- Learners receive personalised support.
- Teachers gain time-saving tools.
- Families more engaged with schools.
- Schools can work together to develop a sustainable model.

“One of the most remarkable ICT systems in the country.”

Tony Blair, Prime Minister

In line with targets set by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), schools in the United Kingdom (U.K.) must offer personalised learning spaces to students by 2008 and deliver learning portals to all stakeholders by 2010. They must also help parents engage more closely with school activities by keeping them regularly informed of student progress. Shireland Language College, an inner-city trust school based in the West Midlands, has implemented a Microsoft® Learning Gateway to help meet these targets. Working with Microsoft Gold Certified Partner Teksys, the school also offers the solution as a managed service to other institutions so they can also transform learning and meet the U.K. government’s “Harnessing Technology” and “Transforming Secondary Education” agendas.

Situation

Shireland Language College, located in Sandwell, West Midlands, is one of the first schools in the United Kingdom (U.K.) to begin meeting the challenges set by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as part of its “Harnessing Technology” e-strategy report. This requires schools to use information and communication technologies (ICT) to transform learning and Children’s Services by:

- Offering students personalised learning spaces capable of supporting e-portfolios (online records of achievement) by 2008.
- Delivering sophisticated online learning platforms by 2010.
- Providing Internet-based portals for parents, learners, and educators.

Shireland’s involvement with “Harnessing Technology” dates back to 2002, when it took part in the DfES-funded ICT Test Bed project, which sought to understand how technology could be used to support the government’s wider agenda for education reform. The project paved the way for the current e-strategy agenda and involved three clusters of schools, all in areas of social disadvantage.

TEKSYS

Microsoft Infrastructure Optimisation

“When students submit work, they get feedback almost instantly, when they need it most. This increases motivation and improves student performance.”

Jon Nowicki, Consultant, Shireland Language College

Another objective of the Test Bed project was to help schools work more closely with partner institutions. This helped to shape the DfES “Transforming Secondary Education” agenda, an initiative that requires institutions to work together as school federations that share resources and know-how.

Jon Nowicki, Consultant at Shireland Language College, says: “As a Specialist School, it’s our responsibility to share best practices, lesson plans, and other resources with schools in our federation. This makes a massive difference in situations where we want to help a failing school improve its performance, for example.”

Solution

Once Shireland was recruited to the Test Bed project, the next step was to identify an approach that would support the majority of its goals. Working closely with Microsoft® Gold Certified Partner Teksys, Nowicki and his team implemented a portal based on the Microsoft Learning Gateway that enables teachers, students, and parents to access and share information on secure Web pages. Key features include:

- Individual school e-mail and calendar, which can be synchronised with e-mail on personal computers.
- Personalised spaces within the portal—known as My Sites— where they can view tailored information, add personal profile details, share documents, and interact with other stakeholders.
- An online Virtual Learning Environment to manage learning across the school.
- School address book to improve speed and accuracy of communications.

Each user has additional services that meet their own requirements:

- Teachers can set work for students online, mark multiple-choice tests automatically, and post marked work on a student’s My Site.

They can also access a private staff area—containing document libraries and links to essential resources—and connect seamlessly to the school management information system (MIS). Staff can collaborate at school and departmental levels and enjoy easy access to the student portal to post messages, important calendar dates, and documents for students.

- Students have their own portal that contains announcements, discussion boards, an events calendar, and student planner.
- Parents can use the My Children link to view their child’s homework, timetables, and modules. They can also view information on attendance, assessment, rewards, and sanctions as teachers update school records. Behind the scenes, Learning Gateway uses Web Part technology to connect parents seamlessly with information about their child that is held on disparate systems.

As part of the Test Bed project, Shireland offered Learning Gateway to the nine partner schools on a managed-service basis—running the servers and overall system on their behalf. Now, Shireland supports 60 schools in this way. From a technical perspective, each school can:

- Customise its portal: Partner schools use the built-in content management system to take greater control of their Internet presence, while Shireland can delegate administrative responsibilities to individual schools.
- Support e-portfolios: Ben Saville, Business Manager at Teksys, says: “In the last 12 months, we have used Web Part technology to collate key data from back-end applications, including a school’s MIS. This means individual e-portfolios are automatically maintained.”
- Use an existing MIS: Saville says: “We had to ensure the Shireland Learning Gateway would support the two leading systems—Capita SIMS and Serco Faculty CMIS. We

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Ben Saville, Business Manager,
Teksys

worked with Capita and Serco to ensure that an individual school's learning portal could work in the same way, regardless of which MIS was in use.”

Benefits

Shireland's ICT strategy has helped the school boost its rating from “very good” in 2002 to “outstanding” in 2006. The U.K. school standards body OfSTED noted in its report that the impact of ICT was “almost without precedent.” Talking at the Specialist Schools Conference in Birmingham, Tony Blair described Shireland's Learning Gateway as “one of the most remarkable ICT systems in the country.” Critically, the school is now able to meet most of the government's “Harnessing Technology” and “Transforming Secondary Education” agendas.

Addressing the Government's “Harnessing Technology” E-Strategy

Development of the portal is continuing. Shireland and Teksys now offer a solution capable of meeting the key requirements of DfES “Harnessing Technology” strategy:

Delivering Personalised Learning and E-Portfolios

Teachers can seamlessly collate assessment and attendance information to a single viewpoint and use reporting tools to identify patterns that help them tailor personalised learning strategies to help students realise their full potential. What's more, schools can use this approach to support students in the transition between primary and secondary schools.

Saville says: “Teachers at secondary schools can view coursework, assessments, and comments contained in marked work produced by students at primary school to identify a preferred learning style. This helps ensure better-quality personalised learning continues from primary to secondary school.”

Equipping Schools to Meet 2010 Requirements

Shireland has already helped 60 other schools in this way. Sir Mark Grundy, Head Teacher, Shireland Language College, says : “With the Learning Gateway framework, individual schools can access shared ‘portal-level sites’ and improve partnerships with external bodies such as the Careers Service and Fire Brigade. Liaison officers from these organisations can log in, look after their own sites, and communicate with schools more easily.”

Delivering Anytime, Anywhere Learning Portals for All

Students can access their online work assignments at home using any Internet-connected computer. Teachers can use Learning Gateway to automatically mark multiple-choice tests and post marked assignments directly to a student's My Site, instead of distributing marks at school. This considerably reduces the time spent marking tests manually.

Meeting the “Transforming Secondary Education” Agenda

Schools in federations can strengthen partnerships with Learning Gateway. Nowicki says: “We had a situation where two partner schools merged. In the year before the physical merger, both institutions could log on to each other's resources, share materials, and discuss issues together. By the time they were due to work on the same site, they had been collaborating online for months.”

What's more, federation schools can pool funds allocated by local authorities to develop a shared system, consolidating investment in technology and know-how. One school can develop and administer the learning portal so the others do not have to worry about technical maintenance and support.

Saville says: "If a school has created a good system, it supports other similar institutions across the country with the service. It doesn't matter if they are spread geographically—schools that share common interests, and specialist Science Colleges across the country, can work together more effectively."

Improving Student Motivation

Learning portals can also help motivate students. Nowicki says: "Many online activities that students complete are marked automatically—for example, in the case of multiple-choice exams. When students submit work such as this, they get feedback almost instantly, when they need it most. This increases motivation and improves student performance."

Empowering Teachers with Time-Saving Tools

Teachers using Learning Gateway can set work and deal with administration more quickly and smoothly, so they can spend more time supporting pupils. What's more, teachers working across partner schools that share a federation-wide Learning Gateway can manage multiple responsibilities more easily.

Increasing Family Engagement with Schools

Parents can access information about their children's progress quickly and easily, rather than waiting to find out at an open evening. Nowicki says: "They can see if their child arrived at school on time and how they are."

For More Information

Teksys is a specialist Microsoft services business providing a range of consultancy skills and software services to optimise customers' Microsoft-based infrastructure platforms.

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