

Case study

Client: St Paul's Catholic College
Sector: Education



Learn Anywhere has now been rolled out to every year group at St Paul's.

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Andy Lowe,
St Paul's Catholic College

Creating a virtual learning environment

In 2004, St Paul's Catholic College in West Sussex relocated to a stunning, purpose-built facility. With the move came the opportunity to initiate change, not only to the working environment, but also to the very nature of learning both within the classroom and at home. With the new building as a catalyst, St Paul's began to realise a vision for e-learning that aimed to deliver 1:1 access to ICT for every pupil and teacher, interactive whiteboards in every classroom and a fully integrated virtual learning environment for the entire school.

St Paul's Catholic College is a voluntary aided comprehensive that draws its 850 secondary and sixth form pupils from the local diocese. In 2004, after 40 years in its original 1960s building, St Paul's was offered a greenfield site in Burgess Hill on which to build a brand new school. With the opportunity to start from scratch, the school's technology needs were considered from the outset. “Part of the preparation for the building was ensuring it would contain the infrastructure necessary to support our ICT needs both now and into the future,” explains Andy Lowe, Director of e-learning and Assistant Headteacher at the school.

There were several factors driving the transition towards e-learning for St Paul's at this time. The government agenda for education from 2003 put greater emphasis than ever on the need for pupils to gain increased access to ICT. This was backed up by (albeit rather limited) research into the improved educational outcomes achieved by the greater use of ICT both in the classroom and at home. “In addition, we could see that we needed to bridge the gap between the way our students live their lives and the way they learn,” says Lowe. “It's not about knowledge, it's about giving them the skills they need for the workplace and their future lives. The pace of change is such that the jobs we are training our kids for today probably don't exist yet.”

Learn Anywhere

Central to the development of the school's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) was the creation of the St Paul's e-Learning Foundation – a scheme to provide laptops for all students (or those who want them), for use both at school and at home. Parents are invited to make regular monthly donations (boosted by Gift Aid) towards the scheme. This funds the provision of laptops for all subscribers to the scheme, regardless of their ability to pay.

St Paul's uses Ergo Computers to supply the laptops, in partnership with specialist e-learning finance provider Syscap. Syscap offers a dedicated finance programme called Learn Anywhere that has been specifically designed to work with schemes that rely on parental contributions. Aiming to minimise the administrative and financial burden of setting up a laptop scheme, Learn Anywhere helps schools to avoid upfront payment and isn't restricted to a particular IT supplier. The scheme comes with a range of insurance options to minimise the risks associated with damage, loss or shortfalls in parental contributions.

Controlled roll out

Sensibly, St Paul's decided to stagger the introduction of its far-reaching e-learning programme over a three-year period. “We started by targeting years seven and twelve with

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700 laptops are in use at St Paul's, helping the college take full advantage of the VLE.



laptops and VLE resources, as well as introducing them to e-learning resources," explains Lowe. "The following year years eight, ten, and thirteen joined the initiative and finally years nine and eleven." This phased rollout enabled the staff involved to maintain a good level of control over the implementation, allowing them to monitor the results in each year group closely and iron out any problems as soon as they occurred.

The laptops – 700 of them are now in use across the whole college – are enabling St Paul's to realise the full potential of a VLE, where pupils and staff can communicate with each other and share a full range of curriculum-based educational resources both in the classroom and at home. The school has even explored the possibilities of textbook free and exercise book free classes, as Lowe explains: "One of our initial visions was that we could go completely textbook free. So we tried recreating textbooks in digital format. But we soon realised that ICT isn't about replacing other knowledge sources, it's about giving children the tools they need for learning. So now we blend both resources by encouraging staff to create e-learning tasks as well as using textbooks."

Parents are involved in the process too. The college hosts a regular e-learning café, where parents are invited to spend an hour being guided round the VLE and shown how to use a laptop. In addition, regular forums are held for

the discussion of issues such as e-learning, interactive whiteboards and internet safety. In the New Year, St Paul's will be launching its online Learning Gateway for parents, offering them the opportunity to access a full range of information about their child's education, including timetable, attendance records, assessment data and behavioural reports.

Holistic strategy

The level of ICT integration and e-learning at St Paul's is outstanding, but by no means unachievable by others, says Lowe. "A virtual learning environment like ours is appropriate to every school. But it does rely on parental support: trusting the school to try something new, helping to get pupils involved, demonstrating a commitment to learning at home as well as at school and where appropriate, contributing financially."

Also important is what Lowe calls a "holistic strategy" of ICT adoption. Everyone from governors (who are responsible for the St Paul's e-Learning Foundation) to pupils and parents is involved in the scheme's success. "We try to engage everyone with what we are doing," says Lowe. "And ICT is embedded in everything we do. It's not just about laptops in classrooms, it's about how it affects communication, policy development, strategic development, staff training – everything. ICT is not a bolt on solution. It's a fundamental tool for every area of school life."

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About Syscap

Syscap is the UK's leading independent IT finance provider. Syscap works directly with clients and in partnership with industry-leading IT vendors, equipment suppliers, ISVs and other business service providers. Through tailored, innovative finance solutions, Syscap enables commercial, professional and public sector organisations of all sizes to acquire the business assets and resources they need, without traditional budgetary constraints.

Founded in 1990, Syscap now employs over 110 people across the UK and Europe, has annual revenues in excess of £135 million and £300 million of assets under management.

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