

A headteacher challenges Becta... *but who's right?*

Phil Williamson, head at All Saints Junior School in Hessle, has lost faith in learning platforms. But Becta's **Stephen Lucey** insists they are effective

Headteacher Phil Williamson

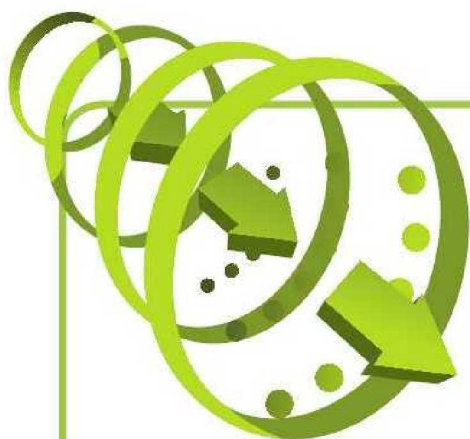
Iwould like to point out at the very start of this article that I am an ICT enthusiast and also to apologise to secondary colleagues that this article

is more from a primary school viewpoint.

The thing is, as a primary head, I have grown worried about learning platforms, and I need to know: "Is it just me?"

When I first heard about learning platforms I was delighted – I wasn't quite sure what they were, but I knew they included a virtual learning environment (VLE) and that millions of pounds were available for their introduction and staff training. However, after unexpected and lengthy delays, my first view of our platform was a huge disappointment. I felt like I'd ordered an expensive new car only to find on delivery that it had no engine or seats.

The platform was clearly based on a secondary school model and was missing everything but web pages and folders. The training was poor. I laughed when told that infants were expected to log in with a password like 'qKTfh'. I was insulted when instructed how to save a picture from the web and how to create a new folder. I felt



my IT skills were being equated with the age of the youngest children I work with.

I calmed down – it was early days and surely everything would improve. But, for many colleagues, there was no issue at all – they simply decided that the learning platform was not for them.

The advent of 'The Platform' had caused my school not to renew its subscription to its own VLE. To be blunt, we had struggled to use it, and a free, new system with extensive training was very attractive. Even so, our existing VLE had offered a suitable interface for primary children, individual logins, online folders for staff, individual web pages, online interactive homework resources, blogs, secure chat and so on.

Yet few of my staff had used these regularly and so the children had been involved little. The staff had found over time that as we also used our own website, SamLearning, our own purchased software and other online resources (better than those provided with our VLE) it was simpler and better for the children's learning to use what we had.

I worried about the new platform because it was only 'working towards' these facilities. It seemed years behind what we had now rejected. The portal to a platform is designed to be a single entry point for children to access interactive learning resources, for parents to receive reports and see their child's work, for teachers to keep pupil records, planning, attendance data and so on – and to email their students. Everything is linked to the school's Information Management System (IMS) and everyone is happy.

One door, one password, everything available. Nothing simpler. But, while a brilliant concept, this just doesn't work. Our platform blog deals mainly with how to speed up your connection, while interactive resources from companies other than those of the platform provider struggle to be found or accessed at all.

There are huge issues over licensing: a site licence for top-rate software in a school is one thing; a licence for every family who attends that school is something else. Interoperability, a technical term which refers to different systems talking to each other, is a cause of much concern: IMS systems are not listening well to the platforms.

Thinking it could still be just me, in my speech to our National Conference in Brighton this May, I appealed for positive

homework. In ICT terms, many children and parents already have personal logins to their school website – I was looking at one last week which, as well as personal web-pages, offers virtual art galleries, podcasts, blogs and so on – all for an annual charge which is a quarter of the supply costs paid for my school's 'training'.

Schools already use email and text messaging to communicate with parents and there are many providers of interactive resources out there we can use to set and mark homework online. Most of the software we have in schools already is incredibly good.

Some online tracking systems are close to providing reporting to parents. Many schools and local authorities already use the free Moodle software for bringing together like-minded groups

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examples of learning platforms. Sadly, for every one positive there were five negative. What I heard was: "slow", "doesn't do half of what we want", "my school already has this" and "it just doesn't work". Positive comments were related to the web pages children had made, but went little further.

One of Becta's main aims is to use these platforms to engage parents in their child's learning. I cannot argue with this valid and honourable aim. I cannot disagree that ICT is the world of both the present and the future. However, perhaps it is worth reminding ourselves – and Becta – that it is wrong to think that parental engagement doesn't already happen without a platform.

Primary children's parents tend to use a real door rather than a virtual portal. They talk and listen to teachers regularly and they will do so ad infinitum. They come in to see their children's work and many support their children with their

for co-operation and networking.

So, is this all about the simple portal? Is the vision of a one-stop shop the future? If Becta could only reassure me that this very costly project is working, I can see my way through this. But I'm not sure. Now we're this far in, what is the feedback on the improvement in parental engagement? How is it really working? What are the outcomes, particularly for primary age children and their families? Please reassure me there won't be needless duplication of the already excellent ICT provision we have. What does the cost-effectiveness analysis to date show?

I do know one thing. Without our support the platforms will stay unused and the portals closed. I believe there are a lot of us out here who have lost the faith. Or is it just me?

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Dr Stephen Lucey, executive director, Strategic Technologies, Becta

There is no question, in our view, that learning platforms are central to the effective use of technology in learning. They allow teachers, students and their parents or carers to be at the heart of Next Generation Learning, a Government campaign initiated by Becta.

In terms of how much learning platforms cost, we have always felt it is a vital investment for any school wanting to deliver excellent teaching and learning. As a result, Becta, on behalf of the DCSE, has implemented the Learning Platform Services Framework, which offers a list of approved solution providers (rather than a list of approved products) to ensure that local authorities, schools and colleges are supported in achieving value for money when procuring ICT products and services.

Furthermore, this national framework has established a cohort of rigorously tested solution providers which have satisfied defined service standards and can offer both small- and large-scale implementations. This ensures that schools benefit from well-planned, tailored learning platforms, rather than systems that have been put together in a haphazard manner. Where there may be difficulties between framework suppliers and users, which could include issues with training, Becta can provide support. Where suitable, we would be happy to offer help to address specific difficulties in conjunction with the school, the local authority and the supplier.

However, when discussing this, it is important to remember that a learning platform is not a single 'off-the-shelf' product. By their very nature, they are a collection of tools and services designed to support teaching, learning, management

and administration. Learning platforms extend the opportunities for schools to interact with pupils and parents and to unite teaching resources with teaching staff. The technology offers learners, parents, carers and school staff access to resources, online storage and tools for communication, learning, teaching and management, not only during the school day but also after school hours and beyond the school walls.

One of the goals we would like to achieve with learning platforms is to engage parents more in pupils' learning. And while it is quite right to say this already takes place with existing ICT resources and systems, we know that parents want more. A DCSF study on the use of ICT at home found that the majority of parents would welcome more electronic contact with schools through email or use of the intranet and the *Oh, Nothing Much* report, published in March by Becta, found that 82 per cent of parents felt 'left in the dark' when it comes to their child's schooling. Learning platforms

pupils in primary schools, the technology helps them to access resources and work within school while also helping them show parents their work at home or, where appropriate, continue the learning beyond the school day. Learning platforms can also offer access to all kinds of curriculum resources appropriate to their needs and interests. The technology helps pupils take greater ownership of their education and gives them access to learning resources appropriate to their needs and preferences wherever they are.

One example that illustrates the benefits for primary children and the families is Ranvilles Infant School in Fareham, Hampshire, where many children have parents who are away for long periods in the Navy. The use of the learning platform keeps parents and carers in touch with their child's learning while also enabling them to support them from afar.

More exciting for these young children is the fantastic opportunity to extend the learning across the world as they communicate and collaborate through

“Technology helps pupils take greater ownership of their education”

technology can help schools offer parents closer links with the school and better, more regular updates, which are easily accessible so they feel they are more engaged with their child's education.

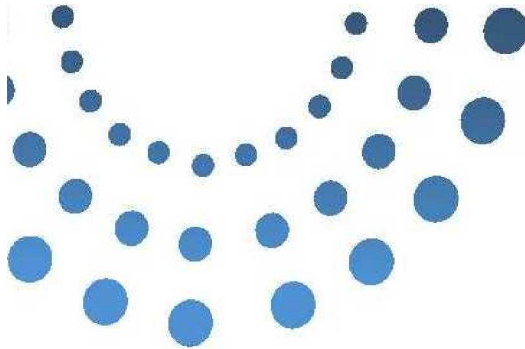
A good example is Anson Primary School in Brent, London, which uses its learning platform to ensure parents have information that is current and meaningful, for example updates on the latest class assignments and attendance records. Parents and carers are empowered to support their child effectively.

The feedback so far regarding the impact of learning platforms on parental engagement has been promising. For

the learning platform.

Other benefits that we have seen from learning platforms include providing staff and governors with the facilities not only for communication and collaboration within the school but also the ability to share resources, ideas and experiences with colleagues in other settings.

One group of schools which is implementing technology to benefit staff and students more widely is in Middlesbrough, where schools are sharing their resources to support each other. For example, some have set up Foundation Stage portfolios in which children's work, including photo stories and



photographic evidence, is stored, offering valuable material to inform the assessment for Early Learning Goals. Governors in many schools now routinely access minutes from governors' meetings and information through the learning platform, demonstrating benefits not only for learning and teaching but also management.

On the point of interoperability, it is our view that systems should integrate in a way that provides the user with access to valuable tools and resources without interoperability barriers. As a result, interoperability standards have been established through direct discussion and negotiation with service users and providers. We are continuing to work with a wide range of partners to ensure these issues do not delay the implementation of learning platforms.

The benefits that are being realised by the most effective schools are a result of careful preparation, strategic leadership and stakeholder involvement in a sustained change management process. But not all schools are there yet. Becta aims to give schools realistic advice and practical tools

to help them successfully implement learning platforms.

Many schools are already making effective use of technology to support learning, starting with tools such as the Self-Review Framework. Becta's ambition is that these benefits are available to all schools based on their needs and priorities. In achieving this, it is essential to continue dialogue with school leaders, teachers, governors, local authorities and many other partners to ensure that all schools make the most of the fantastic benefits afforded by learning platforms.

It is disappointing to hear about the frustrations faced by headteacher colleagues. Becta is working hard to support the thousands of schools looking to reap the benefits that learning platforms can offer to students, parents, teachers and heads. Equally, we're always keen to hear the experiences of school leaders to ensure they have the support they need. We are listening and we do want to hear heads' concerns. **LF**



How is your school coping with learning platforms? Do you agree with our writers? Let us know via the forums at www.naht.org.uk

