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Calling the shots

Parental communication systems can provide value for money for schools, explains **Stuart Abrahams**.

In a time of economic uncertainty, it is increasingly important for local government to achieve cost-effective solutions for schools.

However, in addition to generating cost reductions, it is also vital that services meet the needs of schools and improve efficiencies across the board, thereby creating a more positive teaching and learning experience.

In terms of service procurement within education in England, in cases where local authorities do not

control purchasing they can try to influence

decisions to support schools in implementing the best solutions, helping to ensure cost-effective and far-reaching efficiencies.

For example, with the Government's implementation of parental engagement targets for schools for 2010-12, it is essential that local government acknowledges and addresses these targets too. When it comes to procuring services for local schools, local authorities should consider how they can assist schools in meeting these targets.

Taking into consideration the Government's requirements for schools to effectively engage parents in their children's education by maintaining good communication channels, a parental communication system can be key. Naturally, local government will be keen to improve efficiencies within schools; authorities will want to avoid the reputation of having a high rate of unauthorised absences.

Improving efficiencies for all

According to Becta, the Government agency responsible for promoting the use of ICT within education, 82 per cent of parents feel their children exclude them from their education. Once a child reaches secondary schooling, the breakdown in communication can become more apparent as children develop into young adults and acquire a new sense of independence. Therefore, the requirement for clear-cut and regular communication between a school, its teachers and parents is of great significance. This is where Becta believes that ICT

can play an important role in its ability to create a dialogue between all parties.

Our task as a responsible, forward-thinking provider of parental communication systems in education is to ensure that we provide a solution to meet government requirements, satisfy individual schools' needs and ensure cost-effectiveness. Ultimately, providing schools in each authority with an efficient communication service contributes towards better learning outcomes for children and young people.

A parental communication system has the ability to communicate with parents on many areas, including attendance, behaviour, progress and attainment, and improves general operations within a school. From a local government perspective, a parental communication system can enable a school to run more smoothly.

Recently implementing a parental communication system into 167 schools across Manchester City Council, Vince Slatford, Management Information System (MIS) support manager for Manchester, explained: "It is always a challenge to find new ways of assisting schools in raising their performance levels. One of the many projects we are currently working on is to improve the attendance levels at each school and therefore that of Manchester as a whole. We were aware of a limited number of schools using various applications to text parents and carers in relation to first day calling. This seemed to be a cost-effective and time-saving method of engaging parents at an early stage to discover the whereabouts of each child."

Manchester will see an improvement in other areas, as Mr Slatford further explained: "The introduction of this solution will prove invaluable. It saves schools hours of administration time by enabling them to contact parents and carers effortlessly and also to have access to information about pupils' attendance quickly read back into schools' MIS systems. They will be able to report on timekeeping, behaviour and assessment; they can now communicate in a new way that will save money and time."

The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham wanted to boost attendance across the authority;

consequently, in conjunction with the introduction of a new MIS, they decided to introduce a parental communication system. Rupert Hay-Campbell, an MIS adviser for the council, commented: "To increase attendance levels we wanted to introduce online registration, which would mean that same day follow-up on absences would be facilitated. The overall strategy was to ensure that registers are done more quickly and enable absences to be investigated on the first day, which helps to improve attendance levels and in turn improves overall efficiencies within each school and across the local authority. From a local government perspective, the implementation of a parental communication system improves efficiencies comprehensively and helps improve standards for schools within the area."

The savings continue to add up

Compared with traditional forms of communication, such as letter writing, which carries printing and postage costs, or expensive telephone calls, the parental communication system provides significant savings. Currently used by more than 2000 schools throughout the UK and Europe, the service has also been implemented by specialist sports school, Rush Croft Sports College, in Chingford, East London.

Rush Croft Sports College has reported significant fiscal savings since the installation of their parental communication system. On an annual basis, telephone bills have been reduced by approximately £800 while attendance has also improved. Gareth Hunt, Rush Croft Attendance Officer, commented: "We used the system recently to let parents know that the school was going to be closed due to adverse weather. Ordinarily a process that would take us at least two hours, in this instance we were able to contact all parents with either a text or voice message in around two minutes. Given that a text is cheaper than a call to a mobile, we estimate that we have been saving around £200 per quarter on our telephone bills in the year since we started using the system."

Located in Oxfordshire, The Warriner School has also seen positive results following the implementation of its parental communication system. Leigh Barmby, Administration Manager,

commented on the efficiencies: "We were initially slightly sceptical about the introduction of a new contact system; however, once we started using it we saw the time and monetary savings. Our annual bill for postage and printing is usually roughly £9000; however, despite only introducing the service in September 2009, the school has benefited from immense cost savings."

The future of parental communication systems

Initially some schools may feel daunted by having their local authority select and implement a new technology; for example, some schools may be apprehensive, predicting the introduction could generate additional work. However, with an effective parental

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communication system this need not be the case; rather than creating work it should reduce the workload, ensuring that parents can be contacted more conveniently and efficiently. A positive solution provides huge scope for cost savings, both in terms of reducing the costs associated with letter writing and phone calls to parents and guardians, and in terms of the savings made via an improvement in overall business efficiencies.

Parental communication systems may be a route that all local authorities should consider as a way of reducing costs and improving efficiencies. Manchester City Council can certainly demonstrate to other local authorities the scope of what a parental communication system can achieve. ☺

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