



Parent Power

TS VISITS A SCHOOL WHERE INVESTMENT IN TECHNOLOGY IS LEADING TO IMPRESSIVE RESULTS – THANKS TO THE SUPPORT OF THE PTA

To many people the school PTA stands for a group of well-meaning individuals whom other parents and teachers often try their best to avoid for fear of what they might get roped into. In reality, PTAs increasingly play a pivotal role in helping schools to thrive - and are in fact in control of some pretty healthy budgets, from which teachers and heads can most certainly benefit.

The Hollyfield School is a co-educational academy located in Surbiton with approximately 1,350 pupils, aged between 11-18 years. It is high achieving; this summer the school obtained record results for its GCSE results, with 78% of students obtaining at least five GCSEs at Grade C or above including English and maths.

The school has for a long time recognised the benefits that technology can bring to teaching and students' individual learning. However, situated as it is in a relatively affluent borough of Kingston upon Thames, Hollyfield receives very little by way of additional funding, therefore budgets within the school are increasingly squeezed.

"I guess we were very much ahead of the trend when it came to using technology to develop our students' learning," says Matthew Winpenny, assistant head teacher. "About seven years ago – coinciding with the advent of iPods - a group of teaching staff began creating their own podcasts and video content to help students with their studies outside of the classroom.

"Whilst we could see that this was definitely a great way to engage the students in independent learning it was not something we were able to keep on top of as much as we might like to. Then products such as GCSEPod and Class Dojo began to emerge which in essence

shared our aims and provided the same type of content we were producing ourselves - albeit more professionally and somewhat more effectively. However, with ever increasing budget restrictions, whilst we were certainly keen to subscribe to one of the content providers, we weren't able to do so."

Something for everyone

It was at this point that Matthew, whilst helping out at a summer event, met the new chair of the PTA, Tyrone Cano, who explained that the group was keen to work much more closely with teaching staff to find out where they could offer support both in the classroom as well as outside. "As a PTA we have to be careful what the money we raise is spent on," explains Tyrone. "We have a democratic process to ensure we are not simply supporting the specific interests of individuals, and have set some parameters agreeing what type of thing we can support without stepping into the realm of core education, which is definitely not our place to fund. The main thing for us with any investment is that it should be something from which the majority of students can benefit."

GCSEPod represented new ground for the PTA, but following discussion with Matthew, the members unanimously agreed to fund a pilot – initially for six months. "Every child in the school can have access," says Tyrone. "It covers the entire curriculum so is not subject specific, and because the content is constantly updated we knew the school would not find itself left with out of date material collecting dust when changes were made to examinations and syllabuses."

Raising money in a secondary school is a totally different process from doing it in a primary school, as Tyrone confirms. "There is no school gate to grab parents and ask them to



buy raffle tickets, or nativity plays where you can sell coffee and cake," he comments. "In order to engage with parents it's important that people know how the money is being spent and how any purchase is benefiting their child, which is why we decided on a trial initially."

As it turned out, they needn't have worried; within a few short months the pilot was proving to be a success. There were thousands of downloads across all the curriculum subjects, with anecdotal feedback from both students and teachers indicating a real support for the product. "Initially we were waiting to analyse the impact on the summer's exam results," recalls Tyrone, "but given the huge support it already had in school, we made the decision before the end of the summer term to fund a two-year full subscription. As a member of the PTA it is certainly good to know that we have had a direct hand in the ongoing success of the school; it makes the job all the more worthwhile."