

- ICT on the Frontline feature published in the Times Educational Supplement's Online supplement on May 6 2005
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IT is coming up to 8.15am and year six pupils are already flooding into Newcastle's Hilton Primary School. But this is no ordinary breakfast club or pre-school activity. Up to 80 per cent of this year group regularly turn up early to use the school's ICT facilities and soon year five pupils will be joining in too.

The 460-pupil school was one of the first in the country to have its own computer network and has always keenly embraced new technology.

But head teacher John Laws realised something more was needed in an area with the second-lowest rate of home Internet access nationally – just 36 per cent of households. Also, 32 per cent of children in the north-east live in low-income households – the highest percentage in the country. Nearly 60 per cent of Hilton's pupils are eligible for free school meals. So an imaginative solution was needed.

In January, with help from education charity The eLearning Foundation, the school launched an ambitious e-learning project designed to tackle the digital divide in disadvantaged households.

It attracted £10,000 of funding from the DfES and from local business. School standards minister David Miliband came along to the launch and applauded efforts to “create a level playing field”.

The project is based on the premise that the way to drive up standards is to improve access to ICT at home. And, as a result, more than 100 households have signed up for a cheap package that supplies them with a computer and cheap broadband internet access.

Mr Laws wanted to be able to offer the facilities for a notional cost to families that would not otherwise have access to ICT out of school.

So, with the help of the eLearning Foundation, he put together a deal which makes a new computer with broadband access available for £3 a week while the broadband alone costs £2 a week.

Mr Laws said: “It was an enormously ambitious project. We were one of the first schools in the country to have a computer network – that was about 12 years ago. Everything else developed from there.

“Now it's really taking off. We had a launch last May to get people involved. I was really concerned that we had set ourselves a realistic goal. I was anxious that enough people were going to take advantage of what I thought was a really excellent opportunity.

“So we gave a free t-shirt to every child who brought an adult along to the launch.”

As well as setting up the funding for this project there were plenty of other issues to field – such as technical support for people likely to be having their first experience of computer ownership.

That has been contracted out to a local IT company and concerned parents were offered filtered Internet access.

Reluctant users had to be coaxed on board, and another minefield was the issue of connectivity in homes - with broadband only initially available to people using certain providers for their telephone services.

But, two months after the launch, Mr Laws can say: “I believe we are a success. We have got more than 100 families who would not otherwise have been connected. We have satisfied that demand.”

The school had already made great strides in integrating new learning methods into the curriculum. It started by setting up e-learning portfolios for children at each end of the school – in the nursery and in year six.

Mr Laws said: “We have been using Powerpoint to assimilate the work that has been going on, which can then be used as evidence. The idea of that was to engage children and parents and create a scrapbook of school and home.

“The quality of work that pupils did was fantastic. We have some very creative people.”

The year six project is using learning management software produced by Digitalbrain to create a virtual learning environment where pupils can share homework ideas and access resources while teachers set targets and monitor progress.

The next move will be to expand these projects through the school, with year five the next group slated to become involved.

But Mr Laws believes the boost given by access to ICT at home is the essential next step.

He is convinced of the value of the project, saying that the results are already evident in increased confidence and motivation and feelings of empowerment among pupils.

“It is also having an impact on the parents. They are inadvertently learning IT skills through their children which enables them to better support them with homework and learning.

“We are using Performance Indicators in Primary Schools. Based on that and our own predictions the indications are that we will be looking at an additional 20 per cent improvement for year six.”

Details panel (224 words)

Five key points to remember:

- Mr Laws says: “The most important piece of advice I could give to anyone else trying this is ‘hold your nerve’”.
- A project of this size needs its own dedicated co-ordinator to succeed rather than being allocated to a staff member already juggling plenty of other responsibilities. The job was taken on at Hilton Primary by a former ICT co-ordinator returning from maternity leave.
- You can’t do everything. Teachers are not necessarily computer engineers, project managers or experts in charity finance law. Accept when you need experts and don’t be afraid to call them in.
- Much of the software out there is designed for secondary use. Primaries might have to examine ways of getting it customised to their needs.
- What is your next step? For Hilton Primary the structure is now in place and it is working on ways of using its integrated home/school learning environment over the next few years. So – before you start, work out what you want to achieve and then how you hope to develop it.

Contacts and more information:

- Visit Hilton Primary School's website at <http://www.newcastle-schools.org.uk/hilton/Default.htm>
- Contact the eLearning Foundation on 01372 824372 or at info@elearningfoundation.com.
- Visit the charity's website at www.elearningfoundation.com.
- A case study on broadband in schools is available on Teachernet at <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/casestudies/SubCatHome.cfm?id=108&sid=107>