



From social distanced ways for students to select their school meals, to reminding them of the latest health guidance – find out how one Academy is embedding technology in all aspects of school life.



The Background

St Peter's CofE Academy is proud to be the only Church of England Secondary School in Stoke-on-Trent. With around 1,000 students aged 11-16, the school was built on the site of the original Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form Centre in the centre of the city, in 2013. Whilst welcoming all faiths and none, the Academy has a positive Christian ethos with Christianity running through every level. St. Peter's has co-sponsors – the Woodard Academies Trust – the largest group of independent Church of England schools in England and Wales and the Diocese of Lichfield.

St Peter's CofE Academy boasts a state of the art, vibrant learning environment with impressive resources that enable their students to flourish, with classrooms brimming with creativity and student computers, laptops and iPads available to almost all. Perhaps because of this, the Academy made the decision to contract with RM – as their managed service provider for all their technology needs – in 2013.

The Challenge

Prior to the Coronavirus changing everyone's life, in March 2020, St Peter's was reasonably well prepared for what was soon to hit all schools. All staff had remote access to the school's systems, files and folders, and students were comfortable using Show My Homework as a way to receive and submit coursework digitally.

That said, not all students were accomplished working online, and when the Academy was forced to close its gates to all but the vulnerable and children of key workers, it became clear that they needed to respond.

"Pre-lockdown we believed that learning was best done face-to-face, where we could build relationships with our students, and get to know those who needed a little bit of motivation to get going. The pandemic forced us to revisit this".

Michael Astley, Principal



The Response

The first challenge the school encountered was with students remembering their passwords to access the Show My Homework software application. Faced with this conundrum, the Academy gave the challenge to their technology partner, RM. Their advice – after discussion with the school – was to remove the password requirement altogether. There was nothing particularly confidential contained in the homework and removing passwords removed a barrier to students engaging.

"This is why I like RM. They come up with simple, practical solutions. Whilst I am sure we could have devised a way to give students new passwords, the reality is that it wasn't necessary, and RM came at it from a totally pragmatic standpoint".

Michael Astley, Principal

As the first national lockdown continued, the school became more and more accomplished with using the technology. Staff were checking their emails a minimum twice a day, meetings were taking place on Zoom, and teachers and students were using the Show My Homework platform to prepare and submit lessons.

"This whole period has made us all so much more resilient – you could even throw an OFSTED call at us, and we would just take it in our stride".

Louise James, Director of Finance, Resources and Head of HR for Woodard Academies Trust



One concern the school had arose from students queuing for their lunch in the school canteen, and how they could still support Social Distancing. They initially moved to paper forms that a student could complete in the morning to express their preference, but their RM Account Manager – based on an idea that they had seen personally in their own child's school – suggested a digital solution, whereby students in the school could order the food they wanted via an online app from their own devices. This meant no queuing up with others, as the food could be brought to them, and all done electronically, so no forms could be lost or errors made on selections, allowing easy creation, completion and collation to the benefit of pupils and canteen staff alike.

"This was a very simple – but effective – idea, that just shows how versatile technology can be in a school environment".

Michael Astley, Principal

When a school is so willing to embrace new ideas, and recognises that technology can be a blessing, anything is possible. It also helps when the technology itself is modern and reliable, and managed by someone who does this for a living – freeing up the school to focus on what they do best – teach.

"I know that not all schools have been so fortunate, but we have just got on with things – nothing has broken, we have had no complaints from parents, things have just worked. I have complete confidence in the technology that we have, and the support that sits behind it".

Michael Astley, Principal

In such a scenario, the managed services provider becomes part of that team – they help inform the strategy, they can advise on the budgetary issues, and above all can be left to get on with ensuring that technology is not something the Senior Leadership Team need to worry about.

"RM laid out a clear IT strategic plan for us, identifying what they believe we will need to spend for each of the next few years. This allows us to plan and forecast sensibly – for example last year we upgraded to Windows 10 across the school. This puts us in a better place to engage with the Trust – being able to show them a clear plan with all the benefit of the investment mapped out".

Louise James, Director of Finance, Resources and Head of HR for Woodard Academies Trust

Once it became clear that the pandemic would be around for some time, with a growing need to support the self-isolation of core groups of students (and staff), the Academy began to look beyond Show My Homework, which whilst adequate at first, is not really set up for full remote learning. With support from RM, they have now started to roll out Microsoft Teams, setting aside INSET Day time to train teachers, and in turn students.

Like most schools, not everything was plain sailing. A lack of hardware devices for some of the more disadvantaged children became a pressing issue.

"We were determined to ensure that all students had access to a hardware device – you simply cannot read a Powerpoint slide or undertake an assessment on a mobile phone. The Trust – with help from the DfE – sourced laptops for those who needed them, and RM ensured that each machine had all the right software pre-loaded, so that it would connect to the network the moment a student took it out of the box".

Michael Astley, Principal

It is this type of support that St Peter's value so much. It also spells out the difference between a distant commodity supplier and a genuinely engaged service partner.

"I see my RM Account Manager as an extension of my team. They go way beyond just delivering the SLAs in the contract – they go the extra mile. They want the same outcomes that we all do – better education for our students. Even when we do have a problem, they are proactive in their communication – keeping us in the picture throughout. Nothing is too much trouble with RM".

Michael Astley, Principal

Another small example has been with the Government Covid advice. Their RM engineer simply loaded a screensaver on all school machines that comes up when a student (or staff member) logs on – “Catch it, Bin it, Kill it”. Best of all, with the advice constantly evolving, the message can change at the flick of a switch such that the new instruction pops up on everyone’s machine.

"I can imagine some IT companies saying that that would be too complicated to implement, but with RM they just get on and do it".

Louise James, Director of Finance, Resources and Head of HR for Woodard Academies Trust



Towards the end of 2019, RM undertook a survey looking at confidence levels within schools in the use of technology. This found that it could be a significant barrier in some cases. Covid appears to have changed some of that, and schools up and down the country can point to the resourcefulness of their staff, irrespective of what has been thrown at them. This is especially true for St Peter’s Academy. In December 2018, a school survey showed that 67.5% of their staff were positive about the levels of computer access they had. The same question in September 2020 resulted in an 81.5% positive response.

"Technology is one of those things that people moan about when it doesn't work, but sadly they are not so willing to come forward when it does. The fact that we have heard so few gripes must mean that we are getting something right".

Louise James, Director of Finance, Resources and Head of HR for Woodard Academies Trust

The Lessons Learnt

- 1. Invest in an IT strategy.** Schools and Academies are no different to any other business, and having a strategy and a roadmap, is critical to be able to plan properly.
- 2. Demonstrate your technology.** Whether it is a parent or a potential new teacher, showing that you have decent technology shows what a well-run school you have.
- 3. Be flexible.** Who would have thought we could have achieved what we have, a year ago? The reality is that when faced with adversity our teaching profession have been amazing, demonstrating that they can do anything if called upon.
- 4. Modern technology.** Whilst budgets are always challenging, the reality is that modern hardware devices make life so much easier for everyone – they load faster, they run applications quickly, and they do not crash when you are in the middle of something.

5. Play to your strengths. Teachers are fantastic at teaching. School SLTs are very good at leading. But if you want someone who will ensure that your technology just works, employ a company that does this for a living, who have access to genuine experts to free you up to do your job.

The Legacy

Whilst 2020 is a year that most people will be glad to see the back of, the pandemic has created the opportunity to reevaluate some things – not least how Education is delivered. With students and staff equally accomplished at logging on remotely, staff holding Faculty meetings from home after they have picked up their own children from school, and students starting to collaborate on assignments digitally, the future is bright.

"Take revision days. When we have held these before, take-up has often been poor. But since we have been offering these remotely, we are seeing far more students join and benefit. This is a great example of blended learning in action".

Michael Astley, Principal

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Call: 0845 3077 832

