

Scope and scale

Great Barr School has taken a centralised approach to building and delivering ICT resources that befit its size and place in the local community

Sarah Underwood

Great Barr School is big, not just in its numbers of students and staff, but also in its commitment to delivering accessible ICT resources to students, staff and the wider community.

The school is a specialist science college in Birmingham and with 2,500 students aged from 11 to 18 and towards 350 staff it is one of the largest schools in the UK. This means more funding than smaller schools may receive, but also the need to manage a large ICT estate efficiently, as well as student issues that can be kicked off by ICT either in or out of school.

Daniel Locke-Wheaton joined Great Barr in September 2007 as assistant headteacher of e-learning and sixth form. He discovered a school with good ICT facilities, including a network and computer rooms, but students only studying ICT as a discrete subject. "Students would attend an ICT lesson, then go two weeks without using technology. There was little cross curriculum ICT and little e-learning and e-teaching," says Locke-Wheaton.

Having come from a school where e-teaching was prevalent, Locke-Wheaton picked up his role in e-learning at Great Barr and created



a strategic leadership plan that would cover the next three to four years. The school already had two technicians to support the computer rooms, but their roles were changed and they were grouped like a small company within the school.

Locke-Wheaton explains: "The idea was to put in place a PC World style organisation that would give staff the ICT tools they wanted and service products. The group was called GBIT and was set up to support not only Great Barr, but also other local schools."

GBIT soon started to provide internet access to a local primary school and has since grown considerably to include five technicians who work on a central basis to manage, support and supply over 3,000 devices to

teachers and students. All staff have laptops that meet their individual needs and the school is close to a one-to-one of students to laptops or PCs. Following the PC World line of thought, GBIT holds stock including digital cameras, video cameras, MP3 audio recorders and games machines such as Sony PSPs and Nintendo DS's that can be booked and taken from the central store by both teachers and students, reducing pressure on departments to buy and maintain ICT equipment.

The central ICT team has also developed a relationship with Samsung as a preferred supplier of laptops. The team works with the company to customise laptop components for individual teachers, a big selling point for teachers, and can also influence its product

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roadmap to ensure the right laptops for the school will be available in the next couple of years. And, of course, there is a price advantage.

A new and financially attractive deal with Microsoft is also in the making following the software vendor's decision to change its licensing process from one licence for each computer to a process based on the number of full-time employees in a school.

Again, Great Barr has early knowledge of products as a member of the Microsoft Super User Group, but it has also turned its philanthropic hand to working with schools across Birmingham to cut the cost of licences. "We are working with eight schools across Birmingham to buy Microsoft licences on a group basis and that has created a saving of £25,000," explains Locke-Wheaton. "We will soon extend the scheme to cover more than one thousand teachers and our target is to cover over 3,000 teachers across about 25 schools, which will certainly push the price down."

"This is a new model for ICT

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procurement and one that works at a lower cost for everyone. Our in-school model, GBIT, is also smart in how it manages resources. When I arrived at Great Barr, each department bought its own equipment. Now, if something has a plug it must be delivered through GBIT. Funding comes from departmental budgets, but GBIT can get a better price and is better placed to manage, support and maintain equipment."

Running such a large ICT asset base, let alone networks, internet connections and software platforms, obviously comes at a cost. When Locke-Wheaton started on the

journey to make Great Barr a leading ICT and e-learning organisation in 2007, he had a £1 million development budget to spend over three years, as well as a maintenance budget of about £150,000 a year. About £700,000 of the development work was carried out in 2007 and 2008, and following school funding cuts last year the ongoing ICT maintenance budget has dropped to £70,000.

With most of the key points in the school's ICT strategic leadership plan covered off last year ahead of an expected finish in 2012, Locke-Wheaton is relatively sanguine about budget reductions, pointing out that major developments have been implemented and it is time to consider how to make more of what the school has.

Soon after his arrival at Great Barr, Locke-Wheaton hired a Microsoft SharePoint expert whose role was to build and customise a SharePoint environment that would act as a gateway to teaching and learning materials. He also hired a web and flash developer to support staff making learning resources and



to run the learning environment. These technicians formed GBIT development, which now numbers three staff and sits alongside GBIT support. Another key driver for the school's improvement has been the adoption of training and cross curricular support provided by the ICT department.

SharePoint was well received by staff and students, but in 2010 Locke-Wheaton revisited the software and decided to build again. "SharePoint had grown organically and had become cluttered, rather monstrous and not very easy to use. So we started to build a new SharePoint gateway in June last year and it was ready in September. We also hired a Moodle specialist and customised a Moodle platform to integrate with SharePoint."

The outcome is a Moodle platform for lesson content and home learning, and SharePoint acting as a gateway with access to three zones for staff, students and parents.

The staff zone includes department areas, message boards, information on general issues and detailed information for individual

teachers. Students use the portal predominantly to access Moodle and their own storage spaces, and they can also use it to access the school's SharePoint web applications such as Word and Excel if they don't have access to Microsoft Office at home.

The parental portal is, perhaps, the most innovative, with parents initially gaining access to information about their children and their learning progress, as well as wider information on issues such as home learning. Information written by parents for parents then became available and the schools is now considering how to make learning courses in the Moodle environment available to parents through the SharePoint gateway.

Another fundamental and beneficial use of SharePoint is in building individual student records in a single database that can be accessed and updated by teachers and staff, and monitored by senior leaders. The single database approach means single records can be collated by teachers, department heads, assistant

headteachers and ultimately the headteacher to produce a final report that fulfils the requirements of Ofsted's Self Evaluation Form.

Other embedded technology at Great Barr includes separate wireless networks for staff and students, who are allowed to bring their own devices into school subject to policies that, for example, require lower school children not to use mobile phones unless asked to by a teacher, while sixth form students must make their own responsible decisions on when and how to use devices,.

"There is a downside to the world of technology, such as cyber bullying using SMS texts, Blackberry Messenger and Facebook, but we deal with it and have an expert pastoral care team to help," says Lock-Wheaton.

If this is the downside of ICT at Great Barr, it is more than matched by the upside. As Locke-Wheaton concludes: "It's difficult to quantify the impact ICT has on the school, but surveys of students and lesson observations suggest it is positive for both students and staff."