



Specialist Sports College puts Communication Solution through the Paces

Rush Croft Sports College, located in Chingford, London, is a mixed comprehensive that caters for learners aged between 11 to 16 years, and currently has a student population of 780. The school became a specialist sports college in September 2003 and by 2004 had exceeded the specialist targets set for them to achieve by 2007.

Becoming a successful sports college has lifted the school's collective sense of pride and common direction. This has been reflected across the board from the soar in student achievement, to the significant jump in the school's overall internal efficiencies. The school now strives for excellence in all areas and believes that fundamental to achieving this is ensuring that the internal running of the school is as professional and effective as possible.

Background

Ofsted carried out an inspection of the school in February 2010 and referred specifically to leadership in the report, stating that: **"School leaders are acutely aware of the school's strengths and weaknesses and have driven improvements in provision to more effectively meet students' needs and interests. Staff share the ambition and drive of the senior team."**

Meeting legal registration obligations, cutting administrative time and improving parental engagement were all key objectives for the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) for ensuring that internally, the school was efficient. Kevin Smith, Assistant Head, Director of Specialism and Community, Physical Education Teacher, explained that as a sports specialist school, mobile registration for PE was an area they were eager to investigate further. Having used Groupcall Messenger for a number of years, Kevin was keen to trial Groupcall Emerge when it first became available, and the school has been suitably impressed with the results ever since.

Areas for improvement

Initially, the school simply needed a solution that would allow it to better adhere to the legal registration obligations. Kevin noted: **"Ensuring that registration happens by 9.30am is a difficult task for many schools when lessons take place off site with high numbers of pupils; of course we always took a register, however, it was often much later in the morning. We desperately wanted to rectify this in some way and become much more confident about our safeguarding arrangement."** The school also needed to be able to take registration just as easily in the field as could be done in the gym.

However, the more they explored the issue of 'saving time' they realised that there were more areas in which they could improve. Kevin explains: **"We have two student support assistants at the school and their role is to monitor and record any incidents that take place. They also advise students on where they should be at certain times of the day if they are unsure; a very administration-heavy and quite time consuming job."**

A solution to meet our needs

Messenger is a parental communication system which enables schools to send a text, voice or email message in any language to a parent or guardian's mobile phone or landline, providing information regarding absences and general parental communications. Emerge is an intuitive 'App' which enables schools to have an up-to-the-minute copy of their MIS data instantly and securely available in the palm of their hand for access anytime, anywhere. Kevin added: **"Groupcall informed us that they would be integrating Messenger with Emerge which meant that we would be able to take registration in the gym or on the field. We also realised that it would enable us to communicate with parents or guardians whilst on a school trip, or send an emergency message when access to the school system was restricted."**

Rush Croft Sports College purchased eight iPods; four of which are with the PE department, two with the student support assistants and two with the SLT. The school tried various devices including notebooks, but found these to be slightly cumbersome and not quick enough for sending data. When they decided to trial Emerge they had hoped it would be compatible with Blackberry phones as the majority of their staff use these, however, as this wasn't an option at the time, they decided to go with iPods.

The feedback from teachers has been overwhelmingly positive, with the vast majority finding the solution extremely valuable: "We began trialling Messenger integrated with Emerge before Christmas last year; we had two devices for three months and basically played around with those to find out what we could do with them and establish other areas for use. A relatively short training session from Groupcall was all we needed to get everyone up to speed and aside from getting to grips with using touch screens, all our staff have found the devices extremely user friendly." added Kevin.

A multitude of benefits

Like many schools, Rush Croft Sports College was not confident that it had the correct email addresses for all its parents and has found that voicemails and text messages were the optimal means of communication with parents. It is often found that parents or guardians are much more likely to respond to a text message and detail why their child is absent, than they are to take a call from a school. Kevin explains: "We upgraded our Messenger pack so we now have unlimited text messages which we use on a daily basis to chase up attendance. We also use it to communicate with parents about extra lessons and clubs that are going on. In addition, our system is set up so that if there is a school closure we can still contact all our parents remotely."

The PE department has also been extremely receptive to the solution as Kevin outlines:

“Our PE teachers love that they can register students on the go or even during a warm up activity, so students can benefit from a full class or activity without registration eating into the time. They have all commented that it has made the start to lessons much, much quicker.”

The teachers at the school have realised that they can use it to send specific messages home for individual students, and have begun using it for this purpose quite extensively. They use it to inform parents that their child has done particularly well in a lesson or activity, which undoubtedly stimulates parent-child conversation by introducing channels of positive feedback.

The school's student support assistants have also seen the benefits of Messenger integrated with Emerge as Kevin explains: "They can now access student timetables from their iPods to easily direct students to the classroom they need to be in for any given period. Also, when they are faced with any kind of incident they can, at the touch of a button, access all the student's records and identify if there have been any similar reports in the past. Undeniably, it saves them time as they don't have to go back to the office to access any information; they can do it all on site and record details in 'real time' as any incidents arises."

Always looking forward

"The improvements we have seen in our time management and efficiency over the last 12 months are in no small part down to Emerge which is hugely encouraging. Having said that, I feel we still aren't optimising all the solution's functions to the fullest, and I think doing so would result in further improvements." added Kevin.

The school recently trialed the solution during an emergency situation, a fire alarm, Kevin explains: "With so few iPods it would have taken too long to do a year group at a time, so we opted to do two form groups and it worked very effectively. Emerge continued to deliver instant access to staff and student information. Ideally, however, a school would need to have an iPod for each form group to make it fit for this purpose, and this is now an aim for us."

Kevin has recommended Groupcall Messenger and Emerge to a number of other schools and insists that he will continue to do so: "Some people may turn their noses up at the cost, but I honestly don't think it is unreasonable by any means. While the savings you make are difficult to measure in monetary terms, the administrative time you save, increased internal efficiency and accuracy, and overall improvement you witness within the school speak volumes."