A gateway to educational services: the challenge of parental engagement through web-enabled channels.

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Abstract: The engagement of parents into the education and learning of their children is known to have beneficial effects. Such involvement can include attendance, assessment and behavioural reporting, homework and coursework communications and access to other pastoral and academic areas of school life. In addition parents will interact with the school and Local Authority (LA) for the provision of other educational services such as phased and inyear admissions, Free School Meals (FSM), home-school transport, school uniforms and other related areas. Whilst many of these have traditionally been via personal contact, paper forms, letters or telephone there is shift towards the use of web-enabled technology for these services. This paper looks at the individual services and considers the challenge of offering them through a single one-stop-shop for educational services to parents.

Keywords: Gateway; Education; Parent; Free School Meals; Online Admission; ePortfolios; Online Appeals; Reporting; Home Access.

1. Background

The reports of Harris & Goodall (2007a), OFSTED (2007a), SIMS (2008d) and DCSF (2007a) conclude that the outcomes of parental involvement in the education and learning of young people are that of raising achievement, increasing attendance and improving behaviour.

The Children’s Plan (DCSF, 2007b) considers that a more flexible approach to parental engagement is critical to the key strands of education policy targeted to 2020.

More specifically Jim Knight (DCSF, 2008a & Knight, 2007a) announced that all secondary schools would provide parents with online reporting by September 2010 and all primary schools by 2012. These would include attendance, behaviour, progress, attainment and special needs information.
The concept of a gateway builds on the existing success of the eAdmissions National Project (DFES, 2006a) which saw all 150 LAs offer an online school application form to parents for entry to primary and secondary schools in 2006. In addition some LAs offer online appeals for unsuccessful applications. There are also a number of good practice examples (Hertfordshire; Northamptonshire; Tameside) of online parental applications dealing with Free School Meals (FSM), home school transport, online reporting and online payments and as such there is fast becoming a basket of offerings available online for parents.

Although many of these are fully functional and widely used by parents they are currently disparate and often associated with the school or LA departmental web site by which they are administered.

Reflecting, augmenting and contributing on the work already started by the DSCF Gateway to Educational (GES) programme this paper looks at what might be offered and a framework for implementation of a single point of entry for educational services.

As the Children’s Plan (DCSF, 2007b) states in reference to the co-location of services into shared areas:

‘a one-stop-shop is convenient and avoids stigma. (p. 143).

In addition the leaflet GES 2008a describes such a gateway as:

‘a framework for the delivery of joined-up and universally available web-based services for parent/carers, delivered with a consistent “look and feel” between government, schools and local authorities’

The GES vision (GES, 2008b) shows what might be offered through a gateway to educational services portal.

The vision moves from left to right from school admissions, which is the most mature and established application and as a result is the most utilised online educational portal, through the various other services such as transport, school meals, music fees, school clothing, attainment, attendance and school dinners. The process tends to move from the wider LA provision through a school emphasis, to a pupil focus.

As discussed earlier many of the facilities shown are already available and this paper looks at each one in turn before considering the infrastructure and implications of implementing such a gateway. The order follows the vision moving from left to right and drilling down into the appropriate initiatives currently existing as appropriate.

2. Online school admissions

Already available in all LAs in England since 2006 (DFES, 2006a) the system allows parents to apply for a school place at their preferred schools for pupils starting at primary or transferring to secondary school. The process involves a secure login sometimes supplying a form pre-populated from the LAs children’s database. The system is administered by the LA with allocations being made
available on the appropriate offer day via the online system.

Whilst online take-up figures have been good with some LAs achieving more than 80% average figures have been less than 50% across all LAs with some only obtaining around 5% (DCSF 2008f).

Online school admissions are important because they are often (for primary school reception class admissions) the first point of entry for a parent into the educational system.

Most applications are via a web site located in the admissions and appeals section of the LA web pages. However this is not the case for the pan-London LAs where the 33 LAs and some nearby neighbours have a single shared portal.

As well as needing to be part of a generic single LA or shared portal online admissions needs to increase its presence in order to extend the parental contact with web-based systems.

A study into LAs (GES, 2008d) that have been successful in achieving high take-up for online admissions have identified a number of key elements that result in a higher take-up. However this needs to be considered against the level of digital access to the citizens in that authority.

Clearly there are two areas here increasing access and encouraging usage both of which are considered in section 10 home access.

3. Free School Meals (FSM)

Whilst free school meals will not be something that all parents will be requiring for the 15% that are eligible it is a significant issue (Milton Keynes, 2007a). This is particularly true when one considers the stigma (Storey & Chamberlin, 2001a) attached to having to prove eligibility for FSM on a personal basis at the school. This alone may be the core reason that results in the 20% non take-up rate of FSM (School Food Trust, 2006a).

The problems with such a system are proving eligibility with a typical FSM application requiring the applicant to provide evidence of one of the following as proof of eligibility (DCSF, 2008b).

- Income Support (IS);
- Income Based Jobseekers Allowance (IBJSA);
- support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; or
- Child Tax Credit, provided they are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual income (as assessed by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs) that as of 6 April 2008 does not exceed £15,575.

- the Guarantee element of State Pension Credit.

Hampshire County Council (2008a) is an example of a web-based downloadable pdf form which parents would need to complete in order to apply for FSM. Whilst Tameside (2008a) runs a pilot online system for the application for free school meals using their own housing benefit records.
Once eligibility evidence has been supplied this needs to be processed and agreed. The difficulties of an online system are therefore the integration with the systems that hold the evidential information. Such a system checking via a secure hub is described by DCSF (2008c). However currently there are no LAs utilising this system.

Such a system is illustrated in GES, 2008c. The critical connection is the secure interface between the online FSM and the three main agencies which hold the eligibility criteria evidence electronically; namely HMRC (Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs); DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) and the Home Office.

Using a system such as this an application should be completed within 24 hours as opposed to the days or weeks using a manual form method.

Eligibility for FSM will not be consistent across the country with some LAs having significantly larger numbers than others, for example 38% in inner London and 19% in the West Midlands (DCSF, 2008g). Whilst the system takes much of the stigma of applying for FSM out of the process these areas of high eligibility are also those of high deprivation in terms of IT access so this needs to be considered for implementation and uptake.

4. Online payments

The use of a gateway could also be used for web-enabled online payments. As (GES, 2008b) indicates these could be for the purchase of school uniform after grant application and online selection, music and tuition fees, school meals via top-up card and contributions to school trips, fund raising or similar.

Basically this would be a catch-all for interactions requiring financial exchange and as with all financial online transactions these would need to be secure. This issue is considered in section 11 infrastructure.

5. Online appeals

For parents who are not successful in achieving the school of their preference during the normal admissions round as described in section 2 an appeal against the decision is the next step (BBC News, 2008a). For those who have applied online the natural progression will be to appeal online.

There are currently a small number of LAs who facilitate online admissions within their LAs however as appeals are, for legal reasons, dealt with by a separate part of the LA (usually democratic services or similar) achieving cooperation and interoperability where different systems are used is sometimes problematic.

However despite these issues online appeals is a quick-win option for the gateway with online admissions already established.
6. Parent Know How

Parent Know How (DCSF, 2008d&e) aims to make sure that parents can get the help they need, when they need it, whether through existing telephone helplines or through a new generation of services, delivered online and via mobile phones.

Its current portfolio includes; services for parents concerned about relationships, those with disabled children, those involved with social care and concerned about children’s mental health; services for lone parents, dads and mums and teenagers; and legal and educational advice.

The scope is wide but the remit is improving the well-being of children and their families and as a result improving the social and educational outcomes for all. Services are generally delivered through 3rd party experts, such as Relate, the children’s legal centre, parentlineplus etc.

Whilst the service currently delivers through a number of different access channels a link through an educational gateway would be a natural addition to the existing infrastructure.

7. Online reporting

As discussed earlier online reporting is a government target for all secondary schools by 2010 and primary schools by 2012 (DCSF, 2008a & Knight, 2007a).

Andrew-Power & Coupland (2006a) state that evidence shows that parental attitudes to education have a critical impact on the outcomes of their children and give iReporting as one example of how this may be achieved. This conclusion is reinforced by Harris & Goodall (2007a) in their evaluation of in-depth case studies.

BECTA (2008d) and SIMS (2008d) expand and develop themes on how ICT may be exploited in achieving parental engagement. These are reiterated in BECTA (2007c) in which the use of ICT is considered critical to inclusive learning, resulting in school, home and the community becoming much more closely inter-related with learning.

Desforges with Abouchaar (2003a) give an overview of the rich vane of literature that has been written on the subject of parental engagement and DfES (2007a) gives central government backing to this theme.

More specifically online reporting will generally cover the following areas; attainment; attendance; behaviour; achievement and special educational needs. There are various delivery mechanisms for these however the main ones are via SMS test messaging (BECTA, 2008a&e) particularly useful for alerts such as absence or behavioural reporting and via a web-based medium such as PC, Mac or Digital TV (BBC News, 2006a). The latter could be accessed via the school website or intranet through the gateway.

BECTA (2008d) has produced a toolkit which will help schools to set up online
reporting in schools with a target (BECTA, 2007b) that by 2010 all schools will have an integrated learning and management system. School MIS suppliers are developing their own systems for this also, examples are SIMS Learning Gateway (2008a,b,c) and SERCO Facility eportal (2008a&b).

Of course this will require parents to have access to the internet and indeed a mobile phone for text messaging. Whilst the latter is fairly common place the former is less so and this is dealt with in section 10, home access.

8. ePorfolios

Tolley (2008a), Barrett (2008a) and BECTA (2008f) give an overview of exactly what should be in an ePortfolio and how it should be used.

According to Tolley some of the major directives of an ePortfolio are that it should be; personal; portable; generic; MIS-independent; lite; lifelong and accessible.

The Managing Information Across Partners (MIAP, 2008a), Learner Plan might well be a precursor to the ePortfolio although it is currently in its pilot form.

The Unique Learner Number (ULN) for post-14 learners for diplomas issued via the Learner Registration Service from MIAP is a step in this direction but limited by age and qualification.

All of the above would require storage and access via a single portal from wherever the learner was located using a single learner profile. The gateway would an appropriate access point.

9. Parental records

Parental records held online are similar in concept to the ePortfolio except that they are held by the parent. Linking to health, social services, online reporting and other agencies the record would be an overview of the child’s health, well-being and achievement.

It is based broadly on the concept that the parent will have a record of their children available in one place and accessible at any time.

The concept is only in the visualisation stage and would require storage on a database available from any location again possibly through an educational gateway.

The concept of a knowledge-based expert system that can assist parents in any issues that they may have about their children is a closely related area again with the focus on the parent. Similar in concept to parent know-how except that it would be primarily electronic in nature again accessed through a gateway.
10. Home access

As reiterated in the preceding sections for online services and ultimately a gateway to be effective the ‘digital divide’ has to be breached. The Children’s Plan states that there are over a million children with no access to a computer at home (DCSF, 2007b).

The home access programme aims to ensure that every learner in England (5 to 19 year olds in maintained education) has access to increased educational opportunities via ICT resources at home (BECTA, 2008b).

A taskforce (BECTA, 2007a; BBC News, 2007a) was set up and the final report (BECTA, 2008g) recommends that government intervenes to accelerate home access which is secure and safe, fully inclusive, beneficial to all users and delivers a comprehensive programme of learning to all. The initial target group to be those who can afford home access yet remain sceptical of its benefits.

A gateway will both contribute to and benefit from such an initiative in enabling a single, secure login to a variety of useful and educational services. The inclusion of all parents into the digital community will encourage more online use with all of the benefits discussed in this paper.

This leads us to how the whole concept can be engineered in a sustainable way.

11. Infrastructure

A gateway as described above will need to include the following features:

a. Be accessible from anywhere.
b. Have a single login for all services.
c. Pre-populate forms and documentation where appropriate from existing records.
d. Be available through any access channel.
e. Be cost-free to the user for access.
f. Have the highest security protocols.
g. Be robust.
h. Use current technological processes.
i. Enable access to all.
j. Be based at a location the user finds accessible.

Requirement (a) would exclude the use of an LA intranet or similar and this would have some security implications in (f). However using technology employed by the more responsible high street shops and financial institutions or even that already used for online admissions should ensure both are adequately provided for.

A single login (b) might utilise technologies such as Shibboleth (2008a) and would mean that once logged in to the gateway all access privileges and protocols would be passed to the component modules of the portal. Information about the user would also be passed to each module allowing pre-population to occur thus
reducing retyping of information and using the technology in a sensible user-friendly manner.

Access channels (d) should include PCs and Macs but additional channels such as Digital TV and mobile phones should be included in order to increase the diversity and mobility of access.

Obviously the use of such a gateway should be free (e) to the user although this does not exclude the option of unobtrusive and relevant advertising e.g. school uniform, travel insurance etc.

The site would need to be secure and robust (f&g) to ensure confidence and dependability. The use of multiple servers would give contingency as a result of technical failure and the use of industry standard web security tools will minimise the risk of intrusion.

Whilst the use of Web 2.0 type features should keep the site evolving the site needs to be accessible. The use of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C, 2008a) and Disability Discrimination Act (DDA, 2008a) compliance and related protocols will ensure this is the case.

Finally (j) the point of access is important if the gateway is to be used at all.

12. Implementation Issues

The implementation of such a gateway presents several challenges some technological and some sociological.

Whilst the technology exists for such a system it may not be available to all. In this respect the Home Access section 10 initiative should help. In addition the extension of schools and libraries as learning and access points for all will further extend the potential user base.

Also such a gateway must interlink with all educational services for it to be effective. Whilst LA and government websites may not pose insurmountable problems links to all the school websites, parental eportals and learning platforms is a far more complex task requiring the cooperation and assistance of many different systems and personnel.

Whilst the implementation of a gateway is a significant move it should also be remembered that existing gateways already exist in the form of the Government Gateway (2008a), existing LA portals and the schools’ themselves. Such a gateway is intended to supplement these and not replace them. As BECTA (2008c) vividly exemplars the digital world is changing both from a learner and user’s point of view and it is important that service providers are attuned to this in their access points.

As described in section 11 the challenge of a single sign-on and authentication amongst the plethora of security issues are considerable but not insurmountable However it is important that work begins sooner rather than later.
13. Conclusions

Such a gateway delivers benefits to a large range of stakeholders. The strategic level benefits are outlined in (GES, 2007a) and include for parent/carers reduced social exclusion, increased satisfaction and improved pupil achievement. For schools reduced costs, accord with school improvement agenda and improved pupil achievement. For LAs increased efficiency, reduced service costs, encouragement to use other online services and improved image with citizens. For central government accords with Varney, transformational government and school improvement agenda.

As can be seen the model delivers benefits for all, creating efficiencies and bringing together disparate services into a single place. There should be a knock-on effect with new services being discovered as the more mature and more regularly used ones are being utilised. The process should become endemic and transformed within the parent/carers engagement with educational service be they central, local or school-based.

In this paper we have discussed the vision, the components and the infrastructure and the implementation requirements. It is not a simple matter particularly with so many partners schools to deal with. However the creation of a regional LA by LA consensus building on eAdmissions should make this easier to achieve in contrast to the Government Gateway which is often perceived as too remote from the daily life of the users with many preferring to use a web search engine such as Google to find the local web site for the service that they require.

As web services expand and develop it is critical that educational services keep pace and begin to demonstrate leadership rather than follower mentality. The creation of a gateway is a step in the right direction although its parts are greater than its whole. The next few years will be essential to the development of this vision.

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