EDUCATION TODAY
www.education-today.co.uk May 2007

16th July 2007
Freq: Monthly
Circ: 73,126

ICT

ICT in education, education, education

Author: Managing Director of ramsac, Robert May

When Labour was elected to govern in May 1997, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair set out his manifesto for office by stating that "Education, education, education," was the top priority. Following Mr Blair's recent departure from number ten Downing Street, debate has already started, chronicling the highs and lows of his tenure regarding this pledge - tuition fees, grades, number of teachers and investment being the hot topics. But undoubtedly during this decade in office, schools, colleges and universities have experienced a major revolution in the use of information technology.

Today a typical secondary school in the UK will have an average of 275 computers, with 99% of them having an IT network and Internet/broadband access (according to TeacherNet, a website run by the Communications Unit of the Department for Education and Skills).

One school that perfectly illustrates this growth of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in education is Shireland in Sandwell, West Midlands, one of 28 schools that participated in the DfES (Department for Education & Skills) four-year ICT Test Bed project. According to a Cabinet Office report from the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, published on 30th November 2006, the school had virtually no use of ICT in teaching and learning in 1997 and only 20 PCs in the entire school. At the time of the report the school had 620 PCs, interactive display equipment in every teaching space and had developed an online learning gateway to manage information and digital teaching resources.

The ICT Test Bed project was conducted in three deprived areas of England in order to explore how ICT could be used to support the Government's wider agenda for education reform. It demonstrated that with the use of technology GSCE and primary school test scores can be improved. The Schools Minister Jim Knight commented on the project, "The Test Bed project demonstrates just how ICT has the power to transform young people's learning - both at school and beyond the school gate." He added: "We will be looking to capitalise on this project and replicate it across the country."

This support for ICT is further endorsed by Becta, a government organisation committed to improving learning through technology, stating that teachers and pupils had found the introduction of ICT both positive and motivating. This represented a shift in the views of teachers, in particular, with initial scepticism and apprehension being gradually replaced by optimism and confidence. This attitude change is demonstrated in Seven Kings School, London, which is referenced in the Cabinet Office report as having 150 computers in 1997, with ICT not integrated into lessons and teachers fearful of using it. Roll forward to November 2006 and all teachers were in possession of laptops and the school wirelessly enabled.

During the past decade the government has committed almost a quarter of a million pounds per school on ICT, equating to more than £5bn in all. Whilst this figure seems considerable it pails into insignificance when compared to the £1.2bn that is spent on education every week – well over £600bn since 1997 and on a percentage of overall spend on education the investment falls way behind the typical percentage spend you would expect to see on the balance sheet of a business. Yet whilst we call for the newly formed cabinet to look at greater investment in ICT it is vitally important that education establishments spend wisely to ensure they get the very best return from their allocated ICT budget.

It is here that much can be learnt from the business world (the average number of computers in a secondary school is similar to that of a medium sized business). Knowing what to buy, when to upgrade and what to replace are all major issues when purchasing IT hardware, software and services, regardless of whether you are in business or academia. Of course there are schools which do benefit from experienced ICT co-ordinators, however many do not have this luxury and are forced to operate in a 'break-fix' manner, rather than taking a longer-term strategic approach to improving their ICT services for both staff, pupils and increasingly the wider community.

The budgeting, specifying, installing and ongoing maintenance of the myriad ICT items on a growing agenda pose a big challenge for the most seasoned ICT co-ordinator and for those without in-house assistance, the ability to administer local area networks (LANS) with PCs, laptops, scanners and printers; manage Internet and broadband service provision; roll-out of new and upgraded software applications and operating systems; maintain databases, intranets, extranets and website; install interactive whiteboards and operate wireless services is daunting to say the least.

One solution to this problem for a growing number of academic institutions has been to look at how commercial businesses have tackled similar challenges. This has led to many choosing to work with specialist IT consultancy services, that are well placed to provide expert guidance regarding the current state of an ICT infrastructure, understand the existing and future requirements of that particular school, college or university and what hardware, software and services will be needed (and when) to achieve these goals and maximise the investment.

One such establishment is King Edward's School in Witley, Surrey that chose the independent IT consultancy, ramsac, to work with to manage its ICT operations, bringing its experience in managing IT for business and applying them to the school. Its Director of Information and Communication Technology, Brian Turner explains why, "They were able to offer the school certain experience and knowledge that we lacked. ramsac has provided us with solutions to many of our IT issues, from technological development, business continuity planning, server failure and technology up-grades to recruiting the right member of staff to manage the day-to-day duties in our ICT department."

A specialist IT consultancy is able to take the stress out of ICT and provide the services and skills required to match each individual case. For some this may simply be support for the ICT co-ordinator at the end of the phone, a part-time ICT member of staff, or for others it may mean working closely together to develop a longer term overall strategy. This enables those for whom a dedicated in-house team may not be practical, to outsource all or part of their ICT needs. In return they benefit from properly planned solutions and support without any of the headaches often associated with managing technology.

Whether ICT is managed in-house or by a specialist consultancy, one thing is guaranteed, as Prime Minister Gordon Brown set out his new government for 'change', one of his first actions was to create the new Department for Children, Schools and Families, headed by Ed Balls, making it clear that education, education, education remains firmly at the top of the political agenda. Undoubtedly with the evidence stacking up in favour of the benefits derived from ICT assisted learning and the rapid pace of technology, the infrastructure in the classroom and skills development of the staff will need to keep pace to ensure that expectations and potential are achieved.

www.ramsac.com