How a proactive special school in the West Midlands responded to the pandemic by moving 80-90% of their IT systems to the cloud... reducing their carbon footprint at the same time

RM Education

Sutton School

The Background

Sutton School is a coeducational foundation special school, located in Dudley in the West Midlands. It provides education for around 180 pupils aged 11 to 16 years. Pupils are drawn from across the local area and it is recommended that they all have a Statement of Special Educational Needs, where their education cannot adequately be met in mainstream schools.

The school aims to provide every member of the school community with the opportunity to achieve his or her true potential and ambitions through a broad, balanced curriculum matched to their individual needs, ensuring all pupils mature into adults capable of an independent life which will be personally rewarding and of service and benefit to their local communities.

The school has worked with RM as its primary IT service partner for over 20 years.

The Challenge

The school proudly admit to having always been a very IT proficient school, embracing new technologies wherever and whenever they were applicable.

> "The Covid lockdown required that we took proactive measures to ensure we were best able to support both staff and pupils. By bringing forward our movement to the cloud and through the delivery of training and support, we have helped ensure that the systems which underpin teaching and learning have increasingly become available at both school and home. Our relationship with RM has been instrumental in helping ensure that amongst the challenges such a move presents, technical difficulties were rapidly addressed and overcome".
>
> **Ian Curnow,** Deputy Headteacher

Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic outbreak in March 2020, Sutton School had started the move to cloud-based operations including software, communication and storage. Google Classroom was being adopted by some – but not all – teachers, and Microsoft Teams was being used in a very limited manner. Administrators were able to access necessary drives and applications through their remote (CC4) access.

This all changed with lockdown – and despite remaining open catering for a small number of vulnerable children, and those of key workers – they chose to use lockdown as a catalyst to move forward their use of the cloud to support pupils and staff.

> "Sutton School swiftly adapted their teaching and learning to match the needs of the pupils. Communication was enhanced through Microsoft Teams and use of Google Classroom. We had MS Teams meetings for form groups so pupils could still see each other, interact and discuss how 'Lockdown' was for them. By giving pupils individual Chromebooks, we have promoted independent learning in a safe manner and there is no cross contamination with pupils sharing resources".
>
> **Danielle Doman,** Teacher

The Response

Moving a significant element of school systems to the cloud presented a number of new challenges during lockdown, albeit with significant understanding from both staff and students alike. The school believe that this would have been even harder had they not made the right decision several years earlier in selecting an IT partner who could help them in situations such as these – albeit that no-one could have envisaged that in early Spring 2020.

> "The team at RM were able to assist us and guide us through the steps we needed to take, troubleshooting and problem solving along the way. Their input was invaluable and helped us successfully manage a complex transition".
>
> **James Chamberlain,** ICT Manager

Post-lockdown the school can now boast a one-to-one device for every student and teacher. All software is now cloud-based and all communication and meetings are performed via Microsoft Teams. Their server-based drives are no longer used and one drive now houses all shared files for staff and group SharePoint access for the whole school, including students. Teachers are increasingly using Google Classroom to support teaching and learning and every student has a Chromebook which accesses available resources and lesson activities, providing fast, mobile internet access with all day battery life.

> "We believe that the school now operates an 80-90% cloud based structure and has benefited greatly from such an approach. We could not have done that without the help of our IT partner – RM – who supported us throughout this transition".
>
> **James Chamberlain,** ICT Manager

Whilst every school is different, Sutton School were better prepared than most, in that they had already started the move to the cloud. In many respects the pandemic enabled the school to pause (for a moment) and reflect on what they had, before stimulating them to take the more radical steps to future proof the IT infrastructure of their school in order to better support pupils and staff during lockdown and beyond.

Key to this was the involvement of the respective technology engineers – the school onsite technicians, and the remote team provided by RM. Together they played a key role both as sounding board for each other, as facilitator and as liaison to the wider RM team. In that respect, this really was a partnership – an extension to the school team, when they needed it most.

> "By embracing our cloud-based resources to meet the new challenges presented by Covid19, we have been able to continue supporting and teaching our pupils in these difficult times".
>
> **Daryl Charles,** Headteacher

Whilst the move required both a financial investment and staff time, the school felt this was a worthwhile venture and they are already seeing the benefits – staff are communicating better than ever – both inside and outside of the classroom – which during this unpredictable time, has proven invaluable.

One – perhaps surprising – benefit, has been the move to a largely paperless system. Everyone in the school now seeks to minimise paperwork and printing whenever they can. This has not been without its challenges, but they have made significant changes in approach, with new workflow systems within the school and the end result has no doubt reduced their carbon footprint, saved some money, and made processes not only quicker but much more reliable due to the digital trace they now leave behind.

The Lessons Learnt

1. **Future proofing your IT systems is key.** With a move to the cloud already envisioned, much of the necessary infrastructure was already in place. This ensured that building systems fit for the future could accelerate upon lockdown.

2. **Significant change requires significant training.** To suddenly have to show teachers how to access their systems when they are already working remotely, in a way that they could then pass that knowledge on to their pupils is certainly challenging. The good news is that all parties were suddenly very attentive, and there is nothing better than "learning on the job"!

3. **Have a reliable technology partner at your side.** No school can be expected to do what they had to do, but those who already had an IT partner that they could call upon, certainly had a head start. For Sutton School, they had a long-term relationship with RM – a company who was experienced helping schools up and down the country cope with very similar issues.

4. **We all like one stop shop solutions but in truth they do not exist.** Research your software programmes and platforms carefully, utilising best practice resources from companies like your IT partner where you can. One size does not always fit all, but listening to the experience of others – for example from Case Studies such as this – could give you the added insight that you need.

5. **Furnish staff members with reliable technology and communicate with them throughout.** One thing that the lockdown revealed was how important it is to have a reliable device that allows you to use the latest software, and do so in a fast and efficient way. Cheap or ageing hardware can only make a difficult situation worse.

6. **Fire prevent rather than fire fight.** Put systems in place to deal with issues and consult your IT partner about your intentions. When you roll out any new system, you will inevitably have issues but there are ways to minimise them, if you work with others along the way.

7. **Take advice from others.** Ask other schools and talk to the experts on the topics. Whilst all schools are different, many of the underlying issues are not. A technology partner that works with many schools will almost certainly have valuable experience that can help guide your decision making.

The Legacy

The pandemic has been an awful situation – our economy has suffered, children's education has been disrupted, and – sadly – people have died, yet the situation has also driven positive change in response to this challenge. We cannot turn the clock back and undo any of this… but we can learn from it, and especially build on some of the positive things that we have done during lockdown.

At Sutton School, they name five, but there may be more:

1. build on the investments in Remote Learning via some form of **Hybrid Learning** – permitting students and staff to continue their education both in class and remotely

2. become less dependent upon paper and **reduce your carbon footprint** – no-one thought this was possible, but Sutton School have proved it can be done

3. increase the use of **cloud-based resources and platforms** – the ability to access files and systems from anywhere on any device is an imperative, and when you start to do it, you will never look back

4. **improve communication** between staff, students and parents through the use of platforms like Microsoft Teams – once you see what MS Teams can do, you wonder why you never introduced it earlier – it just makes everything so much easier

5. **invest wisely** when you can – budgets are always challenging, but some things have moved from being classed as luxuries to becoming necessities – such as modern and reliable hardware devices, and dependable technology partners. When you do invest, do not just take the cheapest option – some things are more expensive for a reason.

"I was given my own 'Chromebook' for school. It is good, as I don't have to share my laptop with anyone else, especially as the virus is around and I don't want to catch it. It is fast, the internet connects well. It has really helped my learning as I can research on my own".

Callum Drake, Year 10 Student

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