

Somerset County Council's Alternative Provision Programme Successfully Re-integrates Pupils Using Blackboard Collaborate

If a pupil throws a chair across a classroom, everyone sees it and focuses their attention on that pupil. On the other hand, if a pupil is purposely disruptive and throws a chair across their bedroom while taking a class online, nobody will notice, depriving them of the satisfaction of being the centre of attention. Using an online virtual classroom is something that can help to teach such a pupil how to behave properly without disrupting the whole class, whilst they maintain their education. This is just one of the numerous benefits that an Alternative Provision programme has discovered by using Blackboard Collaborate to hold engaging and effective online virtual courses.

In the 2008/09 academic year, the Somerset County Council's Alternative Provision programme successfully reintegrated a number of pupils who had been excluded from mainstream school by using a combination of tools, including Blackboard Collaborate, to enable teachers to personally communicate with their pupils in an online environment.

About Alternative Provisioning

In 2007, the UK government created legislation declaring that when a young person of compulsory school age is permanently excluded from school, a local authority has the duty to provide full-time alternative education from the sixth day of exclusion. In the UK, the thousands of children being educated in Alternative Provision are some of the most vulnerable in society. Although the perception is that Alternative Provision predominantly teaches excluded pupils, nearly half of the children are there for other reasons. For example, some have been bullied and are too scared to attend school, while others are ill, injured or are teenage mothers. Currently, it is the schools responsibility to provide education. However, this is often just paper work sent home to do.

Why Choose Alternative Provision?

The main reasons for choosing Alternative Provision often include:

- ▶ **The pupil's key talents are not being developed through the national curriculum. Alternative Provision recognises that we are all individuals with different strengths and weaknesses and that pupils learn in different ways and in different environments.**
- ▶ **The pupil has had one or more fixed-term exclusions and is considered to be at risk of permanent exclusion from school. Alternative Provision is a strategy to avoid permanent exclusion for pupils and to encourage inclusion in education.**
- ▶ **The pupil has not been attending school regularly and is unlikely to achieve GCSEs. Alternative Provision offers a different setting with a broader choice of subjects for pupils, which may encourage attendance.**
- ▶ **The pupil is on the Off Roll register awaiting a school place. Alternative Provision gives pupils a chance to engage in education while they are waiting for a school place to become available.**

There are many advantages of Alternative Provision. Pupils can choose from a variety of educational options, including GCSEs, vocational training and qualifications, and practical skills that lead to jobs. They are often given a greater degree of flexibility in what and how they learn, which helps to develop a child's independence and also encourages him or her to take personal responsibility. Pupils that get this choice discover that they enjoy their education and are much more motivated to attend class and achieve good results - all of which promote higher self-esteem.

Pupils Learn Without Even Realising It

In 2007, Somerset County Council began teaching its Alternative Provision curriculum via online collaboration tools from Blackboard Collaborate. It chose to use a virtual classroom primarily because of the large area of the county and the long journey times that would be involved for pupils to meet face to face. A virtual classroom was the obvious choice, with so many of today's pupils having grown up with technology and the familiarity of using the internet.

"Children today after school go home and watch TV, or turn on a laptop or Xbox. If we engage them in a similar environment they'll engage with us more easily," explains Nigel Shipton, Group Manager for Access, Attendance and Equalities at Somerset County Council.

Over a four-year period the programme has grown from 5 to over 20 permanent members of staff with a number of outreach teachers who work with pupils.

Blackboard Collaborate, to us, has been invaluable. The key reasons for us using Blackboard Collaborate are that it's a stable platform, easy to use, and an online version of a physical class. As we have experienced teachers, it takes them minimal time to play around with it until they're ready to teach.

Nigel Shipton
Gp Manager for Access, Attendance and Equalities at
Somerset County Council

The programme covers core subjects such as Maths, Science and Geography; however, subject matter is taught using an alternative methodology. As an example, a teacher may provide a lesson using China as the subject. During the following six weeks, the teacher and pupils login to Blackboard Collaborate from their PCs as the teacher begins a project about Chinese food. While discussing Chinese cuisine, the teacher will discuss currency and food prices to teach mathematics skills, talk about the history of China and why particular foods are popular and show the geography of China when discussing where the food is grown.

"We teach in a way that our pupils are learning their lessons without really realising they're learning it," says Shipton.

Learning live online via Blackboard Collaborate allows the pupils to interact at a high level with their teachers via audio, video, messaging and application sharing. Such engaging courses lead directly to high success rates.

Re-integration has been successful because of the flexibility of Blackboard Collaborate solutions and effective instructional strategies utilised by teachers. For example, building problem solving skills, coping strategies and developing social skills such as cooperative working.

"When they finish our programme and re-enter standard education, pupil's behaviours are much more manageable," Shipton says. "We've had schools tell us that the work they did with us is so successful that they want to use Blackboard Collaborate even more. Their pupils engage better once they've gone through our programme."

The flexibility of Blackboard Collaborate allows Somerset to enable pupils with many unique needs and who are living in many different situations, to continue with their education.

Platform Flexibility Saves Somerset and Its Teachers Time and Money

For teachers, Blackboard Collaborate helps save time and provides enormous flexibility. "There's no carbon footprint, no worry about getting stuck in traffic, and if you're not well, you don't have to take time off work if you are able to work from home," concludes Shipton.

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