'Inclusion for all' – how one Academy school embraced Google Workspace, introduced Chromebooks for all pupils, used RM Unify to glue it all together, and now see blended learning as the future for education in this country

RM™

The background

King James I Academy is a medium size Academy and Sixth Form centre for students aged 11–18 in the town of Bishop Auckland in County Durham in North East England, with over 800 students in Years 7 to 11, and a further 160 6th Form students on roll. The Academy is over-subscribed, serves a deprived catchment, and can trace its history to the early 17th Century. Leaders and teachers at King James pride themselves in the quality and breadth of the curriculum on offer, with expert staff ensuring that all children are well cared for, supported and receive the best education possible.

Against that background, the school has long been a believer in the importance of technology in modern teaching and learning, securing the services of RM as their third-party technology partner over 20 years ago. At that time, the school had 24 workstations and one server – today it boasts 500 to 600 individual computing devices, a small number of virtual servers and a Chromebook in the hands of every pupil.

Making technology work for you

Around five years ago, the school received funding through the Priority Schools Building Programme to replace one of its buildings with a new modern purpose-built set of classrooms as well as a refurbishment of its existing Grade II Listed building. This proved the catalyst to invest in a more modern technological infrastructure, with a reliable WiFi network made up of 57 access points, and the then Headteacher Mr Nick Grieveson (recently retired) made the decision to offer each new Year 7 student a Chromebook device.

"We just would not have been able to do what we have with Chromebooks in our older building – a strong, reliable internet service is essential in today's world".

Pete Grimshaw, Network Manager

About 2 years later – with the previous Year 7's now in Year 8 using their Chromebooks, and a new cohort of Year 7's issued with their own devices – the school also invested in RM Unify as the single sign-on access portal for all of their online software applications, and that made a huge difference to the user experience for staff and pupils.

The next decision was Google or Microsoft. Until this point King James was a Microsoft school, but with Chromebooks installed, it opened a new avenue of thought.

> **"RM invited us to one of the RM Seminars in Newcastle, and during one of the sessions, the RM presenter demonstrated what G Suite (now Google Workspace) could do in Education. We returned to school and persuaded the headteacher that Google and Chromebooks were the way to go, based on what we had seen at the RM Seminar and we could run them alongside Microsoft Office on the PCs".**
>
> **Pete Grimshaw,** Network Manager

Whilst this decision was taken, teaching staff were reluctant to lose access to the Microsoft suite of products, and this was where RM Unify came into its own – making it easy to toggle between Google Workspace and Microsoft Office 365.

> **"RM Unify proved really helpful in making it easy to access the many technology platforms we use on a daily basis – having all the tiles in one place makes it very intuitive to navigate – and it is so easy to add a new tile when we add new software".**
>
> **Becky Newton,** Lead Practitioner Chromebooks

All students were provided a Google email account, with each staff member having both a Google account and one for Microsoft. RM Unify made it easy to display both side-by-side.

> **"It is interesting that we had all the building blocks in place long before the pandemic hit. No-one could have foreseen what happened, but we are all grateful that we made the decisions when we did".**
>
> **Pete Grimshaw,** Network Manager

The next step was to look at the Server infrastructure, with RM helping the school replace their servers with a RM designed Dell VRTX system with SAN and Backup – moving to CC-on-prem for remote access. By this point, the school had been investing in Chromebooks for several years as devices that pupils could use – initially for homework or as an extra resource in class. This 'Chromebook Scheme' was an initiative set up for each Year 7 cohort, with the aim that they would keep their devices throughout the times at King James. When the pandemic first struck and resulted in the first national school closure in March 2020 (to all but the vulnerable and children of key workers), King James' mainly relied on their website and other platforms to set work for pupils to do at home. This was the best option at the time as not all students had access to a Chromebook or a device of their own.

It was at this stage that the school made the decision to audit student access to Chromebook devices for a more consistent learning strategy for remote learning. Parents had been asked to

make a financial contribution in the form of a refundable deposit – in part to minimise the cost to the school, but also to ensure a joint commitment to such an expensive investment. This proved acceptable to most, with 95 percent of parents willingly paying the £40 deposits requested.

This was a significant project – to roll out devices right across the school – with a huge team effort supported by admin staff, IT technicians and a dedicated Chromebook liaison staff member (Laura Newton) who worked tirelessly to fill the gaps. By the end of September 2020, every student had a Chromebook. Whilst they continued to rely on parental contributions, the school also benefited from the DfE Laptops for Schools programme to provide devices for all, as well as Wi-Fi dongles for those with inadequate internet connection at home.
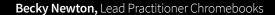
Under guidance from the Leadership Team, an internal champion was sought – a well-respected class teacher with a genuine vision for how this could work.

> **"Some of our teachers were a little resistant to the use of Chromebooks and Google Workplace at first, but it didn't take long for Becky to convince them what they were missing out on, and before long they were advocates too. Once this transition had been made, the step to remote learning was a much easier one".**
>
> **Pete Grimshaw,** Network Manager

She researched the various platforms, as well as the pros and cons of each one. She looked at specific applications and identified opportunities such as Google Apps (now called Google Workspace) for Formative Assessment, Google Drive for students storing their work electronically as a long-term revision tool, and Google Classroom so all students could access remote learning resources and live lessons through Google Meet… concluding that this was the future of education and a space where King James could lead the way.

> **"We went from around 40% of the school having access to a working Chromebook to 97% having one... within 3-4 weeks. This was a huge ordeal – both in auditing who had what, as well as ensuring all students (and staff) had been trained in how to use it".**
>
> **Becky Newton,** Lead Practitioner Chromebooks

It became almost a production line – as the Chromebooks arrived from the various sources, the in-school IT team configured them to work with the necessary school software, cyber security and safeguarding programmes, before the project team allocated them to the next pupil in turn, ensuring they had been trained in how to use them through whole school tutorials, and had the necessary logins and passwords.

By the time the third lockdown came in January 2021, the school were probably in the best position they could be – they had a cloud-enabled network, staff and students had access to devices, they had a remote learning platform, and everyone knew how to use it. The School had also purchased

the new RM Tutor software application for Chromebooks, which syncs with Google Classroom in readiness for students returning to school. This proved very helpful for teaching and learning, as well as monitoring students while they were working.

"It totally transformed the way we taught – inside and outside of the classroom".

Becky Newton, Lead Practitioner Chromebooks

It is clear that without the vision of the former headteacher – alongside the full support of the Leadership Team – this project would never have reached completion. The Academy is rightly proud of the progress made in such a short space of time and the huge benefit that Chromebooks have provided to students working from home in challenging circumstances.

"What started out as 'thinking outside the box' by introducing Chromebooks as a tool for learning has now developed into futureproofing the education our students' experience in King James. RM has been integral in supporting this development, particularly through RM Unify and RM Tutor".

Simon Whitehead, Headteacher

Training was important and the school employed a variety of different strategies – starting with staff:

1. they identified "Chromebook Drivers" within each department – the "go to" person, who received extra tuition and became the local subject matter expert, and they in turn trained others in the team. Throughout the process they have been a fundamental part of the team to tailor and drive the use of Chromebooks for their subject and promote the whole school vision for Chromebooks;

2. they did a lot of "learning on the job" – for example in holding virtual assembles showing how to use Google Drive and Google Classroom;

3. they delivered sessions during INSET days guided by the Leadership Team to give everyone a basic understanding, coupled with bespoke training via dedicated workshops on specific issues – such as monitoring usage amongst pupils – asking staff to sign up to the modules where they had an interest or a specific development need.

"There were lots of barriers at the beginning – now I think everyone is much more confident and each person can relate to a certain "wow" moment when they discovered something amazing about the tech they were using".

Becky Newton, Lead Practitioner Chromebooks

Next on the list was parents. The school wrote to them laying out their vision and what they were trying to achieve. This ensured that pupils brought their devices back into school each day. They also put videos and workshops on Google Classroom and the school website for the parents to learn for themselves.

This proved effective and feedback from parents was numerous and positive – *"the interaction between pupils and teachers has been really good"… "my children have enjoyed the different forums for accessing learning"… "the ability to email the school with any queries and receive daily feedback has been great"… "the structure the school adopted for remote learning has been brilliant, with student progress well supported"… "we have been impressed with the level of understanding of the new applications by teachers and the great use of technology across the school"* – which all goes to make the hard work by everyone so worthwhile.

> **"We knew that parents were a key stakeholder and I am proud to say that liaising with parents has been fundamental to get us to this position. Our next step is to ensure parents can access email summaries to continue to monitor their child's work in Google Classroom and access an array of materials including self-help videos via the website".**
>
> **Becky Newton,** Lead Practitioner Chromebooks

Perhaps the most gratifying is the response from students:

- *"PE lessons remained one of my favourite during lockdown as I was able to remain active even from home"* Year 7 student

- *"I love the English lessons online as they include interactive PowerPoints"* Year 8 student

- *"French lessons work well online as we can practice our speaking"* Year 9 student

- *"I like the pre-recorded lessons in Science, so we can work at our own pace"* Year 10 student

- *"For me I like the History lessons as they are both live and interactive"* Year 11 student

With the end of Lockdown in March 2021 the school are determined to continue to teach with these devices – whilst they played a crucial role while students were learning remotely, they have a just as important role now they are all back in the classroom.

> **"Every teacher I speak with is convinced they will build on what we learnt during Lockdown – recording live lessons, sending them out via Google Meet and marking them in Google Classroom".**
>
> **Dan Stamp,** IT Technician and School Webmaster

> "For me, the greatest recognition comes from the mouths of our students themselves – with lines like "school is amazing for online learning"... "it had been a good experience"... and "we had amazing support and effort from our teachers". Our school was in an excellent position and responded quickly to the move to remote learning. We continue to develop our blended learning techniques and approaches which ensures we continue to be successful leaders in learning for the future".
>
> **Joanne Aitkin,** Acting Deputy Head Teacher

The school are still operating both Microsoft and Google and have no plans to change that model – staff meetings take place on Microsoft Teams, whilst students use Google Meet; for file storage and synchronisation, staff access Microsoft One Drive, whilst pupils use Google Drive; and for emails they use both – those in the Gmail inbox originate from students, those in Outlook come from other staff.

> "Whilst it might seem sensible to select one or the other platform, the reality is that there is a good reason to keep both, and with RM Unify stitching the two together, it really is easy to have both working in tandem".
>
> **Dan Stamp,** IT Technician and School Webmaster

One of the consequences of so many pupils now online is ensuring that safeguarding and policies are up to date. For King James' this was made easier through Google Workspace, as the functionality that goes with that enables the local IT team to be able to control what a pupil can and cannot do within Google Classroom.

> "I would hate to think how a school with a large quantity of unmanaged devices would cope with their safeguarding obligations".
>
> **Dan Stamp,** IT Technician and School Webmaster

For King James' they also make use of the RM Tutor Programme which allows a teacher at the front of the class to see exactly what each student is looking at, so that they can spot if a student is going off subject (such as playing a game).

> **"RM Tutor is absolutely brilliant – not only can I check that everyone is keeping up with what I am teaching, but I can also send them messages, play them videos – all from my own machine and offer support and feedback whilst staying socially distant from the students".**
>
> **Becky Newton,** Lead Practitioner Chromebooks

That said, there were still many parents with concerns and worries about how their child might be using the devices. Fortunately, Google Admin Console provides a complete history of what sites a child has visited and what they have done on that site, as well as blocking those that are considered inappropriate. Google Admin Console is a useful application, as it allows a school much more control over student Chromebooks - once each Chromebook is enrolled, it allows the school to lock the device if it is lost or stolen, displaying a customised message on the screen such as "Please Return to King James I Academy" and advising that the Chromebook will be useless to anyone else. It also enables the school to prevent students from downloading apps, as well as allowing the school to check when the Chromebook is being used (log in times and dates). Best of all, it enables the school to download software or links to all Chromebooks at once, or to groups such as classes or year groups, when teaching staff request it.

> **"There is a significant responsibility on the local IT team to ensure school equipment is not misused, and we really do need to stay one-step ahead all the time. I think we have done a pretty good job so far".**
>
> **Dan Stamp,** IT Technician and School Webmaster

Working with a third-party partner

For King James', they had made the decision to work with a national technology partner many years ago, and over the years, RM has supported them in many aspects of their technology journey, with that support coming to the fore during the pandemic – sharing advice and best practice from other schools facing similar challenges.

One of the most important bridges for the school was RM Unify – having a single log-on that opened the door to all of the software applications that a student would need – from their email to their homework, and from specialised music applications to being able to interact in a foreign language – it really did make it so much easier to get everyone on line in those early days.

For staff, it was CC4-on-Premise that proved the key application. Whilst they had it pre-pandemic, it was rarely used, but as soon as staff realised they could access all of their files and applications from home, it became a lifesaver for everyone. With CC4 it meant that the IT team could change people's passwords remotely from home – again allowing them to keep the school running seamlessly despite the constraints imposed by Lockdown.

The lessons learnt

1. **Find a champion** – change is hard. Having someone who is passionate about it, who understands the big picture and whose enthusiasm is infectious, ensures that even the biggest doubters come with you on the journey. Having the head and SLT's support is also key, as there will be many moments along that path when you need someone to smooth the way.

2. **You need good WiFi** – most school buildings have evolved over time, and whilst they may bring nostalgia, without a strong WiFi system and a solid backbone, they will limit your ability to grow. Chromebooks are a great invention, but useless without a reliable wireless network to connect them.

3. **Train and communicate** – you need to take people with you, so make it easy for them to learn, and keep reassuring them with the progress they are making.

4. **RM Unify can make a big difference** – whilst it is not essential for anyone – and Kings James' started without it – it was only once they installed RM Unify, that they realised how it made everything so much smoother and easier, and now would never look back.

5. **Chromebooks every time** – the reality is that a Chromebook will beat a laptop every time (in a school setting). They just work. One word of warning however – get the best you can afford – as some build qualities on the cheaper models can reduce their life in a rugged school environment, but the better quality Chromebooks definitely last longer.
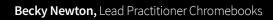
The future

The 12 months of the pandemic changed many things for everyone. It would be a sad waste of a year if lessons were not heeded, and we simply retrenched to where we were before.

Technology can bring so many benefits to an educational environment – it can reach students who cannot be in school for whatever reason, it can enhance communication with disparate audiences such as parents, it can aid real collaboration between pupils, and it can simplify many mundane tasks to reduce teacher workloads.

"Take textbooks – they can be out-of-date the moment they are printed – they are expensive to purchase, not environmentally friendly, and a burden to carry around. Using online resources means students can access the most up-to-date subject information including current real-world links".

Becky Newton, Lead Practitioner Chromebooks

Based on the buzz that is evident at King James' it is clear that they will not be going backwards. For them, learning is now "blended" – whilst they are excited by what technology can do, they recognise that it cannot all be done on Chromebooks – pupils still need to be able to write with a pen.

"Having some children in school – those of key workers – and others learning at home, really showed the power of blended learning – we even had students taking PE lessons, exercising at home and in the class at the same time – all made possible thanks to Google Workspace".

Pete Grimshaw, Network Manager

"We will endeavour to use Chromebooks in every lesson – not for the whole lesson – but they will have a role every time. We have barely scratched the surface of what we can do. With the technology in place we can truly commit to 'Inclusion for all'".

Becky Newton, Lead Practitioner Chromebooks

"We are so proud to have been able to deliver a full learning experience throughout Lockdown. We feel that we have enabled students in a disadvantaged area to make academic progress alongside their peers and we look forward to driving this further in the coming years".

Simon Whitehead, Headteacher

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