



Wigan peerless – Abraham Guest sets a benchmark

MONDAY, 05 JULY 2010 07:18



Sally McKeown goes on an unforgettable school visit

The new Abraham Guest High School in Wigan only opened a few weeks ago and pupils are now enjoying premises which are stuffed with brilliant technology, from the latest biometric lockers (*pictured*) to Nintendo Wiis for physical education (PE).

The day starts any time after 7.15am. Pupils enter through the atrium which serves as a social and performance area at the heart of the school. They might then decide to have breakfast in one of the canteens but, instead of raking through their pockets to find loose change, they just press their left thumbs on a small blue light by the till to put payments through and then carry their trays over to a table.

Cashless catering is just one of the uses of biometric technology at this pathfinder school for the Building Schools for the Future programme. Pupils' digital fingerprints are also used to access wireless laptops. If a student wants to catch up with homework, check out something on the web or even just play a game online, she can go to one of the special lockers, place her thumb on the small screen and a door will open. The locker is so "intelligent" that it even makes sure that she gets the laptop with the best-charged battery and then that allocation is recorded against her name. No more waiting for a teacher or technician to sort them out and allocate a machine; it really is on-demand technology. In the future digital fingerprint technology will be extended for recording attendance.

Daily access to state-of-the-art technology that other schools just dream about

The school has some 800 ICT devices for the 900 pupils, 87 per cent of whom, at the last audit, had home access to ICT. Unlike the situation in many other schools, those students who do not have their own machines are not particularly disadvantaged as they can use computers before and after school and also in the local public library which is, in fact, situated in the school building. Thanks to Abraham Guest's partnership with ICT specialist supplier Northgate Managed Services, pupils also get daily access to state-of-the-art technology that other schools just dream about.

Headteacher, Roy Caslake points out that the school will be continually evolving: "Technology moves fast so it has been crucial to work with a partner that is always ahead of the game. Northgate Managed Services has been incredibly flexible and adaptable in its approach."



Let's start with PE, for this is a specialist sports and arts college nurturing athletes of the future. One Year 11 girl is just back from an international wrestling competition in Belgium where she came second in her group, while two of the boys are on their way to apprenticeships with Wigan Warriors Rugby League Football Club. The school also has outstanding athletes in badminton, judo and rugby but the emphasis is definitely on sports for all.

There is a fitness room with all the equipment you would expect to see in a well equipped gym with private membership. Another area is used for a trampoline class where pupils are videoed as they rebound, and *Dartfish* software is used to view and evaluate their performances on the SmartBoard. The teacher can overlay one film over another so pupils can compare a good performance with a less successful effort and pinpoint the differences.

In another gym, Nintendo Wiis are embedded into the walls and pupils are enjoying a range of activities to improve their cardio-vascular fitness. There is even a Wii in the changing room so pupils with body image issues can exercise in private. Anne Hanley, director of sports at Abraham Guest, says, "They just can't wait to use the Wii. It is great for disaffected pupils who are not immediately turned on by sports and it provides a good link with home. Many of them own a Wii so they can improve their personal fitness outside school too."

Next stop is art where groups are working in learning spaces off a central open plan area. Many are using *Adobe Photoshop*. Year 7 have scanned in photographs and are now editing them to produce self-portraits while Year 10 have been filming a GCSE dance group and are now engaged in editing pictures and designing a ticket for a dance event. There is a virtual art gallery where pupils' work is collected and projected on to a large screen.

Moving on, a humanities class is working on a commercial murder mystery package, gathering and evaluating evidence. Some are using wireless netbooks to record ideas while a small group is using green-screen technology, fed through *Adobe Premier*, to make a professional looking news broadcast. They have used green-screening for work on weather and climate change, the Boscastle Floods and for analysing the destruction of the rainforest.



On to science, and here the technology and learning spaces are mind-blowing. Abraham Guest was one of just six high schools selected to receive substantial ICT funding from the Faraday Project, a government scheme to explore how to maximise spaces used for science. Teachers, governors, technicians and pupils were charged with the task of working out what sort of teaching and learning they needed. While many think of science in terms of labs, gas and experiments, the school worked out that only 30 per cent of time was spent on those hands-on practical activities but they also needed accommodation for planning, gathering and analysing data, discussing, collaborating and presenting – just like real scientists. Words such as “interactive”, “immersive” and “sustainable” shaped the thinking.

The result was three exemplar projects for which specific funding supported the development of the interactive experiments. The first is a "pod" which evolved from collaborations with the University of Salford and Northgate Managed Services, bringing together flight simulation technology and surround sound. Students can learn about the solar system by journeying through the planets, and forces and motion are brought to life as pupils sit on a stool to be transported into a roller coaster simulation.



Then there is the Knowledge Garden produced in partnership with the Wetlands and Wildlife Trust. All the water from the sinks and toilets is carried outside, filtered and pumped through a reed bed before being recycled and brought back into school. Future plans include allotments and a mini wind farm.

The third part of the Faraday project is the 60-year clock. This is not about telling the time but more about capturing the spirit of the age. Pupils

respond to questions and all the data is gathered and stored so they can compare responses and see changing patterns over time. In addition, the clock can be used to store images so pupils might take pictures of hairstyles or trainers and compare them over a number of years. Already, the youngest pupils are becoming part of the history of the school and representatives of young people in the early years of the 21st century.

But that is for the future. Right now the technology is being used to decide a closely fought Sports Personality of the Year competition. Five pupils are vying for the title and the rest of the school in just a few weeks will be casting their votes via a new biometric voting system. Once again, they will register with their fingerprint so there is a record of who has voted and no one can vote twice. It certainly makes the polling card and typed lists of the General Election look so last century.

More information

[Abraham Guest High School](#)
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