



Cairo English School

## MIS from the perspective of a Technology Integration Specialist





Nathan Still, Technology Integration Specialist at Cairo English School is passionate about his role and the use of IT throughout the school. Read about the challenges he has overcome.

I liaise between the IT department, the educational staff, and the administration within our school. When it comes to the IT vision in our school, I help to 'translate' between the different disciplines within the school. Often there tends to be a lot of disconnect between departments, particularly about the implementation of educational goals that use technology, and the understanding of IT needs. I try to make sure that everyone is absolutely clear about what is required, what can be delivered, and ensure goals are achieved.

There is also an important funding and return-on-investment part of my role. I have to consider the needs, opportunities and value from the teachers' point of view and communicate that to the leadership and administration team. 'Liaison' is a good way of describing much of what I do. I don't manage the IT department, I don't have any teachers reporting to me, I'm a go-between person in a lot of ways and, as a result, represent everyone's best interests. When people

understand each other clearly and can see someone else's point of view, it helps the school move forward in a proactive, solution-based way.

I can sympathise with the teachers a lot as I've also taught in the classroom. So, when I see teachers looking overwhelmed at the prospect of learning new technology or a new system, or struggling with implementation because of their responsibilities in the classroom, I can show them compassion as well as give support – it definitely helps.

In addition to my teaching experience, I've also run an IT business. I feel fortunate that I have a unique blend of experience that enables me to see challenges and opportunities from an IT perspective, from an educator's perspective, and from a business perspective too.

I try and help the teachers see the other perspectives in the school and to make sure the IT vision is cohesive. Some teachers do think the IT budget is a bottomless pit, but of course there are limitations!

Cairo English School (an Esol Education School) is a forward-thinking school. We invest a lot in technology and part of that investment is my role as Technology Integration Specialist. There can be such a big divide between teaching and IT; in the language, the understanding of value and needs, and in the skills of users, and so it definitely helps to have someone with a combination of educational and IT skills to bridge the gap.

Cairo English School has 1,609 students in the school this year. The majority of our students are Egyptian. All our teachers have foreign passports with the exception of some of our Arabic and Egyptian social studies staff. The administration team is also a mix of Egyptian and foreign passport holders. Most of our senior leaders are from the UK.

There's a big mix of different disciplines and different cultures within the school. Everyone does need to speak English, especially from a staffing perspective; that's the common language for most of our learning and administration. Our parents are mostly Arabic speakers. Some parents have English language skills, but not all. This can introduce some interesting challenges for communication.

There is a very heavy emphasis on technology within the school. It is integrated into almost all our operational and educational aspects, although there is still a healthy dose of more traditional teaching methods too.

We are heavily using WCBS school information management (3sysACADEMIC, including the WCBS Markbook module). This is the cornerstone of our information management system at the school in combination with

Active Directory and Office 365. These are integrated into our information management and synchronise to create a pretty cohesive system where we store most of our data and information. We always input data about the student, teacher, parent or school into our WCBS information centre and then let it trickle down to Active Directory and Office 365. From there we can link to other services too.

#### How MIS supports a child's learning journey

Across the school, all of our summative assessments are levelled and we are heavily using our new equivalency within our school information management system. We've aligned the English National Curriculum levels, the Early Years profile, IGCSE, A levels and IB Diploma against an APS (average points score) baseline that we use. We have created numeric equivalents so that we can easily compare and track different grade sets across the whole school. We also benefit from managing the IB curriculum this way. It gives us visibility of the teaching and learning that's happening, and the ability to easily track student progress at a time when it's absolutely crucial.

This ability to track all the way from the beginning of Early Years through to the end of the IB is one of the most critical benefits of the WCBS Markbook. It enables teachers to record and compare results of students during and across academic years.



It allows us to track individual student progress from start to finish of their time in our school, and each year see, numerically and graphically, how much progress they are making with their development of skills and knowledge.

Schools are increasingly focusing on a child's learning journey. Here at Cairo English School, it's now a huge priority. Tracking the learning progress online in an integrated way is one of the biggest projects that I've been involved with since joining the school in 2013. Prior to that, most teachers were collecting data on spreadsheets and Word documents. Every teacher organised this however they wanted, printed it out, and put it into a binder. Not an efficient or effective way to support students throughout their learning journey! In the space of three years, we moved from that, to now having crucial data input into the levelled Markbook which is standardised across the whole school.

This has enabled our administration to be able to track students with way more accuracy than before. It's created transparency and accountability across the school too, helping to highlight those teachers who are showing success, and identifying those teachers who aren't and who need more support.

#### Enabling teacher success

Having been a teacher, I know that the most stressful situation is when you come into a teaching position and you don't know what's expected of you; when you're not clear what to assess, or how to know if you are succeeding. For us, the WCBS Markbook has been such a reliable solution; it really does meet this need.

Every teacher within our school has to use it, but it's an easy system to use and it's completely open to all staff. Each teacher can look at all other teachers' marks, with no restrictions. This creates a really open, collegiate environment;



one that provides simple accountability and helps everyone know what is expected of them, what to assess, and to know if they are making progress with their students. Everyone benefits from this accessibility. If any teacher needs to check on a student, they can quickly go into the Markbook and analyse how that student is progressing across other subjects as well as their own, or track them based on their progress in previous years. It creates a positive feedback loop that is very proactive for teachers.

#### Making mistakes with technology

I had the IT skills to be able to think through the process of how to manage the data, and to identify how the data should be input, moved, analysed, exported and accessed easily. As a result, we were able to amend this process and get everyone using it correctly; using the system and inputting the data how it was meant to be done! For some, it was challenging to make the change, even when they found out they were using it in the wrong way. But it was worth addressing the problem and making the change. Now everyone can access the data easily, and now we get a lot more benefit of it across the school.

#### Introducing new technology systems to teachers

What is important to remember is that teachers have a very full agenda, and any change requires an investment of time. So you need to introduce any big change bit by bit. Don't plan on implementation all in one go. For teachers, the hardest part can be getting set up with a new system and understanding how to optimise the system so that it helps them.

From experience, I have found that creating an entire, year-long IT training course for staff works well. We use this approach for IT inset training and we use our VLE to deliver the training.

When it comes to getting all your staff proficient users, try to empower the innovators in your school. There are always some teachers who see the big benefit of the change you are making and, as a result, tend to be more receptive to the training.

#### Becoming an iPad school

We are moving towards being an iPad school and this is our first year with iPad Pros. They are simple, reliable, and not complicated for a teacher to manage with students in a classroom. Our goal is to have a one-to-one policy, with iPads for every student from Year 5 and up, and for every teacher, within three years.

#### Communicating with parents

Our parent community is extremely involved in their children's lives. We use our parent portal (which is integrated into the management information system) to share reports with our parents and we use our VLE, Showbie, to share



the effectiveness of iPad use in the classroom. a teacher doesn't have something accessible on Showbie, or has disabled access, we hear about it from our parents pretty fast! We want parents to access the reports at the right time, so we open the parent portal for one week during the time that reports are distributed and then we close it again.

Many of our parents are good online users. We currently have over 1,500 parents who regularly read our digital newsletter. We also use our school management system as an incentive for parents to pay school fees. A child's records are open to their parents through our parent portal as soon as the school fees are paid. It is a strong incentive for parents to pay fees! The children are still in the classroom, still learning, but there is some disadvantage to parents if the data on their child is not available.

#### Data security and data integration

Data security is very important for a school. Most of our data is not easily accessible, which helps to protect it. The security of our management system is good and we require passwords that are complex, but not impossible to type or recall. This allows for good data security but also good functionality for users too.

When it comes to data security, IT administrators have the most responsibility because of having the most access to the information management system.

This role requires stringent expectations regarding data care and security. But for other users, I suggest a reduced level of security, such as simpler passwords on a graduated scale; most complex for senior leaders who have access to most data, less complex for teachers, and less complex still for parents and students, in order to increase the level of functionality for those users. In addition, our parent portal is only open when it's required. You do need to have a good balance between functionality and security.



## Preparing for school information management change

Nathan suggest these points to consider when selecting and implementing a new school information management system



- ▶ A new information management system needs very careful thought about how it will work across the entire school. Your senior leadership team needs to be fully supportive of the time that will need to be invested by key people, and the process that will be required, to ensure your success.
- ▶ Use systems and products that are built for schools – not for business. There are too many haphazard implementations in schools because people select products that are not designed for schools.
- ▶ Look for an information management system that is powerful, reliable, designed specifically for schools, and not overly complex.
- ▶ Plan for a system that is efficient and isn't too much work for teachers, parents and administration to access and use.
- ▶ Think through the process of how you, as a school, are going to manage the data you collect. Make sure you are collecting the data that matters – and make sure you are then analysing it in a way that helps you to move your school forward.
- ▶ Make sure that the people in your school who are making the IT decisions and handling the implementation have really solid support and information from the supplier – that's absolutely crucial.
- ▶ Work with your supplier to prepare an effective planning and implementation process. The learning that I went through with WCBS support staff to prepare for implementation helped me a lot.
- ▶ Plan the entire implementation process, allocating enough time for meetings and working groups at the beginning to identify exactly what you need and how you are going to use the data.
- ▶ Schools have such diverse environments with a wide range of people and needs, so when preparing for a major IT change, be prepared for the entire breadth of responses, from positive to negative. You'll always have some people who are really gung-ho and eager to accept new developments, and you'll always have others who don't want to make a change.
- ▶ When selecting products and apps, consider integration within your information management system, ease of use by staff, the blending of functionality, and data security.
- ▶ Always keep things simple and reliable. We used to have some systems that were really complex and hard to use – sometimes it's because people have learnt to use them in the wrong way! Try to eliminate or resolve complicated or challenging systems.

We have taken a huge step in the right direction with our school information management and we're now looking to push the envelope a little further where we can. The school is one of seven schools around the Middle East that are part of Esol Education and our Chief Information Officer is actively encouraging our use of big data and business intelligence. Many other large international schools are doing the same. It's a big trend amongst leading schools to have really powerful business intelligence that can work across different platforms to provide better analytics, particularly of teaching and learning.

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