WCBS®

HD Ningbo School, China

Tracking student performance Western style in a Chinese bilingual school

HD Ningbo School in China (part of the Elite K12 Group) provides a comprehensive solution for families who are seeking an authentic international education.

As part of this process, the school is having to change the cultural expectations of its parents as well as preparing students for life outside China.

It is using school information management software from WCBS to facilitate this change as well as support student performance success.

This includes bilingual programmes for staff and parents.

The Secondary Division Deputy Headmaster explains the impact of introducing a Western style of student performance information management to the HD Ningbo school community.

When I first arrived here at HD Ningbo, the school was using Excel spreadsheets to monitor student performance, and using mail-merge with the spreadsheets to produce its student reports. Access to student data was limited and multiple access was all but impossible. Since then, we have introduced a centralised online system of data recording, tracking and reporting to give us clarity and transparency on student performance that is accessible to everyone within the school community, including our parents.

As a bilingual school in China, all of our students and parents, and many of our teachers and administrators, come from a culture where league tables dominate student performance, with children ranked according to academic ability. Here at HD Ningbo, we are taking a different approach; focusing on every individual student's learning progress. Our use of WCBS school information management software is supporting us in this approach.

> "Here at HD Ningbo, we are taking a different approach; focusing on every individual student's learning progress. Our use of WCBS school information management software is supporting us in this approach"

Using a WCBS system is helping to give us school-wide clarity about student performance. We are still in early implementation stage and have faced challenges along the way, but already we can see that we are achieving what we set out to achieve: a data management system that helps everyone within the school community to support each and every student with their learning progress.

Preparing for our implementation prompted us to open up discussion amongst the staff, not just about how students are performing, but what we can do on an individual level to help improve each student with their learning progress, regardless of where they are ranked in the class.

It's been a real learning journey for our school with WCBS, starting with crucial discussions around important questions including: What are our standards? How do we want students to think about their learning? How do we grade students?

> "The discussions and our shift in focus of how we record and use performance data are helping to transform the culture of our school"

And how do we move students on to the next level? This involved the entire faculty and led to some important conversations about how to grade for our two different systems (British and Chinese), how to recognise the differences between these two systems, how to balance comments and grades, and when to use assessment; not simply to track and report, but also for using as a spring-board to keep moving students forward.

This thinking required a real shift in focus; particularly for our locally trained colleagues, our students and our parents. It has shifted from 'Who is at the top?' to a focus on the fact that if everyone in the class performs at their highest standard, then everyone is succeeding.

The discussions and our shift in focus of how we record and use performance data are helping to transform the culture of our school.

Changing a mindset

Some people think of figures and statistics as being geeky and boring. But when we really think about why we are doing what we're doing as educators, figures and statistics on students are far from geeky! Turning data into progress indicators is helping us to transform our school community. It's helping everyone within the school to realise that our focus is on each individual student and their individual learning pathways, and it's helped us to figure out what it is that we want to stand for as an educational organisation.

Within our one single-sign-on information system, we are now able to get a holistic as well as numeric data perspective of each student. As a result, we are starting to use the data in a range of ways to maximise benefits for our students.

For example, we recently wrote a rubric about how to select a student for our Founder's Award, using data from the system to achieve this. For some of the teachers, it was a real surprise that we didn't just choose the most academically capable student for the award. Instead, the award criteria more closely reflected our school ethos, mission and vision: a student who was within the top 20% academically, but also a student who had demonstrated leadership within the development of school community spirit, who showed evidence of engagement in our extra-curricular activities, and who was a valued member of the school community. We used the data in our WCBS system combined with our rubric to identify our award winner.

> "Within our one single-sign-on information system, we are now able to get a holistic as well as numeric data perspective of each student"

We're really proud of being a bilingual school. We talk a lot about taking the best from East and West. In my opinion, the tracking of student data is one of the best aspects of the West; not tracking for punishment and reward, but rather, tracking to help with personal improvement and to help each student move on to reach their full potential.

Supporting teachers with a new approach to data

We introduced the new information management software to the secondary school staff half way through the first semester last academic year (2015-2016). Following our early discussions, we worked together on the design of a recording template – one that met the specific needs of our school. We went live at the end of semester one and the teachers have now been using the system for two terms.

> "In my opinion, the tracking of student data is one of the best aspects of the West"

What we have with WCBS is a data spine with effective, compatible plug-ins and in a system that is bilingual; Chinese and English. The Chinese teachers see the interface in Chinese. It collates the data into a template we've built and a bilingual report card comes out at the end.

The ability to have the system in both languages is really important. We need everybody to access data and contribute to the documents that drive our ability to help students. That shouldn't be blocked by language, especially in a bilingual school like we are.

So how has the staff coped with the transition? As we expected, it's been a mixed reception. We had a group of people who recognised the importance of data for tracking student performance, and the value of a single information management system for working together as a whole school collective. We were also fortunate that a few of our teachers had already used WCBS data management systems in previous schools so were familiar with the technology. Of course, some of our teachers are still on a big learning curve. It's not only about asking them to utilise new technology and to take on a new mindset to data, they are also having to shift culturally. But already, after just two terms of implementation, the majority of our teachers are using the data to see how they can help each child move forward with their learning.

The teachers who are struggling most with this new approach to data management are those having to bridge the huge cultural divide. Our Chinese teachers have not been trained nor are they used to working with students to make interventions and to develop individual performance. Instead they are used to giving tests in which every student gets a grade, and that grade states where the students is within the class.

> "What we have with WCBS is a data spine with effective, compatible plug-ins and in a system that is bilingual; Chinese and English"

The Chinese teachers have been trained in a culture where they believe the students will work hard until the next test, at which time the students will be re-tested and at that point the student either moves up or down in the class ranking. If the student is not happy with their ranking, they'll get tutoring out of school hours.

> "At every possible opportunity, we are coaching our students about the data and how we are using it to help them move forward with their learning"

So for our Chinese teachers our new approach to data management is asking them to take a big cultural shift. The technology is the tool to enable us to help them do this, but what's been most important is the discussions that this has generated. It is these discussions which have really helped our colleagues who want to embrace this new approach to using data. We are still in the process of full implementation of our school information management, but what we have already seen as a result - and what has been really important this year - are the conversations we are now having amongst the staff about how we report and what we report.

Our reports have a numeric base, but we are now also able to use rubrics and provide transparency about why students get the grades they do. This has meant that we can help students and their parents to make the shift away from the mindset that only one person can get the top grade, to a mindset of 'This is how I can get my best possible grades, this is how my performance is measured, and now I am racing against myself'. At every possible opportunity, we are coaching our students about the data and how we are using it to help them move forward with their learning. We are also having to coach our parents.

Shifting parent's cultural expectations to student grading

Using data in a way to support student progress has been a cultural shift for almost everyone in the school community, not least our parents.

We have had to explain to parents as well as students that performance is not just based on academic grades. This is not always easy for parents to comprehend as it's a different way of looking at success in school. We have run information sessions for the parents and are regularly explaining to them why the students have been given the grades they've been given, and why things work the way they do.

For example, when we've been asked to make selections for scholarships and summer schools, we are now able to use our academic and holistic data to show parents and the students how we are making a selection and why some people may not have been selected. We use every opportunity like this to talk about the way we define student progress, to relate it back to the ethos, mission and vision of the school, and to talk about what we expect from our students.

We are going to open our parent portal (the WCBS schoolPORTAL) to the parents this year. The report templates have helped us to lay out our reports in a meaningful way so that parents are able to easily see the information they want. We are able to present the information to them in a way that helps them see the learning progress of their child.

> "For example, when we've been asked to make selections for scholarships and summer schools, we are now able to use our academic and holistic data to show parents and the students how we are making a selection"

We know that we have to be prepared for lots of learning conversations with our parents because of the fact that we're changing the learning culture. We are going to have to help parents see that we are preparing the students for university and that the way we are using our data is helping to drive every one of the students towards their own success.

We are very clear that we want families who believe in the mission and ethos of our school, which is 'education creates character', so our Admissions department looks out for parents who will help us build a strong community that will support all students.

However, we have to remember that where data is concerned, our parents come from a culture where everyone is ranked and it will take time for them to shift their mindset about the data. As a result, we will have to work with the parents really closely, to inform and keep reminding them of how we are using our data so that they make sense of the changes. The partnership between the parents and the school is very important.

> "The report templates have helped us to lay out our reports in a meaningful way so that parents are able to easily see the information they want"

Our parents made an early and brave choice to move their child to a bilingual international-style school in a country which is only just experimenting with this form of education. We recognise the risk they know they are taking and we believe we should give them as much transparency and clarity of what we are doing to reassure them that they have made the right decision. We are frequently talking with our parents about the partnership between school, child and home. Giving them access to data on their child's learning progress through the portal gives our parents something to talk to the school about and helps them to engage with us and with their child in a meaningful way.

We know this will take time. There's still a mindset with many parents of: 'You didn't do well in this test – why not?' We know it will take us a while to shift this mindset but the portal gives us an effective way of doing this.

The challenges for parents

We expect to face a number of challenges when introducing parents to an online portal for communication.

The main challenge will be parents being able to access data and yet not fully understanding what it means for their child. At the moment, our parents want individual grades so they can react to them. They do not yet understand the need to look at trends and progress rather than simply looking at current grades only. As soon as our parents see one bad grade, we expect to receive communication. But we believe this will create an opportunity for us to help them look at the bigger picture. If we work with the parents to help them understand what to look for in the portal, and why to focus on progress rather than individual grades, then in the long term, we hope the transparency of the parent portal will cause our parents to have faith in the school, our processes and our teachers.

> "But with the portal, we want them to dig deep and look at trends, analysis and a bigger picture of their child's learning progress"

Another challenge we think we'll face is that our parents are used to looking on their phones for bite-size information; using WeChat for example. But with the portal, we want them to dig deep and look at trends, analysis and a bigger picture of their child's learning progress.

The paper versus digital issue will be another challenge. Until now, our parents have been used to getting everything from the school on paper. We need to encourage them to use the digital approach; to show them that it means easier access, wherever they may be and whenever they want it.

Once we have overcome these challenges, we hope that our parents will value the transparency that the parent portal offers and, with that, the faith it builds in the wider school community.

Our advice to parents will be use the parent portal, but don't use it every hour of every day. Logging in once or twice a week will help parents to keep up-to-date with how their child is doing. So when their child comes home for the weekend, over dinner parents can ask how school went that week and they can use the data from the portal to structure the conversation. We want our parents to look at the grades and, more importantly, the learning trends with their child and together, talk about the child's development; to use the data to plan with their child his or her learning pathway.

Leading a new approach to data management

We have mixed nationality pastoral and leadership teams and what's been really interesting to see this year is the change in attitude of our management team to becoming driven by data. Everyone is in agreement that data helps us to achieve our goal of individual student progress.

As a result of collecting data into one system, the senior leadership team has been able to start talking to the heads of year about monitoring student academic performance, setting goals, and working with students to keep improving. In looking at pastoral information alongside a students' academic scores, we could try to identify a student's passions, what drives them, what challenges them, and what inhibits their academic progress.

Our leaders talk about our use of data a lot; in all of our meetings we return to the data and use it to talk about individual students and what we can do to support them with their learning progress.

No longer is school just about generating league tables. Now we work with the idea of continuous incremental improvement and the need to collect data in order to drive this. The data we collate helps us to know our students and the way they are progressing academically and pastorally. This is an approach we are conducting across the school, starting with the senior leadership team.

> "The data we collate helps us to know our students and the way they are progressing academically and pastorally"

The pace of implementation

We are taking implementation one step at a time. Our first priority was a reporting system and, because we are a boarding school, a way to track the medical life of the school, so that's what we started with. Both have taken off really quickly. I don't think anybody has needed more than one hour of training to get them started on each programme. That's because we carefully selected what we wanted to use, it matched a real need, and the WCBS system is incredibly intuitive, user-friendly, and accessible through a choice of mobile devices.

We are now going to use the WCBS system as our portal for grades, and this is what we are going to implement this year, as well as slowly rolling out the parent portal and delivering the reports online, introducing each of these one step at a time.

We are currently only about a third of the way through our desired implementation, but we feel this is a good pace to take in order to get it right. Successful implementation of a school-wide information management system takes time. There are several of us who have experienced the mistake of trying to rush implementation in other schools and we are all determined to do it the right way this time; in a careful, well supported and measured way in order to make sure it's sustainable across the whole group. This year, we'll continue with our implementation in that same manner.

> "The WCBS system has already become the data spine for the school"

The WCBS system has already become the data spine for the school and as our implementation expands, it will become increasingly valuable, but it will only become so if we ensure its sustainability.

Ensuring sustainability

We're taking a schoolwide approach to ensure sustainability of our data management, starting at the Headmaster's office. Training at all levels is critically important for sustainability. We need to empower all users to know why data is so important, how it needs to be collected, how it can be used, and how it can offer possibilities that we don't even know of right now.

I think the problem a lot of organisations make with technology roll-out is that they send emails, links and how-to videos but they forget that they need to talk to people. Internally we have resources, but externally we have WCBS support services too and everybody in our organisation has access to that partnership.

> "We have WCBS support services too and everybody in our organisation has access to that partnership"

Introducing the system in my last school, I made the mistake of being the 'go-to' person for knowing the system. That doesn't create sustainability for a school. So here at HD Ningbo, we are making everyone responsible for getting to know the system proficiently, ensuring access to training for them all, and empowering all our users to utilise the WCBS support services directly. That has caused some headaches on occasions, but by making the staff use the support services directly, they are developing their own capacity for the system and that is what will ensure sustainability.

Advice for schools

There are some key questions a school should ask itself when thinking about what it needs from an information management system:

► Who will be your audiences for the data? Put yourselves in the shoes of the people receiving the information and think about what they'll need to know and how that information should be delivered.

► Why are you gathering the data you currently gather and how do you use it? Is there different data that would benefit your students' progress?

► How do you currently structure your reports and can this be improved?

► Always think about your ultimate outcome which is the progress of learning and how your different audiences can support students with their learning progress.

Regardless of the challenges, none of our staff are refusing to learn to use the system. Having suffered mail-merge for recording and tracking data in the past, using information management that is designed to be intuitive and user-friendly has seemed easy in comparison!

The WCBS technology has not only provided clarity of data tracking, more importantly, it has prompted communication amongst the faculty; open and ongoing discussion about what we value about student learning, what we don't value, and how we structure a system to capture what is valued.

It is helping us all to focus on what we can do to shape our school culture and to put each student on the right learning path.

"The WCBS technology has not only provided clarity of data tracking, more importantly, it has prompted communication amongst the faculty"

Throughout early implementation, keep questioning what you are doing and why.

Keep asking yourselves such questions as: Are we delivering information about the students in a way that is appropriate for our parents? Are we helping our parents to use the parent portal in the best possible way? Based on your early implementation, be prepared to re-visit your report templates to improve user friendliness and value if you have to.

Staff turnover can be a challenge, especially for an international school where contracts with expatriate staff might be short.

This is why empowering all staff to know the system and follow the same approach for data collection and use is essential. Training and support needs to be an ongoing provision.

If you really want to change culture, you need to make sure everyone is buying in to the new approach at every step of the process.

Make sure there is lots of communication between staff and recognise that implementation needs to be a slow, determined process to effect change.

What to look for in a successful information management system

HD Ningbo recommends several features

► Accessibility is crucial. When a teacher or leader wants data, they want it right here, right now. For example, if they are wanting to quickly track and help a student. Accessibility also means being in a format and deliverable on a medium that can be easily used by everyone.

► For Chinese bilingual schools like us, a system that is bilingual is vital. WCBS portals are entirely accessible in Mandarin and English; this includes tabs, headers and everything. Many systems have very limited translation options, if any, which means data is inaccessible to Chinese staff making a system obsolete as a school-wide system.

► An integrated system that is flexible to the needs of the school is also important. We've been able to carefully choose our software providers for the learning resources that we need; playing to the strengths of WCBS for such features as reporting, the online portal, attendance and for the medical reports, but then adding and integrating other specialist software solutions that we choose.

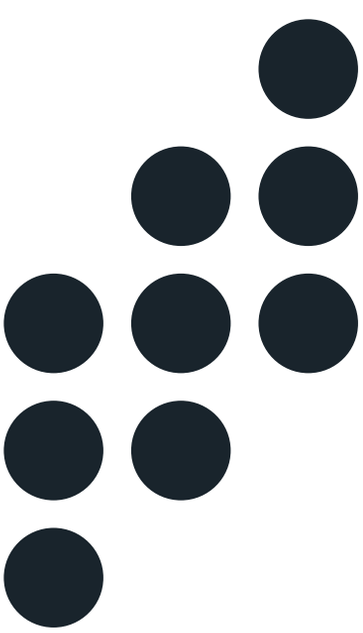
► WCBS has partnered with a number of software providers to ensure effective integration within a single sign-on system. A great example of this is the Mr. Elmer intervention programme which offers an amazing pastoral function which has helped us with cultural changes. Thanks to WCBS, Mr. Elmer can be added on to the WCBS information management system so that the two data programmes are able to 'talk' to each other.

► A successful information management system provides access for all of your different users; teachers, students, parents, administration, and the wider community.

► Dependability, security and ease of use are also crucial features; all of which we've found from WCBS.

► Look for good relationships with a supplier. Who are the people working for the company and do they have shared ideals about student learning? If they don't, it doesn't matter how great their system is, it won't work for your school.

WCBS®



information@wcbs.co.uk

www.wcbs.co.uk

+44 (0)1458 833 344

West Country Business Systems Ltd Registered No 1770829

West Country Business Systems (Holdings) Ltd Registered No 3387976

© Copyright 2019 West Country Business Systems (Holdings) Limited

® WCBS, HUB mark, circle marks, 3sys and pass are registered trademarks and HUBapply, WCBS schoolPORTAL, schoolADMIN, WCBS schoolALUMNI are TM of West Country Business Systems (Holdings) Limited and associated companies