

Athy College creates a more inclusive teaching and learning environment with Chromebooks and Google Workspace

For more than 10 years, Athy College in Ireland has strived to enhance teaching and learning using technology. In 2010, this saw the Kildare post-primary roll out Chromebooks and Google Workspace for Education. This initiative led to improved student engagement, boosted classroom motivation, increased sustainability, and a more inclusive learning environment for everyone.

“Google is making new things possible,” says former Athy pupil and now teacher Olivia Daly. “We’re not just finding new ways of doing what we’re already doing, we’re exploring whole new approaches to teaching and learning.”

The eureka moment

When Principal Richard Daly saw the success of other Irish schools introducing computers as a specialist subject or to support specific technical skills, he wanted to go one step further and integrate digital tools throughout the school.

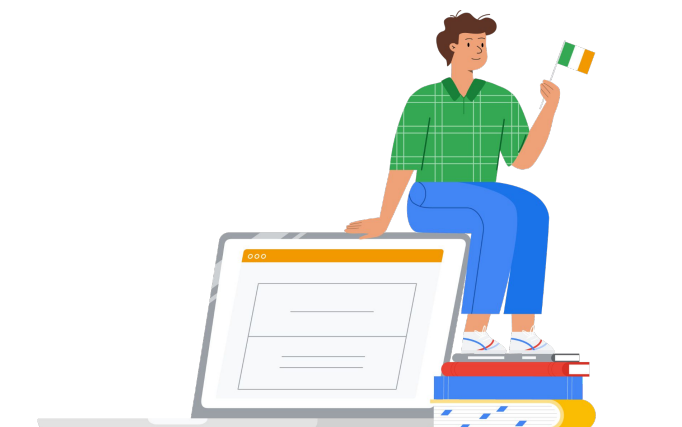
“I wanted to introduce computers as a way of enriching all areas of learning, not just as a specialist subject, even if that meant going in a different direction to other schools at the time,” he says.

When trialling a move from desktops to personal devices in 2010, the school discovered Google Workspace for Education and Chromebooks. Realising the potential of this combination, Richard set about creating a Google account for all staff and students, and purchased the school’s first batch of Chromebooks.



When we started, we didn’t know where the journey would take us. But we’re learning something new every day, and we harness this learning to support our students’ growth – both inside and outside the classroom.”

Richard Daly, Principal

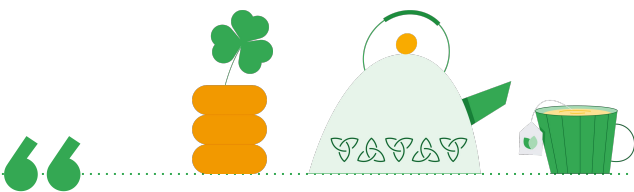


“Using Google for email and admin was a massive leap forward. We now had one system we could all use. Even if you weren’t ‘techy’, you could set up users, you could create groups, you could share files. You had control. And everything was in simple language.”

Until that point, the school also struggled to support teachers as their previous devices were bogged down with unnecessary features, didn’t maintain their charge, or were too slow to boot up. Everything changed with Chromebooks.

“As soon as I put Chromebooks in the teachers’ hands, they became their chosen devices. The security, the simplicity, everything just worked, and they’ve just run with it,” says Richard.

Olivia agrees: “They are so simple, they make you want to use them. If students forget their password, they can be reset in minutes, and if I need to step away, I can secure it at the touch of a button. The battery life is also a big plus.”



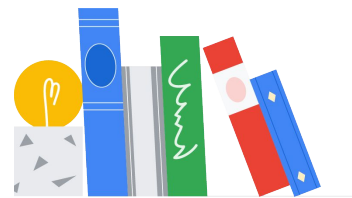
I remember a principal telling me about the computer room he was building at his school, and I told him we had just gotten rid of ours, because Chromebooks enable us to work anywhere. People still come up to us and ask, ‘What about the servers? Where are all the big hard drives?’ And we just say we no longer need them!”

Richard Daly, Principal

Making new things possible

This technology now allows teachers to act more like facilitators in the classroom, give students a voice, and cater to their needs.

“Learners don’t just want to sit and read things online, they want learning to be purposeful, engaging, and fun,” says Olivia. “Google makes this possible. We can create interactive infographics together with the students. We can fill in Venn diagrams together as a class to highlight the themes in poems.”



New tools and apps have also allowed teachers to bring more creativity to learning by exploring different themes and subjects through graphic novels, match-up exercises, story mountains, and mind maps. The portability of Chromebooks makes group tasks easier too.

“It’s about using tech for a purpose – to enhance learning – which means they don’t get bored and are more engaged.” says Olivia.



The move to 1:1

The school's transition to one device per student was accelerated by COVID-19 and the school closures, hygiene restrictions, and social distancing requirements that ruled out device sharing.

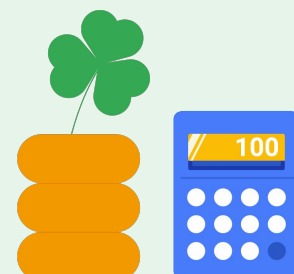
"We were apprehensive about the move, fearing students may become bored with the devices, but the opposite is true," says Olivia. "We see them engaging more than ever. It's strengthened their sense of responsibility, as they need to look after their own device, and it's made doing homework so much easier."

Having one Chromebook per student and staff member has also boosted learner motivation, as students are now eager to work on exercises in their own time or start their next task or assignment.

"I've been shocked many times," says Richard. "When I come into school in the morning and see students sitting around before class with their Chromebooks, I assume they are catching up on Netflix from the previous night. But no – they are doing work and going through class material in groups. They are loving having their own input and the creativity of tasks."

The move to 1:1 also means time no longer needs to be allocated for distributing devices or charging them at the end of the day.

"Class time is precious, so the more you can get from it the better. With their own devices, students are now ready to go, so we can plan our time more effectively," says Olivia.



Boosting sustainability

Prioritising digital learning has enabled Athy to drastically reduce paper usage across the school, including an 87% reduction in photocopying and an almost 100% reduction in printing. Meanwhile, being able to access resources online has resulted in an 80% reduction in textbook costs. Richard has also found a home for the school's out-of-circulation Chromebooks, using them to power digital signage around the corridors.

"Everyone is accountable. We're now thinking twice before printing or photocopying, and have eradicated the use of flip charts completely. And these savings are reinvested in purchasing extra equipment, so we're putting money back into teaching and learning, rather than spending more on paper."



Creating a more inclusive learning environment

Athy uses Chromebooks to ensure a fair learning experience for everyone. The devices allow teachers to use simple techniques such as colour-coding to create adapted tasks in mixed-ability classes without drawing attention to the differences.

“This builds the confidence of the more challenged students to participate,” Olivia says. “They are no longer shy to answer questions. And it gives them a choice – to complete the adapted task or try the standard version – so they have ownership over their learning.”

Learners with special educational needs also benefit from Chromebook tools and features. For example, the built-in-speech recognition software supports those unable to type without them having to purchase a separate program.

“Many of our Special Education Needs (SEN) learners find typing more effective than writing, and prior to the introduction of Chromebooks, someone typing in class really stood out,” says Olivia. “But now everyone is typing, it’s a more inclusive learning environment.”



Today’s students are tech-savvy and have high digital literacy; they can operate phones and touch screens. But what’s missing are the additional skills, such as creating content or finding sources online. Yes, they can learn to type, but they could also be developing a host of other skills at the same time. This is our big motivation – to nurture these skills in our learners.”

Richard Daly, Principal