Planning Phase Proposal
“Preparing for the Implementation of a School Information System”
Keys School, Palo Alto

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Purpose

The purpose of this proposal is to study the potential impact of the new PowerSchool information system being implemented in the 2000/01 school year and identify the key factors that will ensure a successful rollout of the system.

Background

Keys School in Midtown Palo Alto, California, is a K-8 independent school that enrolls 175 students. Demographically, most of the students come from Palo Alto, Menlo Park and Atherton. The majority of the families would be described as well-educated and upper middle class. Internet access, via either home or work, is nearly 100 percent.

Currently, communication between school and parents takes the form of phone calls, letters sent home with the students, or occasional e-mail. The school has invested significant resources in new technology to improve this level of communication. One such investment is a server/software package called PowerSchool. With this program, teachers will be able to electronically enter attendance, grades, behavior incidents and any other information concerning the well being of their students. Subsequently, automatic e-mails will be transmitted to the parents and web-based access to this information will be available in real time. In order to successfully implement this new program, laptop computers have been purchased for each faculty member.

The successful implementation of this system, however, will depend upon defining new communication processes for the entire Keys community, and providing adequate training for all the teachers, administrators, staff and parents.

Current Modes of Communication

Grading

Teachers enter grades onto paper report cards at the end of each quarter. With only one copy of the report cards, it is necessary to keep them in the faculty workroom and require teachers to write their grades and comments on them there. This
generally adds to the stress associated with end of the quarter grading. Grades are
given on a quarterly basis and occasionally in exceptional situations, a mid-term
grade is sent home. The small size of the school and the accessibility of the faculty
members make it easy for students to keep abreast of their progress. However, this
information is not always relayed home and the quarter grade can at times, be a
shock to parents.

Assignments

Each teacher gives out an assignment sheet at the beginning of the week. Students
are expected to carry this sheet home with them and refer to it in order to complete
all the necessary homework in a timely manner. Unfortunately, this sheet can be
misplaced with ease and students tend forget the specific assignment. They will
then need to call a friend or the teacher to get the assignment.

Behavior incidents

If a student is found to be misbehaving in class, a warning is given. Depending
upon the severity of the infraction or the number of previous warnings, a message
may be relayed to the parents via e-mail or phone. Generally, such communication
is also relayed to the Assistant Head to record on the student’s behavior log. If a
parent wants to discuss the situation, a phone call is made back to the teacher, or, if
e-mail was used, a message is returned.

Attendance

Attendance is taken during the first period class of each day by recording who is
absent on a slip of paper and sending it to the office. This information is compared
with the pre-excused absences for the day and any unexcused absence is notified.
Absences are manually recorded for each student by the Secretary. Attendance is
not generally taken during any other period of the day and tardies are rarely
recorded.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Parent teacher conferences occur at the end of the first and third quarters of each
academic year. During this one day event, parents meet with their child’s
homeroom teacher and up to two additional teachers. Parents are also encouraged
to schedule additional conferences whenever they feel the need to meet with a
particular teacher. Group conferences consisting of a number of teachers and the
parents are scheduled whenever an issue that is repetitious throughout the child’s
day occurs.

Keys Community Communication

On Wednesdays, a letter goes home with each child that informs parents of various
happenings and news within the school. Each teacher also writes a weekly letter
that is included in this packet to keep the parents aware of upcoming events and
the happenings within the classroom. Letters of importance concerning school
matters are also distributed in this manner. Occasionally fund raising
announcements and other communications are mailed to parents, however, the
Wednesday letter is the most relied upon mode of communication.
Planning Phase Proposal

This proposal examines the various changes and challenges facing the Keys community as they implement the PowerSchool system. In order to effectively implement this new program, training and information sessions will need to occur with faculty, administration, parents and students. Besides the new skills that will be required of faculty and staff, a new culture of interaction will need to be defined and understood by everyone in the Keys community. Parents, teachers and administrators will need to come to common agreement on how best to utilize this new system.

This proposal identifies key questions to be investigated and provides recommended actions for the project's planning phase to ensure that the implementation of the PowerSchool system will be successful.

Questions, Issues and Recommendations

1.0 Planning and Implementation: Who will be involved in planning the rollout of the PowerSchool system? Who will monitor its implementation and coordinate training? Clearly, this is a project that affects the entire Keys community, so the involvement of key “stakeholders” is essential.

It is recommended that a core planning team be established, led by the school’s head or assistant head. The team would include the school’s technology director and a representative from each of the “user communities” (teacher, staff, administrator, parent, student).

2.0 Best Practices: What have other schools experienced during similar system rollouts? What did they learn and what recommendations would they make to Keys?

It is recommended that the planning team contact the PowerSchool vendor and obtain contact information from one or two of their reference sites. A phone discussion (or visit, if they are local) should be established to review their rollout experience and gather any “best practices” / recommendations that will help a school like Keys have a smooth and successful rollout.

3.0 Expectations and Goals for each of the stakeholders: What improvements do they hope to see as a result of the new PowerSchool system? How do they measure “success”?

It is proposed that the planning team conduct focus groups and surveys to elicit specific feedback prior to the design of the training and the configuration of the
system. Focus groups could be “homogeneous” and/or a combination of participants from the list below:

3.1 Teachers  
3.2 Parents  
3.3 Students – To what extent will students be involved?  
3.4 Administrators  
3.5 Staff

4.0 Changes in Communication: How will the existing interactions between the members of the Keys community change? What processes are currently in place? Which of those need to be redesigned to take advantage of the new system? What new “ground rules” and expectations need to be addressed in order to establish a new “communication culture” in the Keys community? What will be the preferred method of communication (phone, email, fax,…)?

It is proposed that the planning team establish sub-committees to review the following communication processes and establish recommendations for use during the system’s initial rollout. These processes can then be reviewed and refined during the monitoring period.

4.1 School-wide news

4.2 Student performance reporting - Expectations for how quickly grades will be made available on the system will likely differ between parents and students (who want immediate feedback), and teachers (who are working under many practical constraints). It is recommended that the staff and parents discuss this issue during the planning phase, and the teachers establish an initial expectation based on past experience. This issue can then be revisited at each “project rollout review” period (see “Monitoring” below)

4.2.1 Quarterly Grades, Tests and Quizzes  
4.2.2 Projects and Weekly feedback  
4.2.3 Teacher-Student discussions

4.3 Student behavior reporting – What levels of incident recording will be established? Will all incidents go on record, or only some?

4.4 Attendance - What processes and policies need to be established or changed re: attendance? Will attendance be taken at the beginning of the day AND at the beginning of each class period? How will tardies and excused absences be handled? How will attendance discrepancies be viewed and resolved by students and parents?

4.5 Parent/Teacher Partnership
4.5.1 Conference scheduling
4.5.2 On-line, real-time “discussions”

4.6 Homework and Project Calendars

5.0 **Training:** To ensure that all parties are comfortable with and engaged in the new system, meetings need to be scheduled to inform and teach everyone about the changes that will be taking place. Ideally, individual training meetings would be held for teachers, administrators and parents, following a group meeting introducing the system. Who will design the training sessions? When will they be held?

It is recommended that the planning team be responsible for organizing the initial training, and proposing the means of training new users after the initial training sessions are completed.

5.1 Initial introduction to the entire Keys Community
5.2 User-group initial training
   5.2.1 Teachers
   5.2.2 Parents
   5.2.3 Students
   5.2.4 Administrators and staff
5.3 Future new-user training (new teachers, new families, new staff)

6.0 **PowerSchool Rollout Monitoring:** As with any significant change management endeavor, it is important to continually seek feedback and communicate frequently with all the stakeholders.

It is recommended that the planning team establish a feedback mechanism (email suggestion box?) and conduct regular feedback meetings following the system rollout. The frequency of the meetings should initially be weekly (for the first month), twice a month for the first school quarter, and quarterly until the end of the year.

During the planning phase, the planning team should define the process for providing feedback and escalating issues. How issues will be resolved and the hierarchy of decision making will need to be established early during the project’s implementation, and will be used during the monitoring period after the rollout.