iPads at Farnborough Hill

Our vision for the iPad has always been that it integrates seamlessly into the classroom, visible and vibrant whilst in use but unnoticed when it is not needed. The iPad fulfils this role perfectly. Technology must be used to enhance lessons or it has no place in the classroom; it must be robust, reliable and above all purposeful. When planning lessons teachers do not spend time worrying about whether pupils' pens will work or whether their lessons will come to a halt because the pages of a textbook inexplicably will not open. The same must be true of technology, it must work every time. We have achieved this with the iPad.

The iPad is best used in lessons when it is incorporated, but does not dominate, offering up possibilities that were not open to the learner before. Sometimes its role can be minor, enhancing a textbook with an animation or video and sometimes it can be revolutionary, the iPad screen becomes a window into a whole new world of possibilities.

It is hard not to be awestruck by the shiny appeal of the iPad and its marketing potential. In reality Apple has a rich history in education. Tools for classroom management and device deployment that simply did not exist before have become vital in ensuring the iPad's success in an educational setting. Apple has committed huge amounts of resources into improving its educational provision, including software and classroom tools, programs for classroom management and device deployment, support for schools and training programmes for teachers.

Traditional laptops dominate a desk with their footprint, and the screen creates a barrier between the teacher and the pupil. In contrast, the iPad takes up very little space on a desk and can easily be stowed away in a bag. Battery life and computing power is historically poor at a similar price point to the iPad and the classroom is no place for charging cables and the hazard they represent. Laptops can start up slowly, wasting valuable lesson time in the process. With an iPad a pupil can become immersed in learning within seconds. It is easy to make comparisons to computers and imagine perceived limitations of an iPad compared to the technology we are used to, but the iPad should not be viewed as a replacement for a computer, instead as an educational tool with its own unique advantages and workflow. A simple interface which disposes of much of the clutter of a traditional computer and allows the focus to be on learning.

Alongside the introduction of the iPad, we invested heavily in our infrastructure and we will continue to do so as technology develops. We have developed reliable and simple to use systems for the distribution of resources electronically. Firefly, our virtual learning platform allows efficient creation and organisation of pages with rich content, including images, video, interactive quizzes and automated assessment. To complement Firefly, we utilise the Microsoft Office 365 platform which is freely available to all of our pupils. OneNote and OneDrive allow our pupils to access their documents and notes regardless of their location, allowing education to extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom and the traditional school day.

Also vital to the success of iPads is ensuring that staff are comfortable and confident using the technology. To ensure this is the case we provide all teaching staff with devices, as well as regular training and support. We have deployed Jamf, a world class Mobile Device Management system with clients including IBM and Apple itself. Designed exclusively to support mass deployment of Apple products, this system can automatically send apps and resources remotely to our pupils' iPads, removing the need for parents to purchase them individually and ensuring that they always have what they need to complete their work. It allows us to exercise tight control over the iPads, blocking access to apps and functionality that contradict our educational vision and supporting our unrelenting commitment to keeping pupils safe online.

iPads have been a compulsory piece of equipment for all pupils in Years 9 – 11 since September of 2017, following a successful two year trial. In September 2020 we expanded the requirement to include Apple Pencils which allowed us to develop the type and scope of activities that could be completed on the iPad. They are now fully embedded into our practice in these Year Groups. Both teachers and pupils have latched on to the educational benefits and we have seen some amazing developments in the Farnborough Hill classroom. The use of iPads was vital during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure continuity of learning; but it also caused us to rethink the way we teach with technology and revolutionised our practice. We have taken the best features of the digital classroom forward into the post-COVID world. Electronic textbooks and exercise books have become commonplace, reducing the weight of school bags and bolstering our green credentials. Teachers can mark and give feedback without having to take in physical books and the scope for different types of learning activity have become huge. The iPads allow pupils to collaborate in real time on documents, produce rich multimedia pieces of work and have a world of information at their fingertips all without needing to leave their desks.

During all of this time our pupils in Years 7 and 8 have been able to use class sets of iPads for some lessons, but what has become clear is that this does not come close to the 1:1 iPad experience of our older pupils. We have, therefore, decided that iPads will be used on a 1:1 basis by all pupils in Years 7 – 11 from September of 2022. For the time being our Sixth Form pupils will be able to continue to decide what device to bring into school to support their learning.

We hope that parents will join us in embracing the iPad with our pupils as they continue to explore everything that its rich ecosystem has to offer. With parents' support we believe that it can continue to have a truly revolutionary effect on pupils' education.