Our journey to becoming a Digital Schoolhouse.

Gareth Shaw from Ballyclare High School, a non-denominational school in Antrim, Northern Ireland, has been teaching for more than 16 years. Although a geography teacher by trade, he has been working with the school to improve its IT strategy, of which it has now become renowned for. Here, Gareth tells us how he discovered game-based learning to enhance the computing skills at Ballyclare and its local feeder primary schools.

Our school has a long history of achievement in IT and although I work as a geography teacher, that's something that I've been working hard to support with the senior management team. I'm an Intel Visionary and therefore work closely with other educators to implement technology effectively in schools to impact learning in a positive way. I'm also really interested in measurement and have over 15 years of data to show hour our IT strategy has impacted our school's community over time.

When I met Tony Gilbert, an Intel Visionary based in England, he told me about Digital Schoolhouse and its unique approach to delivering a computing curriculum. I knew it would be for us, so I did my research.

What firstly stood out to me was the way the content was set out and delivery of the kinaesthetic, play-based learning. Students are naturally drawn towards technology, with so much of it present in our daily lives, but I could see this hands-on approach would be a popular way to bring it back to basics and provide students with a solid foundation of knowledge.

Like other secondary schools in the area, we were already investing time and resources into connecting with our local feeder primary schools, whether through arts and drama initiatives or community sport, we were already establishing those relationships in order to prepare students for the transition to Ballyclare High School. I saw the opportunity to do this in a way that supported our IT strategy and made learning computing something both the primary schools, our students and our staff could engage with. Digital Schoolhouse provided us with that answer.

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We have now been a Schoolhouse for a few months, joining the programme officially at the end of 2017. So far, the feedback has been great already. The students love it and have been enthusiastic in workshops, while the primary teachers have seen it as an opportunity to up-skill and support their continued professional development.

The brilliant part for us is that, thanks to the grant supplied through the programme, our IT teacher, Mrs Victoria Walker, can be taken off timetable to support our feeder schools. This really opens up the possibilities and provides the freedom to contribute and teach in an unrestricted way.

The Department for Education issued Northern Ireland with guidelines that specify that we should be able to measure and track students' progress throughout their time with us in school, and I'm optimistic that being part of an initiative centred on creative computing will help us to continue to achieve this.

Northern Ireland has a strong education sector and I'm proud of the quality opportunities we can provide our students. At Ballyclare, we'll be continuing to share best practice for effective computing teaching and I'd certainly encourage others to do to the same. After all, when we come together, that's when we can make the biggest impact.

Gareth Shaw, Ballyclare High School
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