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Getting the message: How schools and parents communicate

At some point, every parent has fished a random flyer from the bottom of a backpack and asked, “When did you get this?” But they wouldn’t be the first. Decades ago, a child could even come home from school with a message pinned to their clothing! Fortunately, thanks to smart phones and apps, we may be past the time of using children as carrier pigeons.

Good communication is key for reducing parent stress. “Communication with the school is particularly important to us because our daughter is minimally verbal,” observes Kathy Graydon, who has a nine-year-old in third grade. “Add to that the fact that our lives are busy and stressful, so I need a lot of reminders. It’s not that I don’t want to have her participate in things, it’s that I have a lot on my plate and I forget.”

The right platform

Apps and well-managed school webpages are making communication more fruitful. Shannon Moore’s son is in first grade in the Simi Valley School District, which has his profile on the school’s app. This allows Moore to keep up with his assignments, fundraisers and pay for school lunches. The app provides the lunch menus, which Moore says are helpful because if there’s something he won’t eat, she knows to pack him a lunch for that day.

Moore prefers the app over the private Facebook group his kindergarten class used. “The Facebook group had photos, but you’d have to friend the page and then you open yourself up to friend requests from other people in the group and those people can get into your business. The app is better.”

Jill Ramirez has children in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). It’s one of the largest school districts in the country, serving ten percent of California students. Ramirez points out that no matter how efficient the system is, communication requires effort, even if there’s an app. “The individual classrooms use an app which is only as effective as the teacher using it,” Ramirez notes. “The administration is still doing the flyers in backpacks, and a robocall thing. I would love email updates, but the only people using email regularly are the PTA moms who put a list together on their own time.”

In another corner of LAUSD, Sara Skelton is very pleased with her school’s parent communications, but notes it’s the parents that are driving it there as well. “Thankfully our school has an excellent PTA and we have a communications board position,” explains Skelton. “She has done an amazing job of making sure the information is always accessible to all parents. Teachers are on an app where they can communicate directly with parents. Our website is always updated with all events. We have a classroom rep. who emails all the parents every week with reminders on anything important happening during the week. We have a weekly

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newsletter that's emailed to all parents and links to the website. Sometimes the info is repetitive but parents can't complain that they don't get the information!"

Frances Callier's daughter attends a school that doesn't use an app but, again, shows communication is people-driven. "Our school is AMAZING about communication. There is a newsletter about information and calendar events from the principal every Sunday night, then there is a grade-specific communication that goes out as well."

Focus on basics

Keeping apps and information up to date can help avoid a communication breakdown as well as protecting privacy, whether it be the teacher's privacy or the families. A school with its own network is more secure and comfortable for everyone. "My son's first teacher used her own email account, which felt a little awkward," Moore shared. "His new teacher uses an email with the school district's server address, so I don't feel like I'm bothering her during her personal time if I email at odd hours."

At the other end of the communication spectrum, Lorrie lives in rural New Hampshire where her daughter's school in the Pittsfield District keeps contact basic. "We have a populace of 3,500 residents — it's a small town," she explains. "We don't get robocalls. We get a personal call with a human on the other end. Phone calls and texts work best for us."

Room for improvement

It's important to acknowledge when communication is not working. David Solovieff, whose sons are in middle school in the Montgomery County District of Maryland, feels like he is being made responsible for the communications himself. "There are rare outgoing messages or contacts from teachers," he says. "You need to send the first email."

There is no downside to improving communications between your school and parents because almost everything is improved by involvement. When it's making their lives easier, parents are more eager to assist. At Skelton's school, the PTA Communications position heads up parent-teacher communications for the whole school. "And she has an assistant!" If your PTA doesn't have this position, maybe it's time to add it.

Allowing parents to choose their mode of communication can help. Do they prefer calls, flyers or emails? There are many apps on the market that can help, and can be customized to your school. Once you've chosen your modes of communication, things will go best if you make the first step to let parents and teachers know they can stay on top of sharing information with the tools you've chosen. Good communication can be the core of a happy, high functioning school community.

Contributed by Jack Sanderson, writer and communication consultant living in Los Angeles.