

August 2021

ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Plan your parent update system

Communicating quickly with accurate information is critical in any school emergency. But how do parents know how to receive those messages?

Do they go to the website? Or the district's Facebook page? Or is there a notification system, such as FlashAlert?

Make it easy on your parents and simply tell them how you plan to communicate about important issues. Spell it out in a letter or one-page flyer at the beginning of the year.

Technology provides a wide array of tools to communicate, and it can be fun to try them out. Telephone calls, email, text messages, social media and electronic newsletters are just a few. Some are more effective than others for certain messages.

But when schools use too many different communication tools, it can be bewildering for parents to stay on top of them all. And when different methods are used for different kinds of messages, parents may forget where to access the specific information they need.

So keep it simple. Choose a handful of tools that are effective and efficient in communicating specific types of messages. Inform parents, and then stick with your chosen tools.

Prioritize your website

The one tool that belongs in every communication toolbox is a robust school/district website. That should be the "go-to" for the latest, most complete school and district news. Parents should know that the website will include accurate calendar dates, news releases and general information about programs and policies. Whether sending out printed or electronic messages to parents, always include a link to your website for more information.

So, what other communication tools should you use?

The best tool depends on the message you want to convey. Social media is a great choice for sharing fun photos of students and special events, but it isn't effective for relaying information about more complicated topics, such as budget cuts.

Backpacks can be a good way for elementary teachers to send examples of student work, but can be a black hole for meeting notices, parent letters and other information if parents don't remember to check them regularly.

FlashAlert and similar text notification systems are great for disseminating information quickly in a crisis, but are useless if parents haven't actually signed up to receive the notifications. If this is your tool of choice, be sure to make a push at the start of each year to get parents to sign up for notifications.

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Other options for communicating with parents might include:

- **Text messages** — Parent cell phone numbers are listed in the Student Information System and can be used to generate text messages to all families. While this can be a good way to contact parents quickly, you're limited to a certain word count, so it's not effective for all types of messages.
- **Phone calls** — Telephone calls are the next best thing to face-to-face conversations. Phone calls are often used to relay concerning news about attendance, slipping grades or disturbing behavior. But they are also a wonderful way to build relationships with parents by conveying good news. Make it a practice to call at least one parent a week to relay good news, such as when Johnny consistently finished his homework on time or impressed you by helping another student.
- **Email** — Electronic notes are quickly becoming an important link between teachers and parents because they allow for two-way communication. Parents can respond to emails, ask questions and seek further information.
- **Newsletters** — Electronic newsletters provide a means of quickly sending information about events, upcoming meetings and good news about what's happening in the schools.
- **Letters to parents** — If producing a regular newsletter seems a little daunting, a simple letter can accomplish the same thing. Teachers may want to send a general letter to parents at the start of the year, outlining expectations and listing important dates. Send other letters throughout the year to make special announcements or ask for volunteers, etc.

The list of communication options is long, but remember, you don't need to use them all. In fact, a leaner communication arsenal can be better, especially for districts without a large staff to monitor and maintain them.

Communications are only effective when someone actually receives and reads them. Once parents know where and how to access information and receive alerts about the district, they are better able to stay engaged with their school.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant