Probing the Impact of Parent-Teacher Digital Communication

By Sara Gilgore

Technology is not only changing the way students learn—it is reshaping the way parents and teachers interact.

Educators and researchers have long been intrigued by the potential of digital platforms and tools to strengthen communication between teachers and families. But in recent years, the proliferation of smartphones and various forms of apps, text-messaging, email, and social media has vastly improved the speed and scope of that communication, a digital transformation that carries implications for educators and parents alike.

Academic researchers have taken notice, and are beginning to probe what kinds of tech-based communication between educators and families bring the biggest academic payoff for students.

Many of the tech tools that connect teachers with parents are offered by commercial providers and used by teachers at their own initiative. But some school systems, like the San Francisco Unified School District, are integrating these platforms with their student-information systems, making them functional at the classroom, school, and district levels.

Yet even as proponents of those tools praise their ability to break down walls between schools and families, some say there are risks that the information exchange will overwhelm teachers and parents, and discourage them from engaging at all.

Others say that unequal levels of web connectivity at home prevent poor families from being able to engage with teachers in the same way that more affluent parents can. Advocates for closing that digital divide say that educators need to use a variety of communications to ensure they reach parents from all economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

"Any tool that I can leverage to help [students] learn a little bit more is enticing to me," said Joseph Vincente, a 10th grade chemistry teacher at East Side Community High School in New York City, who has experimented

Quick Communication
Teachers and district officials around the country communicate via text messages and alerts with parents through Remind, a
with reaching parents through text messages and others means. Some forms are "like an alert, a notification," he said, which creates "a different feel to the communication."

'Light-Touch' Exchanges

There is a strong body of evidence that students perform better academically when parents are deeply involved in their education. Yet much of that research was conducted before computer-based technology was prevalent in homes and schools. The research also lacks data on how students' academic performance is affected by parents' tech-based interactions with teachers.

A working paper released last year by researchers at Harvard University addresses some of those gaps. It found that frequent text-messaging between teachers and parents was linked to improved student academic outcomes when the content of those electronic exchanges was focused on educational goals.

A separate study, conducted by the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 2012 found that student engagement in a summer school program increased when families received daily phone calls and written text messages from teachers. A third study, published in a National Communication Association journal in 2008, concluded that emails between teachers and parents led to increased homework completion. But it also found that for some students' emails to their parents might have hindered their performance, because they resented the exchanges or relied too heavily on their parents for help.

Parents tend to connect with teachers via technologies that are convenient, and in many households, the tool of choice is the smartphone. Ownership of those devices has spiked, from 35 percent of U.S. adults in 2011 to 64 percent in 2015, according to the Pew Research Center.

In the Harvard working paper, parents of high school students in a credit-recovery program received personalized text messages from teachers each week. The "light-touch communication," as the researchers described it, was linked to fewer students dropping out of school and failing to earn course credit. That was especially true when messages included concrete examples of how students could be more successful, which the researchers concluded led to more productive support from parents.

When teacher-to-parent communication is too generic, or focused only on positive aspects of student performance, schools are "missing an opportunity to provide guidance on areas for improvement, which all students have," said Mathew Kraft, co-author of the study and an assistant professor of education at Brown University. Parent-teacher communication tends to be more effective, he said, when it provides parents with "specific information on how they can support their [children]... in school and outside of class."

Content and Frequency

While he acknowledges that his research is not conclusive, Kraft believes it will contribute to schools' understanding of what factors—such as the quality of messages' content and their frequency—make parent-teacher communication most effective.
Daisy Marino, a former 4th grade English/language arts teacher at Warren Elementary School in Warren, Texas, started sending basic text messages about upcoming tests, class activities, and field trips to parents two years ago. She used a platform that is now known as Remind, a free text-messaging service that has more than 30 million users since launching four years ago, according to co-founder and CEO Brett Kopf. Other providers, such as Kaymbu and Tadpoles, offer similar services.

Marino taught three classes, each with about 25 students. Over time, she began sending more dynamic messages each week to all of her students' parents, such as pictures of grammatical passages and spelling lists.

She would also send personalized messages to certain parents, about after-school sessions and class party duties. While she said she did not send messages about individual students' academic struggles, to avoid misunderstandings, she said she notified parents individually "when their students had really great days."

"I wanted to make sure all of their parents were getting the information that they needed to make the child successful in class," said Marino, who now works as the district's instructional technology specialist.

One parent who regularly received Marino's texts was Jennifer Spearman. The messages allowed Spearman to stay informed about what time the class would be returning from a field trip and help her kids study despite having missed class due to illness. The mother of three school-age children said the technology has "kept the lines open" with their teachers.

Before her kids arrive home, "I already know what to expect," Spearman said.

**Multiple Resources**

To communicate well with all families, and not just advantaged ones, studies suggest that teachers must use multiple resources, said Joyce Epstein, a research professor of education and sociology at Johns Hopkins University. Epstein is also the director of the National Network of Partnership Schools. The organization works with schools, districts, and state leaders to develop research-based programs for family involvement.

One teacher who takes that multi-pronged approach is Vincente, who, with Remind, uses a combination of email, text messages, and phone calls with parents to discuss the academic progress of students he advises. The mix of methods gives Vincente confidence he's reaching more parents than he otherwise might. He also uses Remind to communicate directly with his students, and help those who are struggling.

"[It] has allowed me to feel like I'm serving students exactly the way I need, in a way that I wasn't able to do before," Vincente explained.

Both parents and school officials need to be selective in choosing the right technologies to keep them connected, Epstein said. Parents should select the portals they will pay attention to, "as opposed to every possible communication," she explained. Schools, in turn, have to be careful not to overload parents, but instead share the most meaningful information in a targeted way, many researchers agree.

Some districts are not only encouraging teacher-to-parent communication through technology—they're actually implementing platforms to facilitate those exchanges. The San Francisco school district's new web platform from SchoolMessenger makes it possible to send text messages and
emails to families.

Though "it is still an imperfect system," according to spokeswoman Gentle Blythe, the district hopes it will make maintaining contact more seamless.

**Programs like READY4K!,** a text-messaging curriculum, similarly strive to support this interaction. It was developed for parents of preschoolers by researchers from the Center for Education Policy Analysis at Stanford University in partnership with the San Francisco district's early education department. The program—which relies on providing parents with small, specific activities to build on existing family routines—is intended to lead to increased parent engagement in early literacy activities and learning gains. The curriculum is now being used by schools in 20 different states, CEPA officials say.

Ultimately, the best technologies for connecting teachers with parents have to work on several fronts, Epstein said. They have to be easy for both sides to use, and they have to allow for messages that are personalized to the needs of individual students.

Some parents "will [want] to say, 'Enough,' and others will say, 'That's wonderful,' " Epstein said, "and that's what we really have to try to understand."

 Librarian Holly Peele and Library Intern Maya Riser-Kositsky contributed to this story.  

Vol. 35, Issue 04, Pages 1,16