SchoolStatus

Engage with Parents Where They Are
Lamar County SD Case Study

HALLENGE: Connect and communicate with the school district's parents in a way that increases feelings of inclusivity and purpose, for shared student goals.

OUTCOME:

Expanded educator understanding of student home life, increased professional and productive communication between teachers and parents, and shared parent understanding of curriculum and course goals.

When a student asks you anxiously, "Did you [contact] my parents?!" you might not expect the question to be filled with eager, happy anticipation. That is, unless you are Computer Science and Engineering teacher Judy Lanyon. That's because Lanyon isn't just contacting parents when something goes wrong. Most of the time, she's calling or texting to brag about a student. The effect is tremendous. Lanyon's students are enthusiastic; happy to be in her class. "When you say you're an eighth-grade teacher [people's] eyes get big and they're like, 'Oh, no!'" laughs Lanyon, "But I love this age group! Their personalities, their thought processes, and just seeing them get to a point where they understand something they thought was difficult, is rewarding." Lanyon's class of 8th graders is thriving due in no small part to her smart, simple approach to connecting with parents:

- Begin communication with parents by talking about something positive.
- Supply parents with ongoing questions to ask their children that correspond with the current lesson and foster conversation.
- Text whenever possible.

Consistent, positive parent communication, perfectly exemplified by Lanyon's own best practices, is just one example of how Lamar County School District in Mississippi builds relationships with parents. They meet parents where they are regardless of the barriers that may stand in the way. To do this, the district uses **SchoolStatus**, the only parent communication tool that puts ALL student data together with tools for calling, texting and emailing from a computer or your own phone.

"I LOVE **SchoolStatus**!" gushes 4th grade Science and Social Studies teacher Jaime Beasely, "It's my favorite!" Jaime uses **SchoolStatus** to reach parents on a regular basis, but finds it particularly valuable for reaching overbooked parents, "Everybody has busy schedules, I get that. **SchoolStatus** is how I communicate with them and they do text me back." Bridging the gap between school and home means being flexible and adaptive towards the many hurdles prevalent between the two.

With **SchoolStatus**, teachers have the ability to call, text, or email a parent or guardian directly from their school computer or their own mobile phone, without having to reveal their personal number—a huge time saver for many educators, especially when jobs keep parents from an in-person meeting. "Both parents are working or it's a single parent household and they're just trying to understand what their kids need," explains Lanyon. The list of barriers to parent communication is long and oft repeated. Multiple jobs with difficult schedules, jobs that don't allow phone calls during work hours, and non-traditional family structures all top the list. And yet, Lamar County School District is making unprecedented contact with parents daily. This school year alone, Lamar County SD has sent over 300k texts, made over 25k calls, and exchanged over 13k emails -- all of which are recorded and attached to the student's card for future reference and administrative oversight. It doesn't take long to understand that Lamar County SD is doing things differently in their communication efforts. Showing parents you care just as much as they do is front and center.

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BEING ON THE SAME TEAM

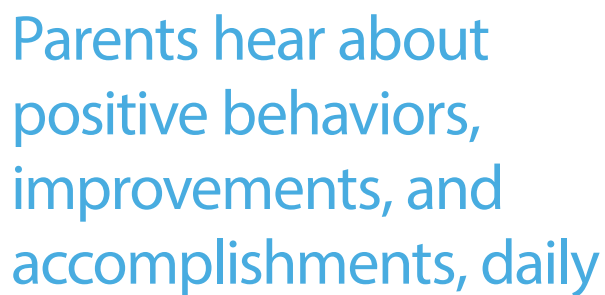When it comes to creating and maintaining relationships with parents, with such diversity across school communities, Lamar County School District stands as a model for communities both wealthy and impoverished. Having recently consolidated with a struggling nearby district, Lamar County SD is comprised of 16 campuses spread throughout five different communities with a wide range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

For Lamar County SD, good parent engagement starts with showing parents that you are on the same team. "We want parents to know that they are welcome. We are a partnership in this," asserted Heather Roland, Principal of Oak Grove Upper Elementary, "We want the best for your kids, and we know you do, too." This is a district-wide approach, and educators at Lamar know that it can't happen without actually talking to stakeholders. "Communication is key," says Bryan Giles, Principal of Lumberton High School, "You cannot do what we do without having communication with family or guardians because you can only get so much from a child while they're at school. It takes all of us working together as a team to ensure that kid is going to be on a positive path. **SchoolStatus** is a way for

us to ensure that we're getting that communication." With features for recording calls, texts, emails, and even language translation in one place, parent communication is no longer an accessory or afterthought to the efforts and initiatives that take place on campus.

Principal Roland makes use of language translation in **SchoolStatus** as she focuses on making non-English speaking parents feel welcome on her campus. Being able to text or email a parent directly not only saves time, but it builds trust. "We have so many other languages, so [**SchoolStatus**] is very helpful," says Roland.

Easy access to communication tools, automatic logging, and language translation means that communication can happen more frequently. For Lamar County SD, that means parents hear about positive behaviors, small or personal improvements, and previously unrecognized accomplishments on a daily basis. With **SchoolStatus**, parents can actually participate in a student's holistic journey on campus. In many instances, this even includes bringing parents up to speed on current technology or learning techniques.

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WHEN PARENTS BECOME STUDENTS

The ever-changing nature of instruction and technology propels many conversations with parents at Lamar County SD. Judy Lanyon's ICT2 students are learning things like programming applications, working in Microsoft Excel and graphic design: in general, a far cry from what parents were doing in a computer classroom twenty-plus years ago. Times have changed significantly, and keeping parents informed and connected sometimes means that teaching doesn't stop with the students in the classroom. "Everything is so computer oriented that some of these parents may not know how to help their child or [that] we've really bumped up the requirements." asserts Lanyon. Lanyon combats the knowledge gaps by consistently supplying parents with the right questions to ask their children.

"It varies depending on what we're doing," says Lanyon. "I usually will send out a message to parents [saying], 'Ask your child about his Photoshop [project].' The kids get really excited about various things in here that they're doing." In this way, Lanyon isn't just creating relationships with parents herself, she is facilitating relationships between parents and their children centered on excitement in learning. That is real parent engagement. Fourth-grade math teacher Hannah White echoes Lanyon's challenges, "A lot of the times the parents weren't taught the way that we're teaching [math] now." Parents want to know how to best help their children prepare for exams
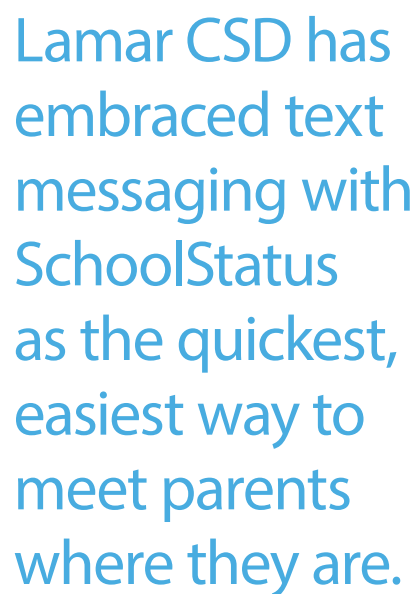
and quizzes. "A lot of [my communication] is me texting pictures of how I work a problem," says White. Both Lanyon and White demonstrate what every educator knows…teaching doesn't stop in the classroom. Sometimes reaching parents where they are means teaching an entirely different lesson to them.

EMBRACING MODERN HABITS

If step one in successful parent engagement is showing parents that you care as much as they do about the health, happiness, and success of their children, the next question is: what is the best way to do that when parents can't come to meetings on campus or answer a phone call during the day? Lamar County SD has embraced text messaging with **SchoolStatus** as the quickest, easiest way to meet parents where they are as well as build trust. Texting tools are integrated with the student data -- meaning educators won't miss important talking points just because they can't meet in person. "We have events throughout the year, you know—Meet the Teacher or Open House—some parents don't come to that, so **SchoolStatus** is how we communicate with them," says Jaime Beasley, "A lot of parents love the text because they'll say, 'My job doesn't allow me to take phone calls, but I can text you when I get a break.' So the texting has been a big thing for us." Lamar County SD isn't waiting for parents to find the time to come to campus—for a lot of parents, that opportunity would never come. Instead, educators at Lamar are finding an alternate way into the busy lives of parents.

Text messaging certainly isn't new to educators, but it has always been fraught with deficiencies. Some common services allow for outbound mass messaging. And while useful for school-wide scheduled announcements, they aren't designed for conversation and aren't a means to build meaningful relationships with parents. Even more problematic, in many districts, teachers use their personal phones —putting themselves at risk for unprofessional or unwelcome communication, outside the protection of the school administration.

Most communication options for educators do not incorporate call logs and text transcripts as part of the student's record—which means details and information may not be captured and included for future reference. "It gives me a sense of safety knowing that it is a recorded conversation," says Lumberton High School English teacher Penny Temples. "It takes some liability off of us knowing that [communication] is recorded." Temples is also happy to no longer have to document calls manually, "I have had jobs where I had to document like crazy, and this is so much easier." With **SchoolStatus**, all communication automatically becomes a part of the Student Card, a digital cumulative folder encompassing all current and historical student data—everything from attendance,

> ## Lamar CSD has embraced text messaging with SchoolStatus as the quickest, easiest way to meet parents where they are.

discipline, assessments and benchmarks to IEP plans and teacher notes about student behavior or characteristics—live alongside communication records. The Student Card ensures students are viewed as more than numbers, and communication records are one of the most important elements. At **SchoolStatus**, we call it Seeing the Whole Student™. Temples remembers a particular instance where she had to send a discipline referral to her principal, "I simply went back to the contact that I had made with this child's parent to see every time I had contacted them about this particular issue." says Temples. "I was able to put that on the referral so it let him know [I] had spoken to the parent [many] times. I really like that. It makes my job easier."

RAISING THE BAR

While texting may be preferred by parents these days, professionalism is a concern with casual forms of communication. With easily searchable text (as well as call and email) records, **SchoolStatus** brings texting with parents to a level of professionalism upon which administration can rely. "**SchoolStatus** allows you to maintain communication via text in a professional manner," asserts Giles, "It doesn't blur the line between your personal and your professional [life]. It allows teachers to use an informal means of communication, which is texting, in a professional way." Principal Giles is very particular when it comes to communication on his campus. Not only does he expect communication to be professional, but the tone is also often a topic of discussion in his office. In fact, he encourages his entire team to revisit communication with parents regularly to check and see how they might be coming across to the person on the other end of the line.

Re-reading text messages, and more importantly, listening to the automatic recordings of phone calls in **SchoolStatus** puts an emphasis on the climate and culture that is being developed by the school district. "Tone is important…A parent may feel you're coming across as rude even though you don't think you're coming across as rude. But if you go back and listen to it later, you might understand why they would feel that way," says Giles, "You may pick up on something that you didn't realize was coming across in the middle of that conversation." With a focus on the experience of the parent, Giles demonstrates once again how Lamar County SD builds relationships with empathy and intentionality using **SchoolStatus**.

ENGAGING PARENTS WHERE THEY ARE

Lamar County School District goes above and beyond when it comes to reaching parents, and it all starts with paying attention to the lives of the individuals with whom they are trying to connect. Whether it's an inclusive atmosphere, difficult work schedules or even a gap in the knowledge base, Lamar County educators are finding ways to welcome parents to the table through smart use of communication technology. "We use **SchoolStatus** daily," says Upper Elementary Principal Heather Roland. "We are constantly in contact with parents to bridge that gap." Remaining in constant contact is no longer a chore added to the never-ending to-do list of classroom educators as well as administration. "We're here to build relationships," says Bryan Giles. **SchoolStatus** is here to help.

Learn more about how to make your data work for you

Turn your student data into parent conversations.

SchoolStatus