

K12 Communication Solutions

A Buyer's Guide

With communication tools flooding the K12 edtech landscape, it can be difficult to determine which option is best for your school district.

Apps and websites for texting, messaging, and calling make it easier for teachers to send out assignments, reminders, and progress reports, and for administrators to send district-wide information and alerts. Ideally, the right tools will also increase parent involvement and engagement resulting in increased student success and better school culture.

Classroom communication solutions run the gamut from social media type platforms to parent portals and everything in between. This report will help you evaluate the tools on the market to help you meet your unique district goals.



Understanding Communication, Involvement, and Engagement

Although they are often used interchangeably, parent communication, involvement, and engagement have important differences. It is necessary to understand those differences when trying to establish your district goals for a communication solution.

Parent Communication refers to the messages sent between educators and caregivers. Whether a reminder about an assignment or a call home to check in during remote learning, this term refers to the act of communicating information.

Parent Involvement refers to the interaction between a parent and the school campus or community. This can include things like being part of the PTA, supporting fundraising, or chaperoning a field trip. This is often initiated by the school district and fulfilled by a parent.

Parent Engagement is the ideal byproduct of your communication and involvement efforts. Engagement goes beyond parents fulfilling school or district needs and emphasizes a joint, balanced commitment to support and improve the learning, development, and health of students. Engagement occurs when communication is two-way, collaboration is encouraged, and parents have the resources necessary to support their child's learning. Research links parent engagement to increased student success.

What do *parents* want?

Parents would like information to be conveniently **pushed directly to them** instead of having to seek it out.

At the same time, parents are busy and **don't want to be overloaded** with messages. Schools should send timely, highly impactful information through personalized communication.



State Expectations and District Goal Setting

Regardless of income or background, research shows **students with involved families:**

- Earn better grades and test scores
- Have better school attendance
- Are more likely to be promoted and pass their classes
- Have greater social skills
- Have a greater likelihood of continuing their education

Your state department of education has expectations for a family engagement plan to ensure that Title I, Part A parent and family engagement regulations are met to build parent and school staff capacity as mandated by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015.

Schools and districts must ensure that strong strategies are in place to:

- Build capacity to engage parents/stakeholders in an effective partnership with the school
- Facilitate family-to-family support
- Establish a network of community resources
- Increase family participation in decision-making
- Support high student academic achievement
- Equip families with tools to extend learning
- Evaluate engagement efforts and use evaluations for continuous improvement





Types of K12 Communication Solutions

As you continue your search for the best solution, you'll find many tools fit into multiple categories, and tools with primary functions other than communication also have communication capabilities.

It's important to note that some tools are useful only on the classroom level, while others support communication at the building or district level. In order to align district initiatives with classroom level activity, you may want to consider a solution that puts all district to classroom level communication in the same place for transparency and security.



Classroom Management Tools

Some parent communication tools on the market are incorporated into existing classroom management software. These tools are powerful for behavior-based conversations but may not have the capacity for district-wide communication or for facilitating relationship building beyond the functions of the app. These apps lack centralized management insight into the content being communicated. Additional school or district-wide tools are necessary for announcements or emergency alerts.

Level of use: Classroom

Examples: Class Dojo, Google Classroom, ClassCharts



SIS Parent Portals/ Online Gradebook

With a lot of parent conversations based on grades, a parent portal or online gradebook may solve the problem of updating parents about how their child ended up with an undesirable grade in a teacher's classroom. These apps offer parents a ton of information and they don't require back and forth conversations in order for parents to get what they are looking for. While handy for parents who are already engaged, this type of tool is not suitable for building involvement or engagement with parents who are difficult to reach.

Level of use: Primarily classroom

Examples: PowerSchool, Infinite Campus

What does it mean to 'opt-in'?

The term 'opt-in' refers to an individual making a conscious choice to participate in something. This can include a parent downloading a messaging app, logging into a parent portal, or visiting a social media page.

Solutions that require parents or caregivers to 'opt-in' will immediately fracture your parent into two groups: those who receive your communication and those who don't.

Parents most likely to opt-in are often *already involved with your school* or engaged in learning at home.



Portfolio-Based Tools

Portfolio-based tools help teachers start conversations with individual parents about their kid's classwork. These types of tools have similar drawbacks to classroom management tools in that they are not a comprehensive solution for your district engagement initiatives. These tools are almost exclusively ways to share student work, and they don't offer good back and forth conversation capabilities.

Level of use: Classroom

Examples: Seesaw, Nearpod



Single User

Often free to use, many parent messaging tools are downloadable on an individual basis. The price may seem appealing, but what you gain in savings, you lose in oversight and security. With teachers using multiple free communication tools, administrators lose the ability to monitor content and frequency, and some apps are vulnerable to outsiders opting-in.

Level of use: Classroom

Examples: Remind (free version), Bloomz (free version), ClassTag (free version), TalkingPoints



Text App

As communication habits have changed over the years, many educators find that texting is the quickest way to reach a parent. The ability to send immediate, up-to-date information is appealing with this type of communication tool, as is the ability to text both parents and students. The best versions send messages to the existing Message app on a parent's phone without asking parents to opt-in to another app.

Level of use: Classroom

Examples: Messages for iOS or Google

The problem with free communication tools

Free communication tools have obvious appeal to individual teachers, but offer less in the way of campus or district level communication goals for parent engagement. With each teacher using his or her own tool, parents of multiple children may need to become familiar with more than one app or process, and administrators lack oversight into communication frequency and content.

District-wide or school-wide communication solutions ensure *all* communication is happening in the same place, and standards for performance are maintained.



Emergency Communication

An absolute necessity for severe weather, lockdowns, or to protect students and staff in case of an intruder on campus. Most emergency messaging systems operate separately from individual parent communication and are not designed to affect district goals such as social emotional learning or campus culture.

Level of use: District

Examples: Activate, Lokdown, SchoolPass



Unified K12 Communications Tool

These tools incorporate one-to-one, group, school, and district-wide communication in the form of call, text, and email for individual engagement as well as emergency notifications.

Designed to incorporate integrated data packages, this type of solution encourages communication around student data performance and goals and may even provide data analytics for targeted engagement campaigns. Advantages include the ability to switch data packages, SIS, or LMS without losing communication history. This type of solution offers the most robust transparency for administrators to monitor professionalism, communication initiatives, and frequency, and prevents disparate communication from taking place around the district.

Level of use: District, Building, Classroom

Example: SchoolStatus

Social Media

Social media can be a great way to post announcements, homework, or fun classroom activities to your audience of parents. Whether using mainstream platforms such as Facebook Groups or Twitter, or K12 social media apps, this form of communication reaches a large group at once, and offers a way to celebrate classroom achievements. Some drawbacks, however, include necessary monitoring if posts by students or parents are allowed in the space, unwittingly posting a picture of a student without permission, and you may still miss a large portion of your audience if parents do not use social media or opt-in to a new platform.

Level of use: Classroom, Building, District

Examples: Facebook, Twitter, Twiducate, Classting, Edmodo

“The way we’ve always done it” might be wasting your time!

Manual, hand-written call logs not only take an inordinate amount of time to complete, the hassle of the process may be a reason calls or texts with parents aren’t happening as frequently as you would like. In addition, notes written from memory will never reveal the true context and tone of an interaction.

The right communication tool will auto-document all calls, texts, emails, and even *attempts* to connect—saving your teachers hours in a week and removing the avoidance to reach out because of the paperwork.

Goal-Oriented Decision Making

When choosing a solution for your district, keep your goals in mind and look for a way to measure the effectiveness of your efforts. Whether your goals are reaching non-English speaking parents, or improving attendance rates, your communication tools should be capable of demonstrating success with transparency and ease in accessing records.

The right solution will give your teachers hours back in their week, equip families with tools to extend learning, and give you peace of mind that each parent is receiving helpful and professional information.

Communication Solution Checklist

Download the Communication Solution Checklist to simplify your evaluation process.

The easy-to-follow checklist breaks down the features of different tools so that you and your team can make a decision with confidence.

Simply scroll through the categories including everything from communication basics, to implementation and security, to documentation and success.

