From Apps to Announcements:

Increasing School-Parent Engagement with Communications Technology

A SchoolMessenger Solutions Survey
June 2017

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Introduction

In the words of Family Engagement Lab, a nonprofit focused on helping schools build parent engagement, "When families engage, children succeed." School-parent engagement has a positive impact on student academic success, keeps families apprised of school activities, emergency situations and other news from the district, and, ultimately builds a strong school community.

From a series of family focus groups, Family Engagement Lab discovered three things that parents most want to know from their child's school. They want to receive information about how their child is doing academically, the key skills their child is supposed to learn, and how they can support their child's learning. Unfortunately, in a national follow-up survey completed in February 2017, they learned that 32 percent of parents are "not at all," "slightly" or only "somewhat" satisfied with the information communicated by their schools.

To learn more about how school districts are leveraging today's communications technology to build school-parent engagement and districts' future plans for using new or existing tools, West, the trusted provider of SchoolMessenger solutions, conducted a national customer survey in March 2017.

Nearly 1/3 of parents are not highly satisfied

Overall, how satisfied are you with the information that you're getting from your child's teacher/school?

68%
Are 'very' or 'moderately' satisfied

32%
Are 'not at all,' 'slightly' or 'somewhat' satisfied

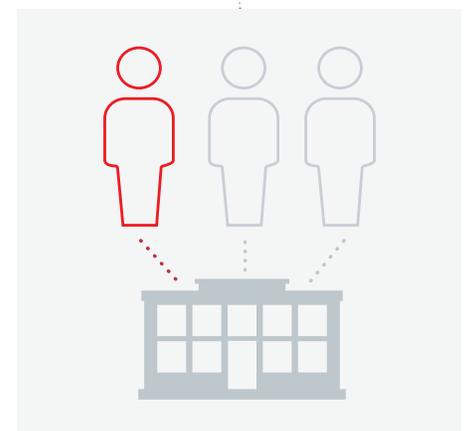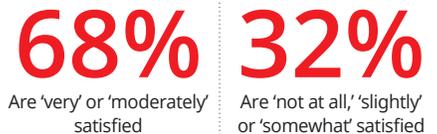Source: Family Engagement Lab

About the Survey

The survey sought to discover the ways that districts are currently using communications technology for parent and guardian engagement, to examine their perceived effectiveness of the solutions and to learn about their plans for growth over the next 1 - 3 years. Respondents were asked about their use of broadcast voice notification, broadcast text message notification, broadcast email notification, district/school websites, district-branded mobile apps, product web or mobile apps, and social media postings (e.g, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram).

Hundreds of West's district-level customers completed the 10-question online survey. The breakdown of respondents from small, medium and large districts as well as rural, suburban and urban districts approximately mirrored the national mix of district sizes and settings. Respondent titles included superintendents and similar roles; technology directors, chief technology officers, and similar roles; and communications, public information officers, public relations, and similar roles.

(Unless otherwise noted, district respondents could select multiple answers for each survey question, so totals will exceed 100 percent.)

Top Three Findings

#1. Use of mobile apps is growing.

Overall, district use of mobile apps to build parent engagement is increasing. Districts report that they plan a 44 percent increase in the emphasis they put on the use of mobile apps over the next 1 - 3 years. Yet, in contrast, they expressed concern about the impact of the proliferation of communications apps from various sources. One respondent commented, "Due to the proliferation of devices, apps and other media channels, it is challenging to find the best way to communicate effectively with a maximum number of people."

#2. Multiple channels are key to maximum parent engagement.

Districts believe that for maximum engagement, they must use multiple channels. Broadcast voice notification remains important since 45 percent of respondents report that parent internet access is a significant obstacle in using technology to better engage parents. Interestingly, when district leaders were asked to respond *as parents*, they had different perceptions of channel effectiveness for engagement, implying that a multi-channel approach is critical. On the topic, one respondent said, "Parents need and want the ability to select only what communications methods work for them. They need opt-out options for the onslaught of options these days." Another even commented, "I think face-to-face communication, one-on-one and hosting community events is the best way. Paper handouts are also good."

#3. Social media dominates and will continue to dominate.

Social media as a parent engagement channel dominates and it appears it will remain dominant with districts putting a high level of priority on investing resources into it over the next 1 - 3 years. Part of the reason for this is that a majority of respondents perceive two-way communication with parents as more effective for engagement than one-way communication. As one respondent said, "I think websites and social media cover the lion['s] share of two-way communication." However, using social media to reach parents is not without its pitfalls. As one respondent noted, "[The] challenge with social media is controlling the potential negative posts and monitoring it consistently enough to ensure only appropriate comments [appear] on the site."

> "Due to the proliferation of devices, apps and other media channels, it is challenging to find the best way to communicate effectively with a maximum number of people."
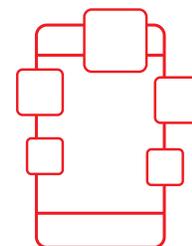
33% of districts surveyed plan to focus on district **mobile apps** in the next 1 - 3 years.
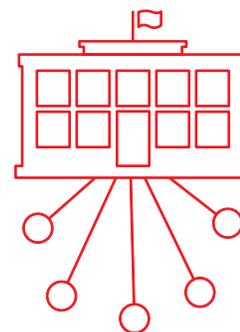
65% of districts surveyed already use **5 or more channels** to communicate with parents.
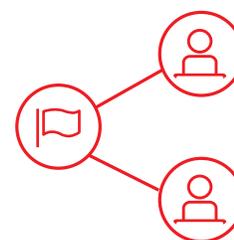
86% of districts surveyed use **social media** to communicate with parents.

Exploring Today's Communications Technology

When asked about the communications technologies that they are using
to engage parents today, districts report that the use of broadcast voice
notification and websites are nearly ubiquitous at 96 and 94 percent
respectively. Social media is not far behind with 86 percent reporting that
they use it to communicate with parents. In addition, 23 percent, or nearly
one quarter, are using a branded mobile app to reach parents.

When it comes to the *effectiveness* of the communications technologies
they currently use, districts believe that social media is nearly as effective
as broadcast voice notification, with 61 percent citing social media and 65
percent choosing voice. The third most-effective communications technology
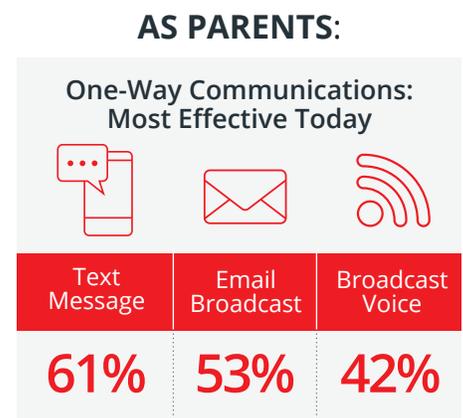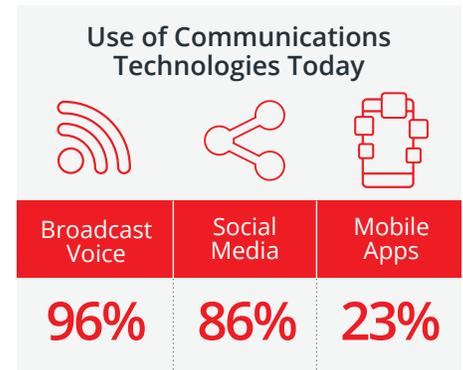is broadcast email notification, at 43 percent.

Interestingly, the respondents' job titles had an impact on their view of
which tools were most effective. Superintendents tend to find broadcast
voice and text message notification more effective than technology directors
and communications respondents. Communications respondents tend
to find social media, websites and broadcast email more effective than
superintendents or technology directors.

> "We use a variety of communication tools, with the understanding
> we must do this in order to reach our entire audience."

District Leaders as Parents and School Communications Technology Preferences

When the respondents were asked to change hats – that is, to answer
the effectiveness survey question *as a parent* – the results revealed varying
perceptions of which channels are considered most effective.

As parents, respondents put broadcast text message notification on top,
at 61 percent, followed by broadcast email notification at 53 percent and
broadcast voice notification at 42 percent. Social media comes in fourth.
This might be extrapolated to imply a conclusion about the general parent
population: multiple channels must be used if a district is going to reach all
parents, as communications preferences vary.

**Use of Communications
Technologies Today**

Broadcast Voice	Social Media	Mobile Apps
96%	86%	23%

AS DISTRICT LEADERS:

**One-Way Communications:
Most Effective Today**

Broadcast Voice	Social Media	Email Broadcast
65%	61%	43%

AS PARENTS:

**One-Way Communications:
Most Effective Today**

Text Message	Email Broadcast	Broadcast Voice
61%	53%	42%

What's on the Horizon for One-Way Communications?

The survey results revealed a connection between the technologies respondents currently deem most effective and their priorities for investment of time or resources over the next 1 - 3 years. As described in the top three findings, social media is the highest priority for near-future investment (63 percent). Interestingly, this is a higher priority for large and suburban districts than districts of other sizes and settings.

Nearly half of districts (49 percent) view websites as a priority for growth. In addition, plans for future use of district-branded apps is up 10 percentage points from current use, from 23 to 33 percent, a relative 44 percent increase.

And broadcast voice notification isn't going away. Some 44 percent of respondents consider it a 1 - 3 year priority, and it's even more of a priority for small and rural districts than larger or more suburban/urban districts.
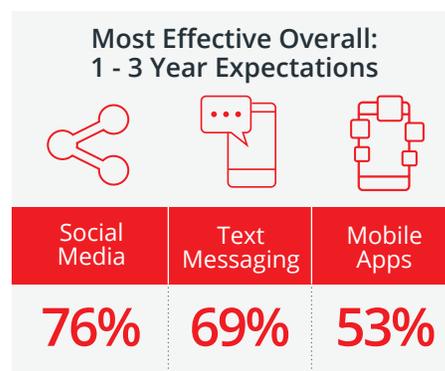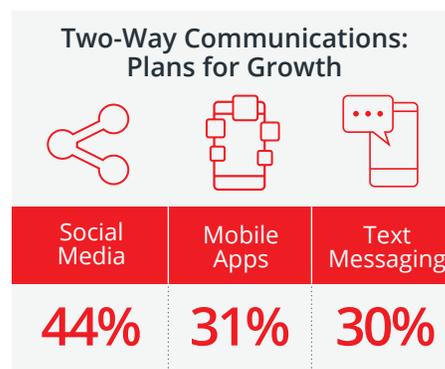
What's on the Horizon for Two-Way Communications?

Overall, respondents see two-way communications as more effective than one-way technologies (62 percent) for engaging with parents.

Of two-way communications technologies, nearly one third (31 percent) view mobile apps as a two-way communications priority for growth in the next 1 - 3 years. In addition, nearly one half (44 percent) see social media as a two-way communications priority for growth. Mobile text messaging was nearly as popular as mobile apps as a priority, at 30 percent.

Looking at what is expected to be most effective and used to engage with parents and guardians *overall* in 1 - 3 years, whether it's a one-way or two-way communications technology, social media tops the results, at 76 percent. Text messaging (69 percent) and mobile apps (53 percent) follow closely behind in the top three. While only 28 percent of districts cite video as being effective and used to engage parents in the near future, it likely will be increasingly important when combined with social media. As one respondent notes, "With Facebook and YouTube Live now available, I can see video being used even more as a communication tool."

Tech director respondents and those from large and urban districts were more likely to see mobile apps as a more effective engagement technology over the next 1 - 3 years than respondents with other titles or in other district sizes and settings. In addition, respondents in communications roles and from large districts were more likely to view social media as more effective over the next 1 - 3 years than respondents with other titles or in other district sizes and settings.

One-Way Communications: Plans for Growth

Social Media	Websites	Broadcast Voice
63%	49%	44%

Two-Way Communications: Plans for Growth

Social Media	Mobile Apps	Text Messaging
44%	31%	30%

Most Effective Overall: 1 - 3 Year Expectations

| Social Media	Text Messaging	Mobile Apps
76%	69%	53%

Overcoming Challenges Along the Way

Respondents report their most significant challenge in connecting home
and school to better engage parents is internet access for parents and
guardians (45 percent), followed by staff training (41 percent) and school
staff time (38 percent) for communications technology use. The problem of
connectivity for parents may be exacerbated for rural school districts.
A 2016 study on internet access by the Pew Research Center reports that
22 percent of rural Americans don't have internet access, while only 12
percent of urban homes and 11 percent of suburban lack connectivity.

One-third (33 percent) of respondents see the proliferation of mobile
communications apps from many different sources as a significant obstacle
to parent engagement.

And budget remains a challenge. In spite of the fact that the survey
question asked respondents to identify obstacles "aside from budget
constraints," several note "budget" in the "other" responses section. This
is supported by the 2017 CoSN IT Leadership Survey which reported that
budget constraints are the top challenge to all technology adoption for the
third consecutive year.
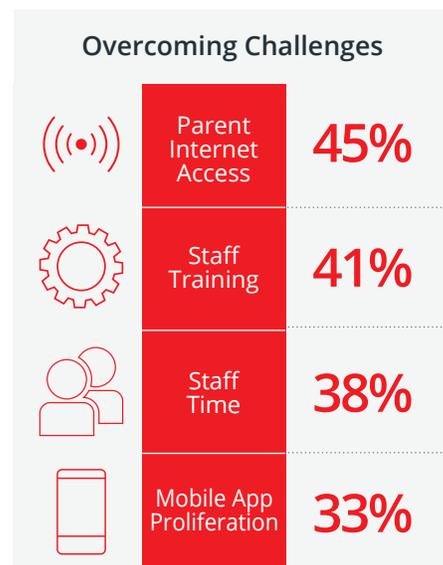
> "Parents need and want the ability to select only what
> communications methods work for them."

Other significant obstacles to using technology to better engage parents
reported by respondents range from lack of parent time/interest to
inaccurate and changing parent contact information. However, supporting
the use of multiple channels, one respondent says, "We use a variety of
communication tools, with the understanding we must do this in order to
reach our entire audience."

Overcoming Challenges

Parent Internet Access	**45%**	
Staff Training	**41%**	
Staff Time	**38%**	
Mobile App Proliferation	**33%**	

Conclusions

Bottom line, the results of this survey demonstrate that not one size, or one method, fits all for using communications technologies to engage parents and guardians. When school districts use two-way communications and multiple channels, the result is maximum reach and engagement.

The good news is that there is a wide range of communications technologies available today for school districts to choose from, and selecting those which best meet the unique needs of their communities can be a multiple-choice answer. One rural district where there is not necessarily a high level of parent internet connectivity might continue to grow its use of broadcast voice notification in parallel with adopting mobile communications apps and text messaging in the near future. Another suburban or urban district, where parents are connected with their smartphones always in their hands, might begin to increase its emphasis on mobile apps, websites, and social media.

Yet, regardless of their demographics, districts understand the importance of two-way communications for building parent engagement – whether that connection is via mobile app or face-to-face in the hallway. The future of leveraging technology for parent engagement is multi-channel, asynchronous, and parent-selectable.

About West (SchoolMessenger solutions)

Through its SchoolMessenger family of products, West Corporation offers K-12 schools the most trusted and comprehensive set of communications solutions.

From advanced communications tools like district-branded mobile apps, products that enable teacher-family messaging, and social media management services, to traditional tools like broadcast voice, email, and text notification, the SchoolMessenger platform helps schools implement multi-channel communications strategies that drive parent and community engagement – in multiple languages and on any device.

SchoolMessenger solutions are the ideal choice for educational institutions that need to be heard in today's busy, mobile, and social world. Innovative offerings like the SchoolMessenger app – which brings together district-, school-, and classroom-level communications into one powerful app – or SchoolMessenger K12 Social – the all-in-one social media management solution for schools – help schools adapt to the ways that parents and community members are communicating today.

Trusted by the most demanding school districts and boards across North America, SchoolMessenger solutions have powered the communications of tens of thousands of schools since 1999.

To learn more about SchoolMessenger products, visit www.schoolmessenger.com or call 888.527.5225.

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