SCHOOLMESSENGER®

Three Simple Ways to Improve School-to-Home Communications

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By Steven W. Anderson

@web20classroom

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Introduction

Strong relationships are built upon strong communication. Whether it's with a spouse, family member, or friend, the ability to communicate well can make or break any relationship. The same is true for our school systems. Students, teachers, staff, parents, and local residents all need to feel that they are engaged members of the school community and that they have the best information possible.

An effective school-to-home communications plan is multifaceted and complex. Ensuring that all stakeholders receive the best, most complete information on a channel that meets their needs can be a challenge. However, no matter what the plan, there is always room for improvement. Here are three ways to improve any communications plan to enhance relationships and build engagement with all education community members.

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1. Be a Storyteller

How many times do we turn on the news and hear another negative story about schools? It seems like there is an exposé about failing schools or a story on how lack of funding is hurting student achievement on almost a daily basis. For those of us on the inside of schools, it can seem as if no good news is ever shared. The reality is that there are amazing things happening in schools every day. From small stories about the activities of one particular classroom to big stories that can have an impact across communities, these are the stories that need and deserve to be told.

There is no question the information that matters to parents and guardians is the critical information related to grades and academics.[1] However, there is something to be said for those great stories that lie just below the surface in every school. There are countless stories you can find if you know where to look; here are just a few examples:

- **Stories about individual achievement –** *like the story about the student who created a braille machine out of Legos for people who couldn't afford to purchase one.*[2]

- **Stories about classroom achievement –** *like the story about a classroom that read the most books in a period.*

- **Stories about community involvement –** *like the story about the school that donated food to a local food bank for the holidays.*

Put simply, there are students, teachers, volunteers, and community members who are doing amazing things in and for schools every day. Start a blog on WordPress, Blogger, or Tumblr and tell their stories. Use your weekly email or a special section on your website to highlight what's great about your school or district.

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2. Diversify Your Social Media Presence

Social media is an almost constant part of our daily lives. We check our likes on Facebook. We post pictures of our amazing meal on Instagram. We see hashtags on our favorite television programs, in books and magazines, and even on our favorite sports teams' jerseys![3] Almost three-fourths of all Americans use social media on a daily basis, and this trend isn't going away.[4]

Schools and districts are also embracing social media as another channel to engage stakeholders. Many districts already have a presence on the most popular networks, Facebook and Twitter. Facebook is great because it allows you to engage with people throughout your school community; Twitter is great as it provides a quick, 140-character way to get the word out; and both offer ease of use and quick deployment of message.

However, if you are limiting yourself to those two channels, you are missing out on additional ways to engage with your community. It is time for school districts to diversify and engage in other spaces.

Consider the fast rise of networks that focus on visual communication, for example. According to Pew Research Center, usage of sites like Pinterest and Instagram has doubled since 2012, while growth on other networks has been slow or flat.[5] Many of today's parents feel more comfortable interacting on Instagram, Pinterest, and Tumblr, where posting pictures or videos is the primary activity, than on Facebook or Twitter, where text-based posts still reign supreme.

In terms of school communications, these kinds of sites can be used to share images from curriculum resources, collections of school pictures, or videos of classroom activities. This can help you engage parents and give them a window into student learning. The possibilities really are endless, and you can engage with the same audience for a different purpose. Of course, these are not the only ways to communicate that kind of information, but they are another way to meet people where they are.

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3. Avoid Message Fatigue

We are bombarded with a tremendous amount of information daily. Each of us has developed our own filters to deal with all the data, letting in the information that matters and letting go of the information that doesn't.

As the father of a first grader, I can attest to the barrage of information I get daily. I receive papers in my kid's daily folder, emails from the district, phone calls from the school, notifications from the teacher via text message – and most of it is the same information being repeated three or more times! I once had someone tell me about the "Rule of Seven," which postulates that you have to communicate information seven different times before the message gets across.[6] That's a nice theory...but who really has time for that? When it comes to school communications, sending that many messages can lead to message fatigue.

To avoid message fatigue, begin by taking stock of what messages are sent and how. This needs to be done not only at the classroom and school level, but across the district as well. Some questions to ask:

- *Is there information at the district level that is also duplicated at the school level? The classroom level?*

- *Can information sharing be streamlined so it is coming from one channel? How can the best information come from the best channel?*

- *Is there a way to share information with the school community less often, but still ensure that it is timely?*

Next, we need to survey stakeholders to find the preferred communications channels. A recent survey done by Pew Research Center with parents of school-aged children found that many parents preferred digital channels to receive information from schools because of the immediacy of the information.[7]

Look at what parents and guardians in your school or district say about how they want to be contacted. What means can you use to get parents and guardians the information they want and need in the most appropriate way for them?

Finally, review reports often. Take a look at all the reports available to determine the effectiveness of your communications. In your phone log, are the calls only being partially listened to? That can be a sign of message fatigue. Take a look at your email log. Are your newsletters being open and read or just glanced at? In your overall message log, do you have a good variety of communications that match what your stakeholders want? These reports provide a treasure trove of information on how your messages are being received, and the data can help you make the adjustments necessary to avoid message fatigue.

Conclusion

A strong school-to-home communications plan not only helps to communicate information to the community in a timely manner, but also helps build relationships, establish connections, and create a culture that all stakeholders want to be a part of. By being a storyteller, diversifying your use of social media, and avoiding message fatigue, you can take your school communications to the next level!

About the Author

Steven W. Anderson, best known as @web20classroom on Twitter, is a learner, blogger, speaker, digital learning and relationship evangelist, author and dad. As a former teacher and director of instructional technology, he is highly sought after for his expertise in educational technology integration and using social media for learning and communicating. Steven presents at conferences worldwide and is also responsible in helping create #edchat, the most popular educational hashtag on Twitter. He is an ASCD Emerging Leader, Microsoft Hero of Education and one of the top educational influencers on Twitter. Steven also serves as SchoolMessenger's Director of Solutions Engineering. You can learn more about him at his website, web20classroom.org.

About SchoolMessenger

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