

Making the Connection with Parents

Parental involvement plays an important role in student achievement. Can it also improve how we conduct school business?

The Mahopac Central School District in upstate New York finds that, indeed, it can.

One of the Mahopac District's goals is to promote maximum community involvement. Over the past few years, however, many parents have communicated to the school board that they need greater access to information about what their children are doing in school in order to become more involved in their education.

The Mahopac District enrolls approximately 5,000 students across four elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school. It is a suburban district, located about 60 miles north of New York City. Many residents are commuters.

Although the district holds events such as back-to-school nights and conference days to encourage involvement, many parents find it difficult to get time off from work to attend. In addition, parents were concerned that events like parent-teacher conferences provided only a one-shot picture of their child's academic life. Further, if parents wanted to follow up with teachers, they often had difficulty reaching each other by telephone.

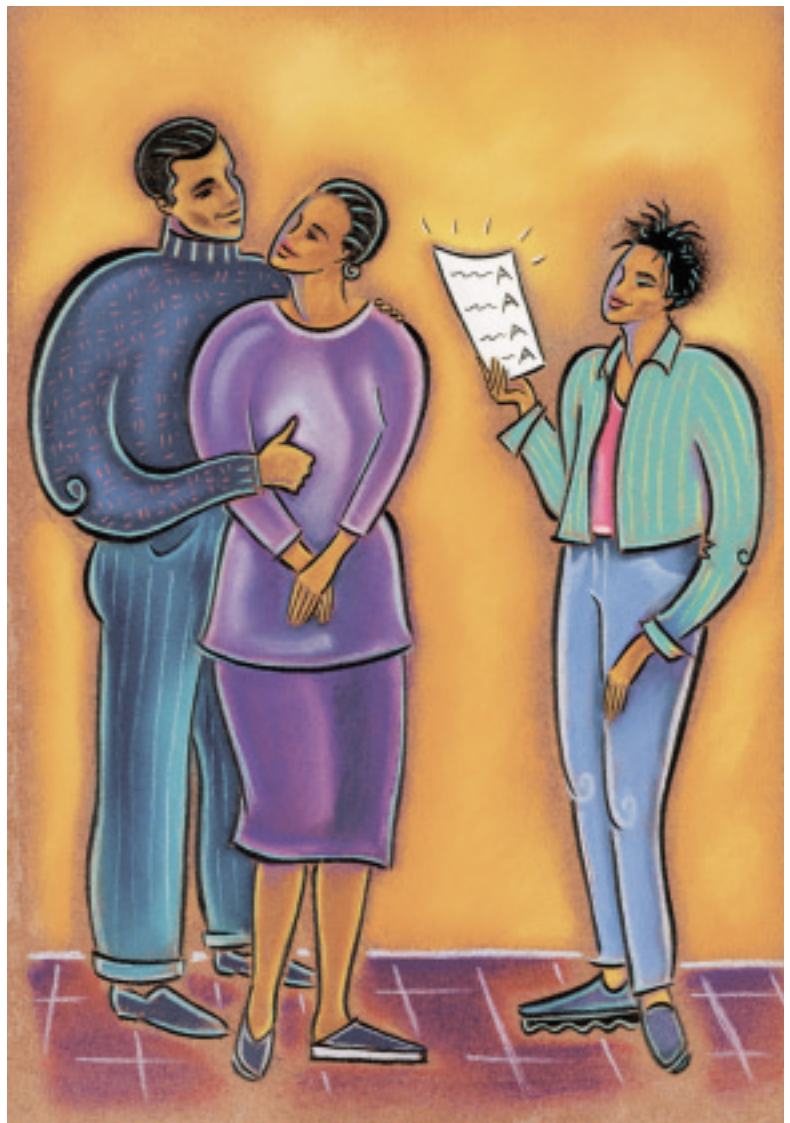
As the district grappled with parents' demands for more access to information about their children, we asked ourselves the following questions:

- How can we regularly communicate with parents without interrupting their workday?
- How can we increase the amount of information available to parents without creating more work for teachers, administrators, and staff?
- How can we make it easier for parents to get involved and stay involved in their children's education?
- How can we improve our own operations as we address these needs?

We found the answer to those questions in home-to-school communication software. By engaging parents in the education process through the power of the Internet, the district realizes several benefits in school business administration, from improved communication to increased efficiency.

Tracking Progress On-Line

In early 2002, the Mahopac District rolled out Pearson Education Technologies' ParentCONNECTxp home-to-school communication software. The software allows parents to track their children's academic progress on-line via an easy-to-use Web site customized for the school district. Parents may visit the password-protected site to view their child's schedule, grades, discipline issues, assignments, daily attendance, period attendance, course history, and demo-



By Donald Beverly

graphic and health and immunization data. Parents can also receive automatic e-mail notification of unexcused absences, tardiness, missing assignments, failing grades, or discipline incidents.

Safe, Secure Access

Before parents or guardians can access their child's information on the Web site, they must register with the school. The Mahopac District requires each parent to come to his or her child's school and present a picture ID. The school secretary checks to ensure that there are no issues, such as court orders, that restrict a parent from accessing the child's information. If everything checks out, the school then issues the parent a user ID and password.

To maintain the integrity of student data, the software application is a "read-only" system. It is actually a copy of a copy of the student information that resides on the district's server. In addition, the data are erased and refreshed on a nightly basis from the "source" server.

Improved Communication

From an operational standpoint, ParentCONNECTxp has significantly improved communication with parents without adding extra work for teachers, administrators, or staff. How? The system simply draws information from the district's existing student administrative system and electronic teacher grade books, eliminating the need for duplicate data entry. If the district tried to gather this information on its own from all the different levels of staff involved in a child's day—teachers, administrators, nurses, guidance counselors—it would be extremely difficult and time-consuming.

Another important benefit is that when parents log on to the Web site, they receive the most up-to-date information available on their child.

Why is improved home-to-school communication important to school business administrators? It can improve school business.

Increased Funding

When students cut school or are absent, the district receives fewer state dollars. By providing parents with daily information about their child's attendance—or lack thereof—the district can potentially increase attendance and thereby increase funding.

When parents receive automatic e-mail notifications of absences or review their child's attendance on the Web site, they can identify patterns and change them. For example, some parents noticed that their children tended to be tardy or absent the day after they worked late at the local mall. So, they used that information to help their children change their work schedules and improve their attendance.

Reducing Phone Tag

Using the home-to-school communication software, teachers and parents can easily communicate via e-mail whenever it is most convenient. In the past, teachers typically made

phone calls to parents during their prep time. However, since most parents work, they were not always available to take those calls. E-mail saves teachers time by reducing the time spent playing "phone tag" with busy parents.

E-mail increases efficiency as well. Since the Web site provides parents with an up-to-date look at their child's information, teachers no longer need to spend as much time reviewing what has already happened. Instead, they can jump ahead to the solution part of the conversation. Teachers also appreciate having correspondence with parents in writing. It eliminates unpleasant instances of "he said, she said."

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Instant Report Cards

Parents, on the other hand, appreciate the ability to view their child's report card on-line. Paper report cards take a week to 10 days to process and mail. Using the Web site, parents can see their child's grades the day that teachers submit them. This feature is particularly helpful to parents of children whose report cards mysteriously "disappear" in the mail.

Manageable Student Schedules

In addition to grades, the Web site lists upcoming assignments and tests, which helps parents whose children tend to wait until the last minute. Although this feature requires no extra work from teachers, it has required a change in their thinking. Previously, teachers entered assignments and tests in their electronic grade books when they entered students' grades. Now, teachers are asked to enter the assignments and tests with due dates in advance. Fortunately, they are beginning to see the value of this feature to parents and the difference it makes in some students' work.

Up-to-Date Emergency Contact Information

Another Web site feature that parents find useful is the ability to check their emergency contact information to ensure that it is current. Having that information up-to-date is critical.

The significance of this feature was seen on the day of the 9-11 tragedy. The student administrative system was used to access emergency contact information and create a list of students whose parents worked in the city. The list was provided to bus drivers. As they dropped children off,

they referred to the list to ensure that someone was home for each child.

Instant Transcripts

To help children prepare for the future, parents can access unofficial transcripts on the Web site instead of standing in long lines at school. This feature saves time for both parents and school staff and allows parents to question transcript information and monitor corrections electronically.

Looking ahead, the district is working to establish a special level of security for college admissions officers to access student transcripts via the Web site. For example, if 30 students apply to a particular university, that university could instantly access the transcripts of all 30 students online. The university benefits by being able to see each transcript immediately rather than waiting for mailed copies.

Their Child, Their Data

The Mahopac Central School District continues to seek new ways to use the home-to-school communication software to improve school and district management. For example, the district is creating distribution lists of parents' e-mail addresses that will be used to communicate with them about important school business, such as school budget votes.

Since implementing the system nearly a year ago, the district has seen an increased awareness among parents of what their children actually do at school and has heard very positive comments. It is important to note that the purpose of this tool is not to create a way for parents to

spy on their children, it is to encourage parents to use the information to talk with their children about their school life and to make plans and decisions together.

Parents are beginning to appreciate that these data on their children are *their* data, a significant change in parents' mindsets. As more parents demand greater access to information on their children from schools and districts, an important change in the mindsets of administrators and teachers will occur, as well.

To date, home-to-school communication software has helped the district improve communication with parents, save time, and increase efficiency. It has also helped us take another big step toward our goal to become totally integrated with our community. ■

Donald Beverly is the director of information technologies for the Mahopac Central School District in New York and an adjunct instructor at Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, New York. He has a master's degree in curriculum and instruction.

CORRECTION

The author of *Accountability for the 21st Century: Standard and Poor's School Evaluation Services* that appeared in the January 2003 issue of *School Business Affairs* is Robert Durante, Director of School Evaluation Services, Standard and Poor's.



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