Reaching families in the digital Age

Communications platforms new and old can help engage parents and students while advancing school goals

By Brad Gustafson

Communication and trust are the backbone of the work we do on behalf of the students we serve. In order to build trust, we need to engage parents, teachers, and students. But it's difficult to garner engagement from multiple constituencies without diversifying communication.

Technology has introduced more ways to get your messages out. It has also made the modern administrator more accessible than ever before. Balancing that continuous access while leveraging technology to support trust-building communications is critical work.

A combination of traditional and new-media strategies can be very effective—and many practitioners report that the strategies they're using support learning goals while being refreshingly relational. I recently talked to several educators who have been able to engage stakeholders in high-tech, low-tech, and no-tech ways. They're promoting student voice and forging meaningful connections using a variety of media. Here's what they had to say about their methods of choice.

Is It Innovative?

Today's leaders have more tools available to connect with staff, students, and families than ever before, but simply having these tools doesn't make a particular approach meaningful or innovative. Principals must keep people at the center of all communication plans. There's no reason schools can't be a beacon for innovation, but we have to engage people in the process by bringing them together, and technology can help.

"So many of us are victims of tradition," says educator, author, and podcaster Latoya Dixon. She encourages school leaders to tap tools and approaches that are efficient, effective, and useful to today's families. If newsletters don't get read or websites don't get visited, she says, push them out to families in the online spaces

Model Missives

To learn more, check out the resources offered by the educators quoted in this article.

- **"UnearthED"** on iTunes (a school leadership podcast co-hosted by Brad Gustafson)

- **Bradgustafson.com** (a blog about creating innovative schools by Brad Gustafson)

- **"Leadership With Latoya"** on iTunes (a podcast about educational leadership by Latoya Dixon)

- **Leadershipwithlatoya.org** (a comprehensive website with Latoya Dixon's blog, podcast, tools, and resources for leaders to use in their development)

- **"My Bad"** on iTunes (a podcast by Jon Harper in which educators share a big mistake)

- **"Teachers Aid"** (a podcast co-hosted by Jon Harper dedicated to providing social and emotional support for teachers)

- **Jonharper.blog** (a blog dedicated to sharing stories and providing support)

- **Drjoyblog.com** (website includes Joy Lynell's educational blog and podcast)

where they "live." For example, Dixon shares content using practical podcasts.

Beyond the Newsletter

Teasing out what is transformative and meaningful requires that leaders pay attention to how the school community responds to communications. Our school, for example, has a cafeteria DJ program that spotlights the student voice. We use video to create "flipped" content for open houses and school board meetings, and created a student-led literacy podcast we call "BookCast."

Amber Teamann, an elementary school principal and blogger from Texas, has her team use Facebook Live for morning announcements, but says that the tool itself is not necessarily what makes the messages reverberate. Her students take the lead by creating scripts, introducing special guests, and connecting directly with their parents.

"Highlighting the great things happening on campus and celebrating students' small wins on a daily basis is important work," she says. "By using Facebook Live, parents are able to see our genuine love and excitement in ways a newsletter or email can't convey."

Not Necessarily High-Tech

Jon Harper, an assistant principal, blogger, and podcaster from Maryland, confesses to being less interested in being perceived as tech-savvy, and more concerned about being "real" with families. He allows himself to show vulnerability in communicating with parents, a timeless trait that continues to cultivate trust.

"The conversations we have with families are often intense, and emotions can run high," Harper says. "When parents know I'm willing to share my heart, they are much more willing to show me what is in theirs."

Lynell Powell, an assistant principal, blogger, and podcaster from Virginia, says that a personalized approach can help analog communications feel more like human-centered design or innovation. "Flexibility is key when connecting with students and families," she says. Powell's school started an innovative Parent Ambassador program to amplify and empower the parent voice, helping respond to the needs of the community while also promoting school goals.

Getting Students Involved

Teamann says her school's hashtag, #WeAreWhitt, builds community while

STRATEGIES TO BUILD TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT

Try to amplify student voice when communicating with staff and families. Start a student-led podcast or turn over a portion of your monthly newsletter to students.

- Focus on making communication meaningful, as opposed to high-tech or innovative. (Remember that what's "meaningful" will differ from one family to the next.)
- Diversify communications by meeting people where they consume media, and give them choices. Some families may prefer paper, while others will love short video updates.
- Look for ways to cross-post to make personalization (and the use of multiple social media channels) more manageable.
- Establish a school hashtag to create community and shine the light on the incredible work students and staff are doing. Check out #WeAreWhitt and #GWgreats for examples.
- Try "flipping" open houses, school board presentations, and staff meetings by sharing video in advance.
- Invite students to help lead communications. One of my former students shared a powerful TED-style talk at his state's annual conference.
- Model a learning mindset and try new things. If you don't achieve some communication "fails" every once in a while, you might be getting a little stagnant. —*B.G.*

"Highlighting the great things happening on campus and celebrating students' small wins on a daily basis is important work." —Amber Teamann, Principal, Whitt Elementary, Wylie, Texas

amplifying the voices of students and stakeholders. "We have student tweeters, we have pictures taken by students that we share, and we have students who will come grab that tripod to record what's happening in our classroom," she says. "Families use the hashtag and share it on all types of social media platforms, as well."

Such cross-platform engagement allows families to see the things Teamann herself loves about her staff, students, and school. In addition to encouraging students to share the school's narrative, Teamann invites families to monthly "Think Tank" meetings that focus on the good, the bad, and the in-between.

Regardless of how you engage with families or the degree to which you include students, parents want to feel heard and valued. Parent support and engagement is typically high when students lead the storytelling process. At our school in Minnesota, we have students blog about memorable moments and use social media as learning media.

When kids create videos that highlight what they're learning or live-stream programs such as a "Genius Hour" or "Passion Project," school communications become much more personal. As a bonus, students pick up valuable 21st century skills, develop a better understanding of their digital footprint, and forge experiences in digital leadership. In that respect, communications exist not only to engage and inform, but also to propel students into the future with valuable skills and experiences.

There's no one "right" way to create engagement, and no single technology—new or old—holds the key. But if you can find out what engages parents, students, and other stakeholders and apply some creativity, you can develop communication vehicles that will continually build trust, encourage student efficacy, and further your school's initiatives. ▪

Brad Gustafson is principal of Greenwood Elementary School in Wayzata, Minnesota.