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News

Posted on Sat, Sep. 09, 2006

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Arlington school district offering e-parenting

By SHIRLEY JINKINS
 STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

ARLINGTON — Gerri St. John keeps tabs on her three Seguin High School students — technological tabs.

She's an e-parent, one of a growing number of moms and dads who use Internet services and Web sites provided by the Arlington school district to do everything from checking teachers' grade books and students' homework assignments to paying for school lunches and even monitoring what their children are eating.

Parents can register for Intouch Online to access student progress and attendance information as well as permanent academic records. They can use PayPAMS, or Parent Account Management System, to add money to school cafeteria accounts or monitor what their child is buying.

Teachers can keep parents updated through e-mails and Web sites. Sam Houston High School has launched TeleParent, an automated notification system that allows teachers to send individualized messages to parents in multiple languages.

"We've actually used both Intouch, and PayPAMS for lunches," said St. John, the mother of a freshman, sophomore and junior.

St. John, a Parent Teacher Student Association vice president at Seguin, said she uses Intouch to check her children's progress at least once a week and usually more often.

"I like the grade books," she said. "It's the best way to find out if they're on track. We love it."

She also accesses the school's band and soccer Web sites to keep informed of her children's calendars and activities. She can even check the school library Web site for books her children need for assignments and read a description and age level for each one and whether that book is available for checkout.

St. John and her husband print out their children's grades and class assignments from Intouch and go over the data with them.



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"It helps them to manage what they need to," she said. "It's a wonderful tool."

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Intouch has been the district's biggest communications success, according to Steven Harvey, assistant superintendent of technology.

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It was phased in over three years at the district's high schools. Now all the junior highs also have Intouch, making it available for all parents of secondary-school students.

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Harvey said 3,020 high school parents and 1,330 junior high parents are signed up. The district has about 17,500 high school students and 8,900 junior high students.

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The junior high participation rate may be lower because the system was rolled out at the junior highs just last spring, Harvey said.

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"We upload grade book data from the teachers once a week," he said. "By far, the feature that's most popular is the grade book one."

Site Map

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The next most accessed menu is the student's attendance record, listing absences and tardies. It's updated every day.

Next, parents look for the three-week progress reports and later the six-week grade reports.

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PayPAMS not only enables parents to make automatic payments to a student's cafeteria account but also gives an online invoice of what the student has purchased.

Parents who want to control their child's sugar intake can block out sweets, for instance, to prevent the child from purchasing them or treating 20 friends to a cookie, too, officials said.

Signing up for Intouch requires a visit to the school. Starting a PayPAMS account can be done online or by phone.

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Sam Houston's new TeleParent notification system is specific to the school, but Harvey said the rest of the district is watching with interest.

The technology gets information to parents by e-mail or phone call, and it requires no registration on the parent's part.

"I've heard raves from Sam Houston teachers and parents," Harvey said. "It's easy to use, but it sends out a really powerful message."

That message is that the school is serious about student accountability and attendance.

"From what I can tell, it's been very well-received," Principal Beverley McReynolds said. "Students are telling us their parents are responding positively."

During the first week of school, more than 1,800 TeleParent phone calls a day were being delivered from teachers, reaching more than 60 percent of the school's student population.

McReynolds said the system's options are its strength.

"It allows teachers to send out messages as specific as, 'Your son or daughter was not

very attentive in biology class today,' or 'Your son or daughter has not turned in history homework due today,' " McReynolds said.

Many of the messages are positive notes as well, she said.

The system delivers phone calls in English, Spanish, Vietnamese or Korean, according to the student's home language. Multiple messages from more than one teacher or administrator are combined in one call that is delivered between 6 and 9 p.m.

The calls can be received by telephone or computer.

"What it has done is allowed for more access," McReynolds said. "It's great if you can make that kind of contact, access a class list in the morning or during a conference period and send out specific messages. Teachers have been very happy with it."

McReynolds has made use of the instant access to Sam Houston's 3,100 students at a single touch.

"I've already made a number of general informational calls myself," she said. "I sent out one last week informing parents that tutoring was already available to students."

Harvey said several of the district's schools use an automated dialing system specifically for daily attendance accountability. The system automatically calls the parent of any child reported absent that day if the parent has not called to report the absence as required by district policy.

The district's first step beyond Web pages was an e-mail alert system instituted after 9-11. The system was used to inform students and parents of school closures, bad weather and the like. It was discontinued when school officials saw that a large number of the e-mails were being kicked back because of user firewalls and invalid e-mail addresses.

A systemwide substitute is being sought, said Veronica Sopher, school district spokeswoman.

There can be problems with e-parenting, as every computer user understands.

"A lot of times, we're finding that Intouch is not always as current as we'd like," St. John said.

Also, there is the ever-present potential for computer glitches, such as last week when Intouch was down for more than a day because its server crashed.

But St. John said the benefits are worth it.

"It helps hold the kids accountable, I think," she said. "What's really good is the direct e-mailing to the teacher."

www.aisd.net

In the Know E-parenting services

PayPAMS

Takes direct-deposit transfers from a bank or credit card account, sends low-balance e-mail alerts, allows parents to view all account transactions and food purchases and to block some purchases. Service fees apply. For registration information, go to www.PayPAMS.com or call 888-994-5100.

Intouch Online

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Allows parents to view a student's grades, attendance, homework assignments, teacher notes, permanent record, class ranking and GPA. Parents may sign up online for a user ID and password, then visit the campus to show an ID and pick up the password. For more information, click on the Intouch menu on the individual school's Web site at www.aisd.net or call the school.

SOURCE: Arlington school district

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