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Meet the Parents

by Matt Villano

Notification tools can do more than alert the school community to an emergency. New systems are cultivating parental involvement by sending home daily reports on students' behavior, attendance, and performance.



AS THE SINGLE PARENT of a student at **South El Monte High School**, just east of Los Angeles, Marilyn Nihipali is all too familiar with short and cryptic exchanges with her daughter on the subject of academics.

The nightly talks usually begin innocently, with Nihipali starting simply, "How was school today?"

Her daughter, like teenagers the world over, answers succinctly, flatly: "Fine."

Most of the time, their chats lack the detail that might convey to Nihipali how her daughter is performing in her classes. But she now has an ally: the school's new parent notification system, a service from TeleParent that contacts Nihipali personally by text message or phone to let her know how her daughter is doing.

The system goes beyond basic emergency notifications with its Situational Student Messaging. Based on information her child's teachers provide, the TeleParent system tells Nihipali if her daughter got to class on time, whether she participated, and whether she did her homework. The system also informs Nihipali of her daughter's conduct in class- important information, considering the sophomore has a history of behavior problems.

"Having this information has given me a better sense of how my daughter is doing in school," says Nihipali. "I try my best to look after her, but this fills in the gaps."

TeleParent and other "parent involvement solutions," as the company bills its service, are facilitating parents' efforts to keep watch over how-and what-their children are doing at school. While many of these systems fall under the broader umbrella of student information systems, which function both for the sake of the school as well as the home, many are standalone services that exist exclusively to keep parents clued in.

While parent notification technologies aren't without challenges, their benefits are indisputable. Anecdotal

reports from teachers will tell you what a 2002 study by SEDL (formerly the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory) confirmed: Students with involved parents are more likely to attend school regularly, earn higher grades, and have better social skills. The SEDL report (see Bytesize, below right) also showed that students with informed and involved parents are more likely to continue on to post-secondary education.

Sean Moshir, founder and CEO of mobile technology provider CellTrust, notes that other positive effects include increased attendance and declining discipline problems. "Knowing when an assignment is due or when a special event is taking place," he says, "or even understanding a child's difficulty in school, brings the parent closer to the child."

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A New Way to Communicate

Using technology to keep parents abreast of what's happening at school is a departure from the way things used to be done. As near as the 1990s, schools communicated with parents by calling them individually, or by printing up announcements about such things as parent-teacher conferences on "dittos" and handing them out for students to take home. Often, the papers never even made it home; students would lose them or toss them out along the way-or never bother to remove them from their backpacks.

For some schools, the preferred method of communicating with parents was the telephone. Many schools used the "calling tree," a system by which administrators who had a message to deliver called a handful of parents, who in turn were expected to call other parents and pass the message along.

In still other schools, when administrators wanted information distributed, they would have teachers call parents themselves- which could add up to 200 phone calls in a given week.

Stage 1: Define the outcomes.

PROJECT FUNDING IS SORTED OUT AND BROAD ORGANIZATION GOALS ARE SET.

"Bad numbers, blocked numbers, work schedules, and dialing limitations at school made that very difficult," says Alex McKenzie, a biology teacher for the **Whittier Union High School District (CA)**. "Also, for a high school teacher, making regular contact with even a small percentage of a caseload sometimes exceeding 200 students was daunting."

Gradually, as technology became increasingly sophisticated and a greater number of K-12 districts started using content management systems, schools embraced the more efficient computer-based notification systems

. Essentially, these systems are glorified databases with a graphical user interface on the front end. Each student has a file, and educators (or district technologists) populate each file with primary contact information for a student's parents or guardian. Over the course of the year, as the need to communicate with parents arises, teachers log in to the database and select which information to broadcast and which parents will receive it.

The technology is as easy as selecting e-mail recipients from an address book and clicking send. In many

cases, the systems tackle in two minutes the tasks that once took schools anywhere from two hours or two days to complete.

Improving Parental Attendance

At the **Harlem Success Academy**, a public elementary school in New York City, educators use a basic short message service from CellTrust to keep a community of more than 280 parents updated on important events via text-message blasts.

In just one year, using a system that alerts parents when their kids miss school, Newport Independent Schools **increased its daily attendance rate by 1.5 percentage points**, generating \$80,000 in state funding.

School CEO Eva Moskowitz says school officials send out an average of four to six texts a month, informing parents about everything from next week's Open House to upcoming tests for which their children need to study. Moskowitz says that while there's no way to prove parents are reading the notes, the approach seems to be working, since the school logged nearly 100 percent parental attendance at school events last year.

"We can't, as a school, educate children alone," she says. "By using this technology to fill parents in, we're working with them as a team to get things done right." Administrators at the **Valley Crossing Community School (VCCS)** in Woodbury, MN, have embraced similar technology to a different end. There, officials have signed up for the Instant Alert service from Honeywell to notify parents whenever weather forces school closings during the year.

Because of how the local residential boundaries are drawn, Valley Crossing pulls from three different districts, so administrators needed something that gave them the flexibility to create distribution lists that accounted for the school's unusual characteristics. Pam Sullivan, VCCS' administrative assistant, says that with the notification service, she has created lists based on district boundaries, neighborhoods, and class enrollment lists to inform parents of any eventuality.

As an example of the system in action, Sullivan recounts a recent snowstorm that prompted one of the three districts to call an early release at 9:30 a.m; the second decided to call a release at 11:30 a.m; the third kept schools open all day. Sullivan says she was able to use the system to send the appropriate message to each student's family in a matter of minutes.

"This is important because it is a safety issue," Sullivan says. "We need to be able to make sure parents receive important communication about late buses, as we don't want to have students standing outside in cold weather if the bus is not going to arrive for another two hours."

Multilingual Messaging

Some notification systems even have the functionality to overcome language barriers. At **Sycamore Junior High School** in Anaheim, CA, where 53 percent of the more than 1,800 students come from families who speak English as a second language, administrators use TeleParent to phone parents with standard audio announcements about meetings, tests, and homework in three other languages: Spanish, Vietnamese, and Hmong.

Vanessa Massey, a former Title 1 program specialist at the school, says the database interface lets teachers select a different language for each call-in many cases, eliminating the need for a translator of

any kind. She adds that an overwhelming number of parents are happy with the system, as evidenced by an outpouring of praise for it at a recent Parents' Night.

Next-Gen Parenting



TECHNOLOGISTS AT THE NEVADA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION recently turned to a web-based system from The Grow Network/McGraw Hill that provides parents with access to a variety of useful, grade-specific educational activities and information about student performance on state assessments.

The system, dubbed the Nevada Parent Network, went live in February, and is expected to be rolled out in earnest this fall after the state's 2008 criterion-referenced tests in reading, mathematics, and science.

Keith Rheault, superintendent of public instruction for the Nevada Department of Education, says that by November the network will provide specific student performance data to parents, as well as analysis of which areas are a student's strengths and weaknesses.

"The idea of involving parents is to get them helping the kids at home," Rheault explains. "The more they can get involved in understanding where their children are, we think that's a key to improving performance overall."

Already, the Nevada Parent Network is taking strides toward fostering greater involvement. Rheault's team organized a Parent Involvement Summit in Las Vegas, which was held at the end of February.

At the conference, school board members, teachers, administrators, and parents met to discuss ways in which parents can participate in their children's education. The group recommended using the new website to link parents to specific information they can use to create personalized improvement plans specific to their children's academic standing. The first part of these upgrades should launch by early 2009.

"The technology breaks down the language barrier quite literally with the click of a button," says Massey, who recently became an assessment and accountability specialist for the Office of Assessment, Evaluation, and Accountability in the Orange County Department of Education. "To communicate with these parents in their native languages, it's like a breath of fresh air."

While only a handful of parent notification services offer broadcasts in multiple languages, a number of them provide the kind of situational message sending in use at South El Monte High, buzzing parents with phone-, e-mail-, and text-based reports on their child's performance and attendance record.

Florida Virtual School (FLVS), an online school serving students in grades 6 to 12, subtracts the middleman by giving parents log-in credentials to Elluminate Academic Edition, a learning management system and online gradebook from Elluminate. The clearance lets parents freely investigate how their kids are doing, peruse the work they've submitted for recent assignments, and see how frequently they are meeting deadlines.

Anna Coppola, the e-school's instructional leader for science and math, says parents also can see teacher feedback and request that individual teachers e-mail their comments on certain assignments directly home.

"We encourage them to log in a lot," Coppola says, noting that a recent survey by Florida TaxWatch

indicated that FLVS students scored higher marks on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test than their counterparts at traditional schools. "Building relationships and making parents feel appreciated, involved, and wanted helps our students be more successful."

This same approach is being used with special education students by the High Plains Educational Cooperative, which serves 17 school districts in southwest Kansas. Administrators recently adopted the NetIEP software from Netchemia, which enables the development of individualized education programs for special needs students, and allows their parents to keep tabs on how well their children are keeping to the plan.

High Plains Assistant Director Marcy Fierstein says the solution works wonders. Every day, educators enter student performance data directly into the system. Then, from home, parents can log on and see what material was covered in class, and how their children are performing in each subject area.

When a parent has questions about something on a report, the parent can call or e-mail the teacher directly. Fierstein says that in a rural area such as southwest Kansas, having this instant interactivity is a vast improvement over the old strategy: weekly printed reports mailed to the home address.

"It builds an immediate and lasting bridge between parents and teachers," says Fierstein. "Overall, when you know that parents are going to be looking at their child's progress every single night, the system also holds our educators more accountable, which isn't a bad thing."

For districts whose funding is tied up in attendance reports, "performance" reporting focuses on how many students performed their daily obligation by showing up for class. Kentucky's **Newport Independent Schools** is using Honeywell's Instant Alert service to maximize that number. Bill Shamblin, the district's director of communications, says that when parents are kept informed about their children's whereabouts, they seem to wield more control over how and when the kids show up for school. He has the figures to back it up: In just one year of using the notification system, Newport managed to increase its average daily attendance rate from 93.6 percent in 2004- 2005 to 95.1 percent the following school year.

Shamblin says this jump in attendance generated \$80,000 in additional state funding for the district, the equivalent of two teacher salaries. "The return on investment has been outstanding, and our attendance records put us in competition with suburban school districts," he says. "More importantly, there are more students in class, and as a result, those students are more likely to move on to higher education."

Links

- **CellTrust**
- **Illuminate**
- **Florida TaxWatch**
- **Honeywell**
- **Netchemia**
- **SEDL**
- **TeleParent**

Challenges Ahead

Despite all of these beneficial applications, this new wave of services that facilitate communication with

parents comes with potential pitfalls. One of the biggest problems is access. Systems such as CellTrust and TeleParent make the act of delivering information to parents a cinch, but many parents-especially those in poorer school districts-may not have access to the necessary technology to receive the information in a timely fashion.

While most parents have telephones to receive automated audio blasts, not all cell phones are equipped to receive text messages, and a significant number of middle- and lower-class Americans still don't have computers in their homes.

Wayne Morgan, vice president and COO of Netchemia, says that many of his company's education customers work with parents who don't own computers. He says that for these people to interface with the company's NetIEP system, they must use public terminals at libraries or the local FedEx Kinko's.

"Just because you put your product online doesn't mean that everybody will be able to use it," he says, noting that in most states, parents of special education children are required to meet with teachers in person anyway.

Another potential trouble spot is acceptance-getting parents to embrace these new methods of communication. Particularly for older parents who have grown accustomed to receiving notifications by paper or telephone, the notion of being contacted by different means can be disconcerting.

CellTrust's Moshir says that in school districts, sometimes the biggest hurdle is getting tech-skittish parents to embrace text messaging and the internet as means of information exchange. Still, he predicts that over time, as notification systems become more prevalent and greater numbers of parents are exposed to them, these methods will become the norm.

"Once [parents] realize the value of being connected, these challenges are resolved fairly quickly," he says, adding that in all scenarios, however the information is delivered, "when parents are involved in their children's education, the child prospers."

::WEBEXTRAS ::

For more information on student information systems, visit www.thejournal.com and enter the keyword **SIS**.

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