Connecting in the 21st Century

PARENTS AND ADMINISTRATORS
SPEAK UP ABOUT EFFECTIVE SCHOOL
TO HOME COMMUNICATIONS

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Speak Up

ABOUT THE SPEAK UP NATIONAL RESEARCH PROJECT AND SCHOOL COMMUNICATION FINDINGS

Report Methodology

Speak Up is a national initiative of Project Tomorrow®, the nation's leading education non-profit organization dedicated to the empowerment of student voices in education. The Speak Up National Research Project annually polls K-12 students, parents and educators about the role of technology for learning in and out of school and represents the largest collection of authentic, unfiltered stakeholder voices on digital learning. Since fall 2003, more than 2.2 million K-12 students, parents, teachers, librarians, principals, school technology coordinators and district administrators have shared their views and ideas through Speak Up. K-12 educators, higher education faculty, business and policy leaders report they regularly use the Speak Up data to inform federal, state and local education programs.

### Demographics of reporting sample

In fall 2010, Project Tomorrow surveyed 294,399 K-12 students, 42,267 parents, 35,525 teachers, 2,125 librarians, 3,578 school/district administrators and 1,391 technology leaders representing 6,541 public and private schools from 1,340 districts. Schools from urban (34 percent), suburban (29 percent) and rural (37 percent) communities were represented. More than one-half of the schools that participated in Speak Up 2010 were Title I eligible (an indicator of student population poverty) and 34 percent have more than 50 percent minority population attending. The Speak Up 2010 surveys were available online for input between October 18, 2010 and January 21, 2011.

Report analysis process

A particular strand of questions was included in Speak Up 2010 around school to home communication. Questions on the parent survey focused on parents' views on the efficacy of the communications, the methods and/or tools that their child's school uses to deliver information, and their expectations for the types of information that they would like to receive electronically. As a companion to the parent questions, school and district administrators as well as school based technology leaders were also polled on the importance of parental connections and the school to home communications tools. The resulting national level data from these questions were analyzed and compared with other Speak Up data to develop the key findings for this special report. Additionally, parents' responses to an open-ended question on the Speak Up 2010 survey were also reviewed and included in this report as supporting documentation.

Introduction

Each year, Project Tomorrow®, a national education nonprofit organization, facilitates the Speak Up National Research Project and, as part of this initiative, tracks the increasing growth in the use of emerging technologies to address the specific needs and aspirations of students, parents and administrators for 21st century learning environments. Since 2007, Project Tomorrow has partnered with Blackboard Inc. to create a series of annual reports that focus on key trends in the use of technology to increase student achievement and parental engagement. One of these key trends is the growing need for more effective, timely and targeted communication between the school and home. Increasingly innovative schools and districts are tapping into the power of emerging communication technology solutions to ensure safety and security, to engage parents in the learning process, to enhance student achievement, and to improve overall staff productivity. In this special report, we examine the Speak Up 2010 survey data collected from almost 380,000 K-12 students, parents and educators to highlight the expectations of parents for improved school to home communications and how schools and districts are stepping up to address those new sets of expectations. The key questions addressed in this report include:
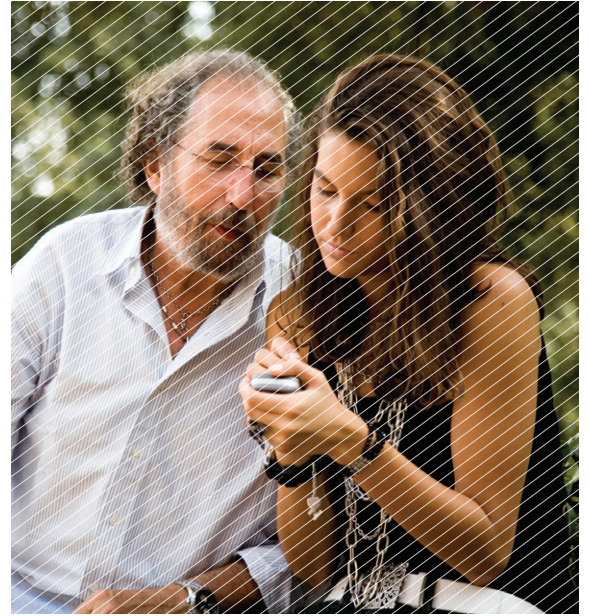
▶ **Do administrators recognize the value and importance of effective communication with parents as a key factor for improving student outcomes?**

▶ **How are schools and districts tapping into emerging technologies to connect with parents?**

▶ **Do parents have different expectations today regarding information they receive from their child's school?**

▶ **How are teachers leveraging technology tools to instruct and provide feedback to students?**

▶ **Do parents' perceptions on the efficacy of school to home communications have any relationship with their attitudes regarding their child's school?**

Key Findings

Do administrators recognize the value and importance of effective communication with parents as a key factor in improving student outcomes?

Many of our nation's school and district administrators are wrestling with how to effectively leverage emerging technologies within the school day to impact student learning. Interestingly, a cohort of innovative, tech-savvy administrators are also exploring the use of online and social media tools as well as other communication vehicles to more fully engage with parents with a purposeful goal of enhancing student achievement. When asked to identify the solutions that would have the greatest potential to increase students' college matriculation and career readiness, 23% of administrators chose "engaging parents as co-teachers" as one of their top three choices (Figure 1). Consequently, this same group of leaders noted that identifying and implementing effective tools for communicating with parents is one of their top issues right now. These innovative leaders are not only leveraging emerging communication tools however. In fact, it appears that their approach to meeting all of the needs of their students has a distinct technology bias. One-third of this cohort is also interested in providing online courses and offering a virtual school option for their students as an additional way to drive greater student achievement.

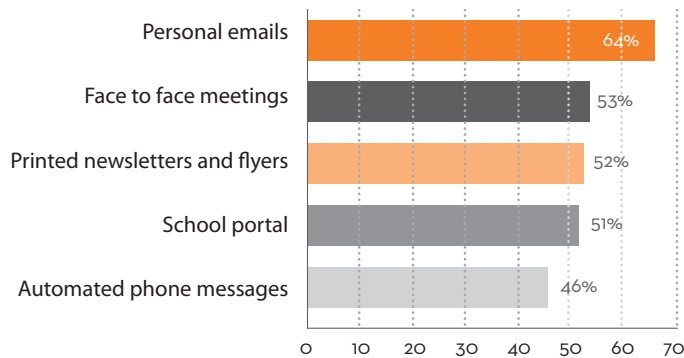FIGURE 1: **PREFERRED SOLUTIONS BY ADMINISTRATORS TO ENHANCE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

▸ Enhancing teacher effectiveness 49%
▸ Integrating 21st century skills into the curriculum 38%
▸ **Engaging parents as co-teachers 23%**
▸ **Leveraging technology to bridge home to school learning 23%**
▸ Aligning local curriculum to national Common Core Standards 22%

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How are schools and districts tapping into emerging technologies to connect with parents?

As today's parents are becoming more technology-enabled themselves with greater online access at home, in the workplace, and through mobile devices, schools and districts are adapting their communication approaches to encourage a stronger school to home connection. However, the landscape still includes a mix of traditional as well as tech-empowered communication tools for parents. Figure 2 illustrates the top five ways that parents are currently receiving information from their child's school.

FIGURE 2: CURRENT SCHOOL TO HOME COMMUNICATIONS VEHICLES FOR PARENTS

Vehicle	Percent
Personal emails	64%
Face to face meetings	53%
Printed newsletters and flyers	52%
School portal	51%
Automated phone messages	46%

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Urban parents reported more communications via automated phone messages than their rural counterparts (52 percent vs. 44 percent). Additionally, we noted a significant difference between parents of elementary, middle and high school students. Where two-thirds of elementary parents indicated that face-to-face meetings were the most prevalent communication vehicle, only 45 percent of middle school parents and 39 percent of high school parents concurred. For parents with students in grades 6-12, the school portal is the vehicle of choice for receiving information about their child's activities and educational progress (56 percent).

A shift to more online communication is most evident in the strong emergence of school portal use over the past three years, providing extensive information about student grades, assignments and activities. While less than one-third of parents identified the school portal as a primary information source in 2007, a majority of parents noted such in 2010, a growth of 58% in just three years. With a majority of parents now reporting access to smartphones or similar Internet accessible mobile devices, the next emerging trend in this category may very well be the use of text messaging and Twitter, some of which we are already seeing in many districts.

Do parents have different expectations today regarding information they receive from their child's school?

With the increasing role of the more fully featured school portal in school to home communications, a majority of school technology coordinators report that they are now providing parents with greater access to attendance records, students' homework assignments, grades, as well as general information about school activities. And while parents value that information, their expectation for the kinds of information they would like to receive from their child's school goes far beyond the functionality or

> *In today's environment, parents, teachers, the community and all stakeholders of public schools expect instantaneous communication regarding events going on at their local schools.*
>
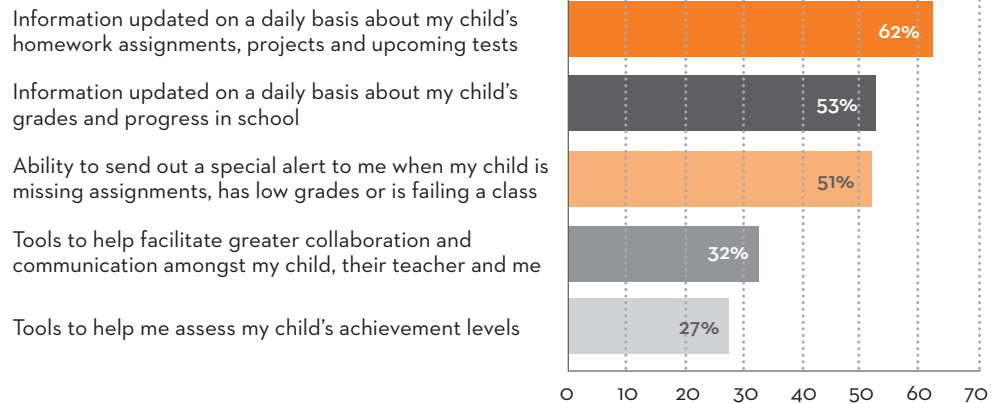> *It's considered a basic service, not an extra.*
>
> District Administrator from Michigan

even original purpose of most school portals. The two key components in this new set of demands are the timeliness and personalization of the information. Just like the general public, today's school age parents are becoming very accustomed to instantaneous information at their fingertips that is highly individualized to their needs. Thus, the vision that parents have for the new "ultimate school portal" or a different kind of communication vehicle must contain these essential features:

FIGURE 2: **PARENTS ULTIMATE SCHOOL PORTAL**

Information updated on a daily basis about my child's homework assignments, projects and upcoming tests — 62%

Information updated on a daily basis about my child's grades and progress in school — 53%

Ability to send out a special alert to me when my child is missing assignments, has low grades or is failing a class — 51%

Tools to help facilitate greater collaboration and communication amongst my child, their teacher and me — 32%

Tools to help me assess my child's achievement levels — 27%

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How are teachers leveraging technology tools to instruct and provide feedback to students?

Almost universally, teachers are using email, IM or text messaging to communicate with both their colleagues and the parents of their students; 96 percent of teachers report this usage as part of their daily professional tasks. However, some teachers are beginning to open up new lines of communication with their students using these same kinds of tools. Slightly over one-third of teachers report using email, IM or text messaging to communicate with their students and 38 percent say that they are using technology to provide their students with feedback on performance. Interestingly, the least likely group of teachers to use those tools for student inter-actions are teachers with less than 3 years of experience. In fact, while less than 9 percent of these novice teachers said they are using these tools, more than 37 percent of the teachers with sixteen or more years of experience are leveraging these basic communication vehicles to provide feedback to their students.

Students are using a more varied set of tools today to communicate with their peers outside of school, including social networking sites, discussion boards and chat rooms. While 74 percent of high school students and 65 percent of middle school students still report using email, IM or text messaging on a regular basis for peer-to-peer communication, less than half of the students in grades 9-12 and only a quarter of the middle school students say they are communicating with their teachers using these tools. Not surprisingly, girls (59 percent) are more likely than boys (41 percent) to say that they are emailing or text messaging their teacher.

> *Communication must be an ongoing relationship between the parents, student and teachers.*
>
> Parent from Arizona

The emergence of mobile devices as the communication vehicle of choice is also propelling teachers and parents to think differently about leveraging these tools for teacher communications. In fact, 53 percent of parents say that the use of mobile devices in school could potentially improve teacher-student-parent communication and 64 percent of teachers concur. Correspondingly, 52 percent of high school students say they would use their smartphone to communicate with their teacher if it was allowed at school. With 58 percent of parents and 44 percent of teachers having a smartphone or similar device, the opportunity to leverage these devices to improve school to home communications appears to be near a tipping point.

Do parents' perceptions on the efficacy of school to home communications have any relationship with their attitudes regarding their child's school?

As noted earlier, today's administrators are increasingly concerned about the effectiveness of their school or district's communication with parents, and how to successfully leverage emerging technology solutions to improve that important school to home connection. And it appears that their concerns are justified. Through the Speak Up survey we polled parents both about their opinions on the efficacy of the communication tools used by their child's school and their general feelings about their interactions with the school and their child's teacher. The results point directly to the critical need for good school to home communications. Parents that rated their school (or district's) communication as ineffective were five times more likely to say that they "did not feel a connection to the school" and that "teachers at the school did not work with parents to address their child's academic issues" than parents that gave the school a good mark on communicating. Additionally, 33 percent of parents that were dissatisfied with school communications also identified the quality of their child's teacher as a major concern while only 12 percent of the parents who were pleased with school communications carried that same concern about teacher quality. Today, effective school to home communications mean much more than having a good school website with accurate dates for the school play, football game or band rehearsal. In fact, the way that a school or district communicates information to their students' parents is really about creating a school culture of connection, collaboration and cooperation between parents, teachers and administrators.

Ending Thoughts

The need to keep parents informed is quickly converging with the explosion of emerging technology solutions, providing new opportunities for administrators to harness the potential of these new solutions to do more than just transmit information. Given the importance that administrators place on engaging parents in the learning process and the new higher expectations that parents have for communicating, the time is ripe for schools and districts to more fully explore how to leverage a wide range of communication solutions. These solutions will include social media tools and mobile devices to increase the timeliness and personalization of their communication processes. The bottom line is the value of effective school to home communications today is really about enhancing student success. As one parent commented, "The working world has embraced technology for communicating, so schools should do the same to make this an inherent part of the students' learning."

About Project Tomorrow

Project Tomorrow® is the nation's leading education nonprofit organization dedicated to the empowerment of students voices in education. With 15 years experience in the K-12 education sector, Project Tomorrow® regularly provides consulting and research support about key trends in K-12 science, math and technology education to school districts, government agencies, business and higher education. For additional information, visit us at **www.tomorrow.org.**

About Blackboard

Blackboard Inc. is a global leader in education technology that transforms the experience of millions of educators and learners everyday. Blackboard works with states, K-12 districts and virtual schools to expand educational opportunities, create collaborative learning environments and increase engagement for students, teachers, parents and administrators. Blackboard Connect, a robust communication platform, helps district leaders and teachers to share time-sensitive information easily and securely, reaching parents and students with targeted messages pertaining to their education. Blackboard also offers online and mobile solutions, helping educators to close the gap between the way students live and the way they learn through personalized, connected learning experiences that meet the needs of the K-12 classroom and the 21st century. Blackboard is headquartered in Washington, D.C., with offices in North America, Europe, Asia and Australia. Learn more at **blackboard.com/k12**.