

What Parents Want in School Communication

Strategies for helping teachers and principals develop better strategies for connecting with parents.

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Most of the population declares their New Year's resolutions January 1. For educators, it happens closer to September 1. And often high on the list: improving relationships with parents.

A new survey from the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) may be able to help you keep this one. Relationships are built on communication. And NSPRA recently surveyed 50 of its member districts (ranging from small to large and urban to rural, with a total of 43,310 responses in 22 states) to learn the communications preferences of both parents and non-parents.

The survey was quite informative as to how, and what, school districts should communicate with communities (many of NSPRA's members are district communications officials). But I think one of the most valuable uses for this survey will be in helping teachers and principals develop individual communications strategies for reaching out to parents.

How Parents Want School News

Consider, for example, that the survey asked parents their preferred delivery method for school news. Internet communications clearly won. The top five answers:

- E-mail from the district/school
- Online parent portal
- District/school e-newsletters
- District/school website
- Telephone/voice messaging system

As NSPRA President Ron Koehler points out, "Consumer needs are changing. The backpack folder is no longer the primary source of information for parents. They want and prefer instant electronic information. ... [T]he data demonstrates parents and non-parents alike turn to the web when they need information, and they want it now."

There is a twist, though: Social media (Facebook, Twitter and blogs) ranged near the bottom of communication preferences, below newspapers, television and attending school board meetings. More on this later.

What News They Want

A great feature of this survey is that it divided parental responses into "elementary" and "secondary" categories, acknowledging the differences between those schools and students, which are often lumped together. But it turns out that when you are talking about what information parents want from teachers, most communications priorities are the same:

- Updates on their child's progress or insight on how they improve
- Timely notice when performance is slipping

- Information on what their child is expected to learn during this year
- Homework and grading policies

Rounding out the top five for elementary students was information on behavior (including how their child gets along with others), while for secondary students it was how to best communicate with the teacher.

Parents also want much the same information from both elementary and secondary schools:

- Curriculum descriptions and information on instructional programs
- A calendar of events and meetings
- Information on student safety (and quality of teaching, at the elementary level)
- Educational program changes and updates (elementary level)/curriculum updates and changes in instructional programs (secondary level).

Rounding out the top five for elementary schools was information comparing their school's performance to others; for secondary, information on graduation and course requirements.

When They Want It

Many parents (47 percent) and most non-parents (59 percent) would like district updates as often as decisions are made. While the survey didn't further break down the frequency of communications to find a preference for school or teacher-level communications, I think that could be a guide for those entities as well. In addition to the 47 percent of parents wanting district updates as often as decisions are made, 36 percent of parents would like monthly updates and 13 percent would like quarterly. Less than 1 percent prefer less than quarterly (3 percent responded with "other").

What Does This Mean?

As NSPRA Executive Director Rich Bagin notes, while we know what the survey says, "each school district must complete its own research to see what its parents and other constituents prefer when it comes to communication."

I would expand that research to include the strengths and passions of those working in the district as well. And keeping that in mind, I think it is important to revisit the survey's finding on social media. For all the attention that we in the education community have been putting on social media lately, I did think it was interesting how little parents (and other community members) as a group looked to it for school news. NSPRA leaders hypothesized that "social media may be seen as 'too social', lacking in credibility for official school information," or that "it is just too soon to make an impact for today's parents."

Yet just a couple weeks ago, I heard a very impassioned principal talk about the ways that he has effectively used social media including in communicating with both the school and greater community, which has responded well to his efforts. But the message he spread using those tools seemed to be the one that this survey found that parents want -- information on instructional programs, events and so on. My guess: He gets feedback through these tools on what parents (and others) want, and uses it to shape his message.

The example speaks to a broader point: Develop a communications strategy that meets the needs of your community. In doing so, make sure you take the time to learn what parents want to know. Otherwise, you'll have a hard time giving it to them.