



Fort Osage
School District (MO)
www.fortosage.net

Fort Osage keeps community engagement simple and straightforward

In today's digital world people are bombarded with information from multiple angles. How do you make sure all this information isn't overwhelming?

Remember one simple acronym:
KISS. Keep it simple and straightforward.

Understanding the community needs

Fort Osage School District is located in a rural part of Missouri, and many of the residents do not have internet access due to either cost or inability to connect. The district surveyed their community to learn more about how they wanted to receive messages. Most everyone these days has a mobile phone, and their study proved this fact—the parents in the community use smartphones daily.

According to Stephanie Smith, the Director of Public Relations for Fort Osage, “When we started looking at mobile apps, we wanted more than just an app that would link to a page on our website. We looked at the type of the information that our parents want from us, and they need lunch menus, school supply lists, and notifications about things taking place in their child’s classroom or school. Then on our end, we wanted a better way to engage parents and enhance student achievement.”

After researching various mobile app and notification providers, Fort Osage School District partnered with Blackboard. They chose Blackboard due to the overall ability to provide parents access to student information like grades, attendance, and lunch balances.

Creating a simplified experience

After successfully using Blackboard for several years, Fort Osage decided to look at streamlining their communication efforts and make community engagement simpler. They wanted to create open, two-way communication among the schools and families, and create a positive and supportive learning environment for every student. Fort Osage chose to use Blackboard's Community Engagement Solution, including Web Community Manager, Mass Notifications, Mobile Communications App, Teacher Communication, and Social Media Manager. The complete solution helps the district share student specific information, relevant news, and timely updates with families and community members all from one interface. By using all of the community engagement products, Fort Osage created an integrated communications strategy that covers every channel and device their faculty, staff, and community are using.

“COPE is beyond phenomenal for somebody like me who’s a one person shop managing 12 schools.”

Stephanie Smith
Director of Public Relations
for Fort Osage (MO)

Stephanie explained that one of the significant benefits of using the fully integrated solution is being able to COPE the acronym for “Create Once and Publish Everywhere.” COPE allows users to write a message once, select delivery channels (such as social, text, phone, emails, mobile app, and website) then click a button to publish. Stephanie utilizes COPE to send daily messages regarding student meals, supplies, and events Monday through Friday. “If I want to send a message multiple times I don’t even have to re-do it three times. I just schedule the dates and set them to go on every communication channel that we have three different times. It takes 10 minutes. I set it, forget it, and move on to the next project. Having the full Community Engagement Solution with Blackboard saves times, money, and effort,” stated Stephanie.

Straightforward integration and adoption

Fort Osage is a Google district and an added benefit of using Blackboard is the integration. With their old website, the Superintendent Secretary or Board Secretary would have to make multiple changes in various places when making simple updates to information on the site. Now, their website links to a Google folder and all updates are made in there, which simplifies the editing process for district content managers.

Using Blackboard's Community Engagement Solution is not only helpful for the administrators but with staff as well. The Teacher Communication product has enabled Fort Osage teachers to connect with families where they are, safely and consistently, and without

adding extra work for the busy teachers or parents. It bridges the gap between classroom and home and allows the district staff to have insight into every message going to families. “Our teachers find the system really useful. We have over 50% of our teachers who use it. On an average school year, we have five to eight teachers who send messages home a night,” Stephanie said. Fort Osage understands that student success has the most impact when teachers and parents work together.

The goal to increase community engagement within the district requires adoption from everyone, including students. The district believes in teaching the students to take responsibility and does this by utilizing the district mobile app and the website. Fort Osage encourages parents and students to use their mobile app and website to monitor academic progress. At the beginning of every school year the district provides instructions on how to access grades, attendance, lunch balances, assignments, and more by logging into the mobile app and website.

For example, students can monitor their grades and assignments in real time by downloading the mobile app and viewing the student information section to find data about their specific classes. For those children who are not permitted to have a cell phone yet, they may use the Dashboard on the district website to view their grades. Stephanie explained, “There are a little over 11,000 downloads of the app, we have 5,000 students enrolled, and we expect that number to go up by the beginning of each year.”

According to Stephanie, it was the school children that helped Fort Osage decide how often the mobile app should be updated with student data. “We used to update the app once a day. It would update overnight with grade information and students would say, ‘I told my mom, my grade went up from a C to a B because I turned in those missing assignments.’ Unfortunately, some students that wanted to do something that Friday night or weekend were not allowed because the parent did not see the grade change by the end of the day Friday,” Stephanie said. Now to keep the students and parents up-to-date, Fort Osage updates the website and mobile app four times a day.

Conclusion

Since moving to Blackboard's Community Engagement Solution, Fort Osage has seen a 10% increase in website engagement. Grades, assignment information, lunch balances, and the teacher directory are all accessible for the students and parents to view on the website and mobile app. The ability to publish, edit, and modify website content, social media, notifications, and the mobile app from a centralized interface provides time for teachers and administrators to focus on what matters, the students.

From a brand perspective, the website, mobile app, social media accounts, and mass notifications all look the same, which provides a consistent experience for district users and community members. Stephanie stated, "We like that even though everything has the same look and feel, one web page might be just a single column layout, another might be a two column layout. You still have the flexibility to set it and make it what you want or need, but you've got the consistency piece that everything still looks the same."

Fort Osage School District has a seamless integration where parents and students are using the community engagement tools daily, which allows them the opportunity to build a deeper understanding of the district's mission, vision, and passion for driving student success.

Discover how the Blackboard Community Engagement Solution can enhance communication and student success at your school or district.

SEE THE SOLUTION

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