
Trends in community engagement

Text, Twitter, email, call—new expectations
for school-to-home communications

Blackboard[®]

“In this complex world, it takes more than a good school to educate children. And it takes more than a good home. It takes these two major educational institutions working together.”

Dorothy Rich
Author of MegaSkills®

Introduction

Parents have high expectations for communications and engagement with their child’s district, school, and teachers. Their increased use of digital tools in their personal lives means they are increasingly interested in using similar tools to support their child’s education at home, and to be fully informed about school and classroom happenings. However, many leaders have different perspectives when it comes to thinking about using technology to support engagement and communications. They value parental engagement but may not have caught up with the parent’s preferred methodologies that support meaningful communications. The result is often a mix of unmet parental expectations and frustrated administrators who cannot understand why their well-meaning attempts yield less than satisfactory results.

Each year since 2003, Project Tomorrow, a global education nonprofit organization, facilitates the annual Speak Up Research Project on Digital Learning. A key aspect of the research project is to track the growth in student, educator, and parent interest in digital communications. We also track how our nation’s schools and districts are addressing that interest with innovative engagement experiences that support learning in and out of the classroom. Since 2007, Project Tomorrow has collaborated with Blackboard to create a series of annual reports that focus on the year-to-year trends in the use of digital tools to support learning through an in-depth analysis of the latest Speak Up data findings.

In this report, we will examine the trends from our analysis of the Speak Up data collected in fall 2016. More than 514,000 K-12 students, parents, educators, and community members participated in Speak Up 2016. While the perspectives of several stakeholder groups are included in this year’s trends report, this report is not meant to be the consummate word on how to build greater community engagement with digital communications tools. Rather, we recommend that the findings in this report and the questions we pose in the ending be used as discussion starters to stimulate new ideas on how to best leverage a school or district’s assets to ensure that both the school and the home are working together to improve student success.

Key findings from this year's community engagement trends report include:

1. School principals say effective communications with parents is a major challenge for them, a challenge that may even be “waking them up in the middle of the night.”
2. Increasingly, principals are turning to social media tools to communicate with the parents of their students, but parents' choices for communications tools are often at odds with the administrators' choices.
3. Parents of elementary-aged children report higher levels of satisfaction with teacher and school/district communications than parents with children in middle school or high school.
4. Parents value convenience, personalization, and timeliness in communications strategies and increasingly want information pushed out to them rather than having to search for it.
5. Schools and districts need to learn how to differentiate their messages and the tools they use to meet the needs of parents who are increasingly tech-savvy and value greater communications with their child's teacher and school.



Importance of engaged and well-informed parents within school communities

Administrators have always recognized the importance of engaged and well-informed parents within their school community. The difference today is the sense of urgency that administrators feel to ensure that all parents feel engaged and well-informed both about their child's individual academic performance and events and notifications from their school.

In fact, one-third of school administrators now say that effective communication with parents is a top issue for them, an issue that may often “wake them up in the middle of the night.”

Increasingly, administrators are turning to a variety of media and other channels to communicate with parents, and seeing the results translate into higher levels of parental engagement. Use of social media tools, in particular, for these tasks are at an all-time high, and many schools are realizing a positive impact from that usage. This past year, 88% of school site administrators reported tapping into various social media tools to communicate with parents. Notably, 61% say those efforts resulted in more informed and engaged parents, an increase of 18% in just one year.

The implementation of new learning models has also stimulated a need for increased communications and engagement with parents. With 48% of school site principals saying their classrooms include some form of blended learning, it's not surprising that principals are connecting both the benefits and challenges of blended learning to effective parental communications. Principals (41%) say blended learning improves school-to-home communications, resulting in more engaged parents, and ensuring that students, teachers, and parents are on the same page regarding learning goals.

What do we mean by “new learning models?”

In a quest to meet the individualized learning needs of every student, many schools are adopting various new types of learning models in the classroom. According to iNACOL, the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, new learning models share several key characteristics:

- Teachers use data derived from the use of digital tools and resources to “differentiate instruction, customize learning and engage students in deeper learning.”

- Students work at their own pace and take responsibility for their own learning progress.
- Students demonstrate mastery of key concepts and skills prior to moving on to higher level units or content.

The most popular new learning models being implemented in classroom today include blended learning environments, flipped learning approaches, and fully online/virtual classes.

“We needed to put our information and our communication where our parents already were. A lot of our parents were telling us they couldn’t access social media or their email during their work day. So, we started sending information across all our communication channels at one time so parents can access it wherever they are.”

Doug Bellamy

Website and Multimedia Coordinator at Wylie ISD (TX)

Six of ten principals also identify that it takes effective communications to make sure parents understand their important role in a successful blended learning program. In many ways, this new interest in classroom models may be a good testing ground for exploring innovative ways to use digital tools for communications because of parents’ high interest in these new learning environments. Parents want to be involved in their children’s learning, but the quality and sustainability of that involvement is often predicated on the efficacy of the communications between classroom and home.

To jumpstart effective communications, parents want to know more about what they can do at home to support their child’s learning. When asked what types of information they wished their child’s school could provide, parents identified specific information that could support effective communications and bridge the learning experience from home to school:

- Recommendations about apps they can use at home to support learning
- Ways to work more effectively with their child’s teacher to improve learning opportunities
- Types of technology and workplace skills their child is learning at school
- Types of technology they should have at home to support their child’s learning experiences in school

Another communications gap that emerged in the data findings is a lack of information for parents about student achievement at local schools. This may show a lack of effective school-to-home and school-to-community communications.

As noted in Table 1, communications about school performance may also be a function of the size of the district, and thus institutional capacities. For example, parents in larger districts with student enrollments of 25,000 or greater are more likely to say they know the percentage of students that graduate from high school and go to college than smaller sized districts with less than 25,000 students. Smaller districts are also more likely than medium sized districts to be doing a good job of sharing information with parents. In many ways, this may be a function of the culture in smaller districts. In addition to less family mobility in smaller districts, all students may attend the same singular elementary, middle, and high school thus creating a greater sense of continuity, which supports effective information sharing. Across the board, however, school districts of all sizes in all types of communities have room to grow in terms of sharing information with parents about their local school performance.

Table 1: What do parents know about their local schools?

INFORMATION	% OF PARENTS FROM SMALL SIZED DISTRICTS (< 5K STUDENTS)	% OF PARENTS FROM MEDIUM SIZED DISTRICTS (5K-25K STUDENTS)	% OF PARENTS FROM LARGE SIZED DISTRICTS (> 25K STUDENTS)
How my child's school compares academically with other schools	55%	51%	59%
Percentage of students who graduate from my local high school	34%	28%	38%
Percentage of students who go to college	31%	27%	39%
What schools are identified as needing improvement	28%	30%	28%
Qualifications of teachers in my local schools	24%	24%	24%

While new stakeholders such as business partners, civic leaders, and voters at large are important audiences for district communications, parents of school-aged children (96%) continue to be the primary constituency for school and district communications. **K-12 communications professionals note that an important goal of their work is to increase parental knowledge about school and district achievement and policies and programs. They also indicate their goals to build trust and confidence in local schools through effective branding using school websites, social media, photos and videos, and local press stories.**

Therefore, a hallmark of a good communications strategy should be that parents and other stakeholders have accurate and comprehensive information about local schools. Too often, however, parents are acquiring school information from unofficial sources, not the school or district's communications vehicles. Based upon results from the 2016 Speak Up surveys, 36% of parents say they learn about school information primarily by word of mouth, with less than 24% identifying school or district websites as the source of their knowledge about school performance in particular. This can be a challenge for school and district leaders to ensure the correct information reaches parents and communities. Many districts see this as an opportunity to find creative and effective ways to tell their own story, in their own words.

“We know parents are mobile and on-the-go. Because we have an app, they’re going to be looking at information a lot more than they ever have before. I’m already sensing a level of engagement excitement.”

Chris Hamilton

Director of Communications and Public Relations for
Athens City School System (AL)

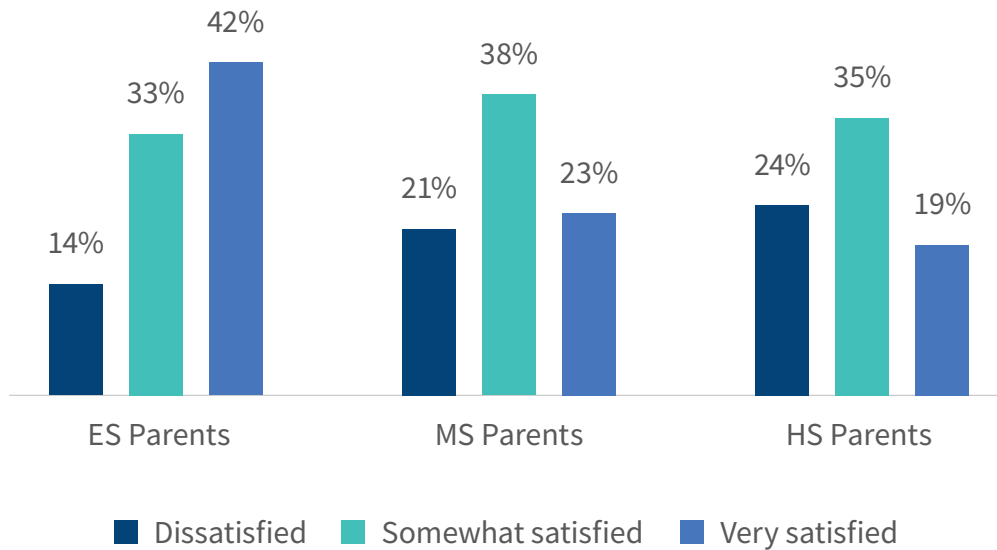
Parents’ expectations for communications and engagement

Parents are constantly inundated with information. From global current events, to updates on friends and family, their smartphones are epicenters for media and information. For parents, information about their child’s educational progress and how to be involved with school events may originate from the classroom, the principal’s office, or even the school district central office. Understanding the complexities of this situation for parents, this year’s Speak Up surveys asked them about two specific types of school communications; communications from their child’s teacher(s) about that child’s individual academic progress, and communications from the school or district about information, events, or general notifications. In both cases, our goal was to understand parental satisfaction and perspectives on best approaches.

Parents report varying levels of satisfaction with communications from their child’s teacher. Parents of elementary aged children report higher levels of satisfaction than their peers with older children (Figure A). **While 42% of parents with children in kindergarten through 5th grade say they are very satisfied with teacher-to-home communications, only 23% of parents with children in grades 6-8 and 19% of parents with high school aged children share that same view.**

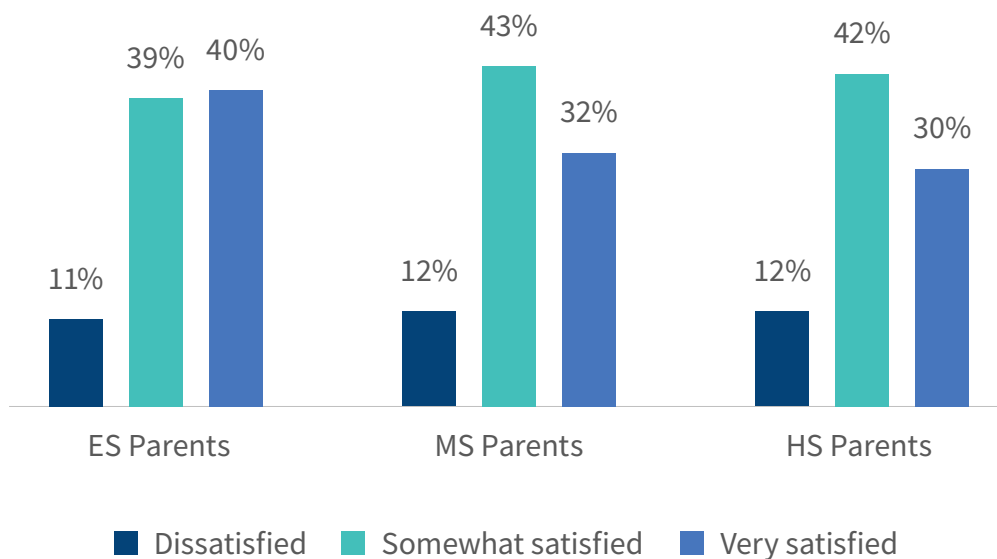
This difference in satisfaction may be attributable to the “one teacher, one class” format in elementary schools, whereas older children are more likely to have multiple, subject specific teachers. Parents note that their most significant concern with technology use in school is the variableness of usage between teachers. These results seem to indicate a parental desire for consistency. For many parents, maintaining communications with multiple teachers when their child is in middle school or high school can be especially challenging. Increasingly, parents feel using digital tools can help to alleviate some of those challenges and make it easier for parents to keep up to date on their child’s class progress and share insights with their child’s teachers. Therefore, parents may have higher expectations of effective digital communications with their child’s teachers in middle and high school.

Figure A: Parent satisfaction with current teacher-to-home communications strategies



Middle school and high school parents are more positive about school and district communications (Figure B). When asked to identify their level of satisfaction with general communications from their child’s school or school district, almost one-third of secondary school parents rated communications as very satisfactory. Four of ten parents of elementary school children had the same valuation on their school or district communications.

Figure B: Parent satisfaction with current school/district-to-home communications strategies

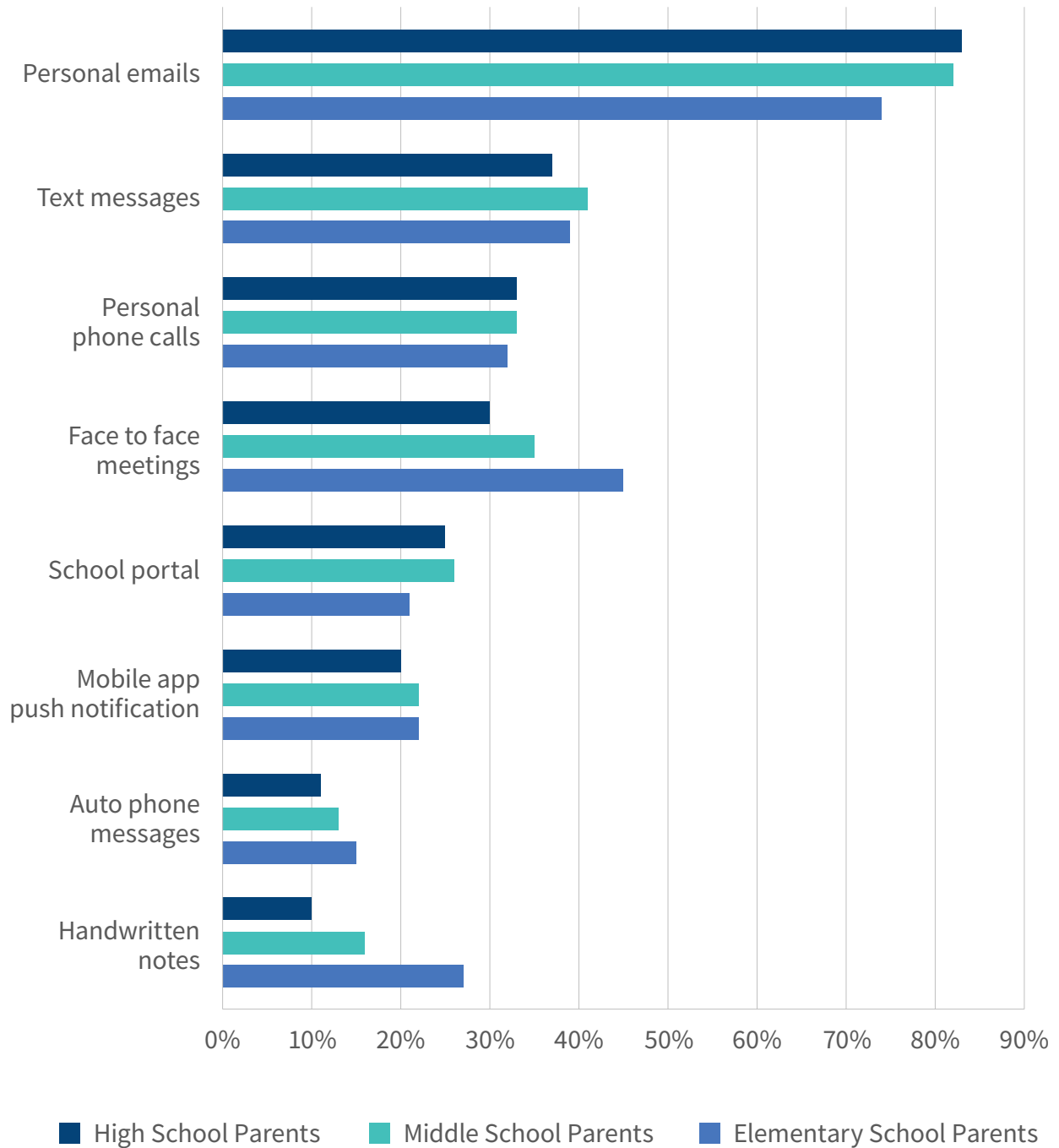


While parents across all grade levels appear to be more satisfied with general communications than teacher-to-home communications, most schools and districts are probably wishing for more parents to give them a grade of “A” in both types of communications. Understanding the types of communication vehicles that parents consider most effective is a good place to start in terms of planning strategies to develop higher levels of satisfaction.

Parents’ assessment of the most effective way for their child’s teacher to communicate with them is to some extent grade level dependent. **Parents of elementary aged children are more likely to endorse face-to-face meetings with their child’s teacher and even handwritten notes sent home than the parents of older children, as demonstrated in Figure C.** This may be the result of a more hands-on approach with younger students and the ability for some parents to be on the school campus more frequently when their children are younger. Tech-savvy parents who consider their digital skills to be advanced favor digital approaches such as school portals, text messages, and mobile app notifications for classroom-to-home communications by 2:1 compared to parents who say their tech skills are average or beginner level.



Figure C: Parents' assessment of most effective way for their child's teacher to communicate with them about their child's progress in school



For the most part, however, parents want a mix of traditional communication approaches (phone calls and emails) and emerging digital solutions (texts and school portals) for information about their child. The key to classroom-to-home communications is that the parents are looking for highly personalized and individualized outreach efforts even with traditional communications channels. It may be that as parents are increasingly using online tools to personalize shopping, banking, and entertainment choices, that communication with their child's teacher should be at least as individualized as those interactions. Parents want a personal email that details their child's academic status not just an email directing them to an online class site for grades or test information. Thus, even the choices of traditional approaches are most likely being influenced by parents' everyday experiences with digital tools.

Parents' preferences about how they would like their child's school or district to communicate with them about general information is also illustrative of this trend for more digital approaches. Email continues to be the most preferred method of communication, perhaps because of its unobtrusive nature and ability to provide parents with a record of the information. For general updates and notifications, timeliness and efficiency more important than personalization. Auto phone messages and text messages are the dominant preferences across all grade levels as demonstrated in Figure D. Also notable in Figure D:

- Websites that are not kept current are seen as less effective than a timely email message.
- Online newsletters are favored over hard copy versions by parents of middle school and high school children.
- Parents of children in the younger grades (28%) still value the hard copy flyers and newsletters.

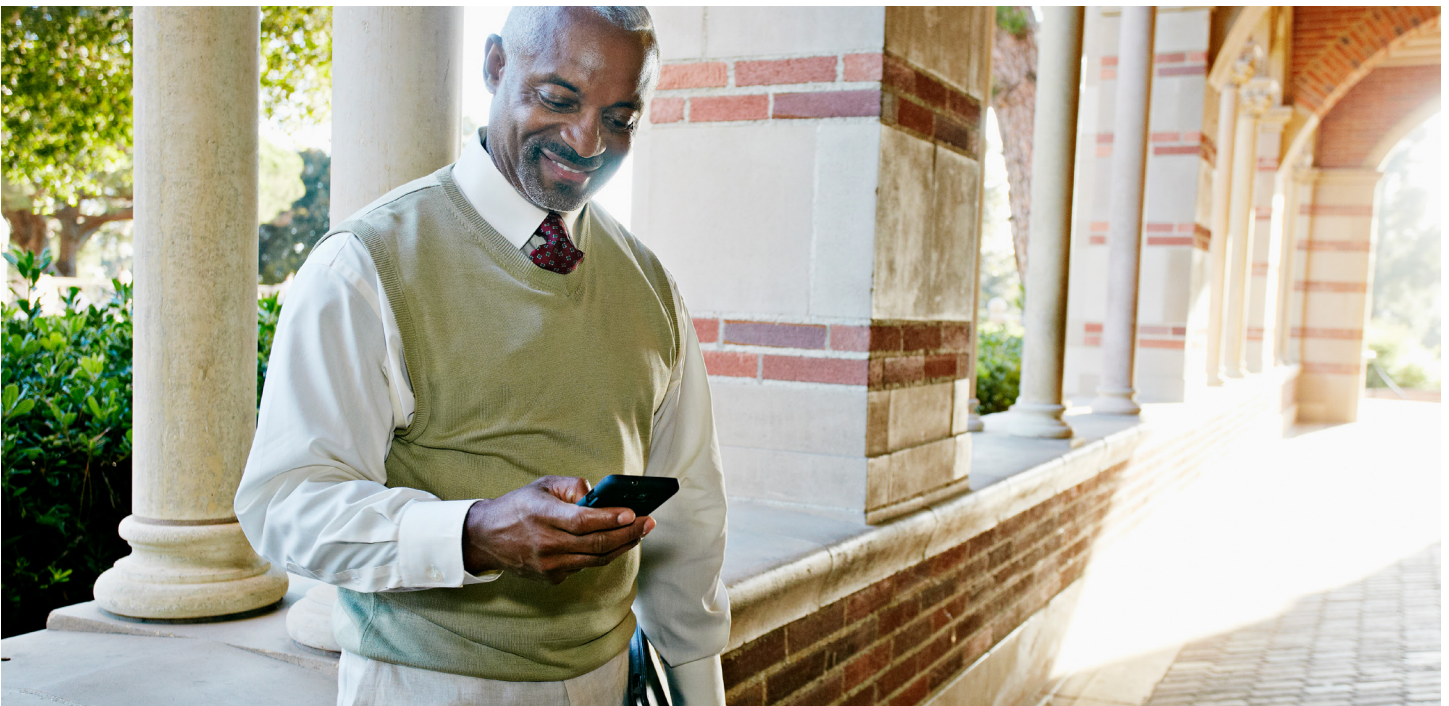
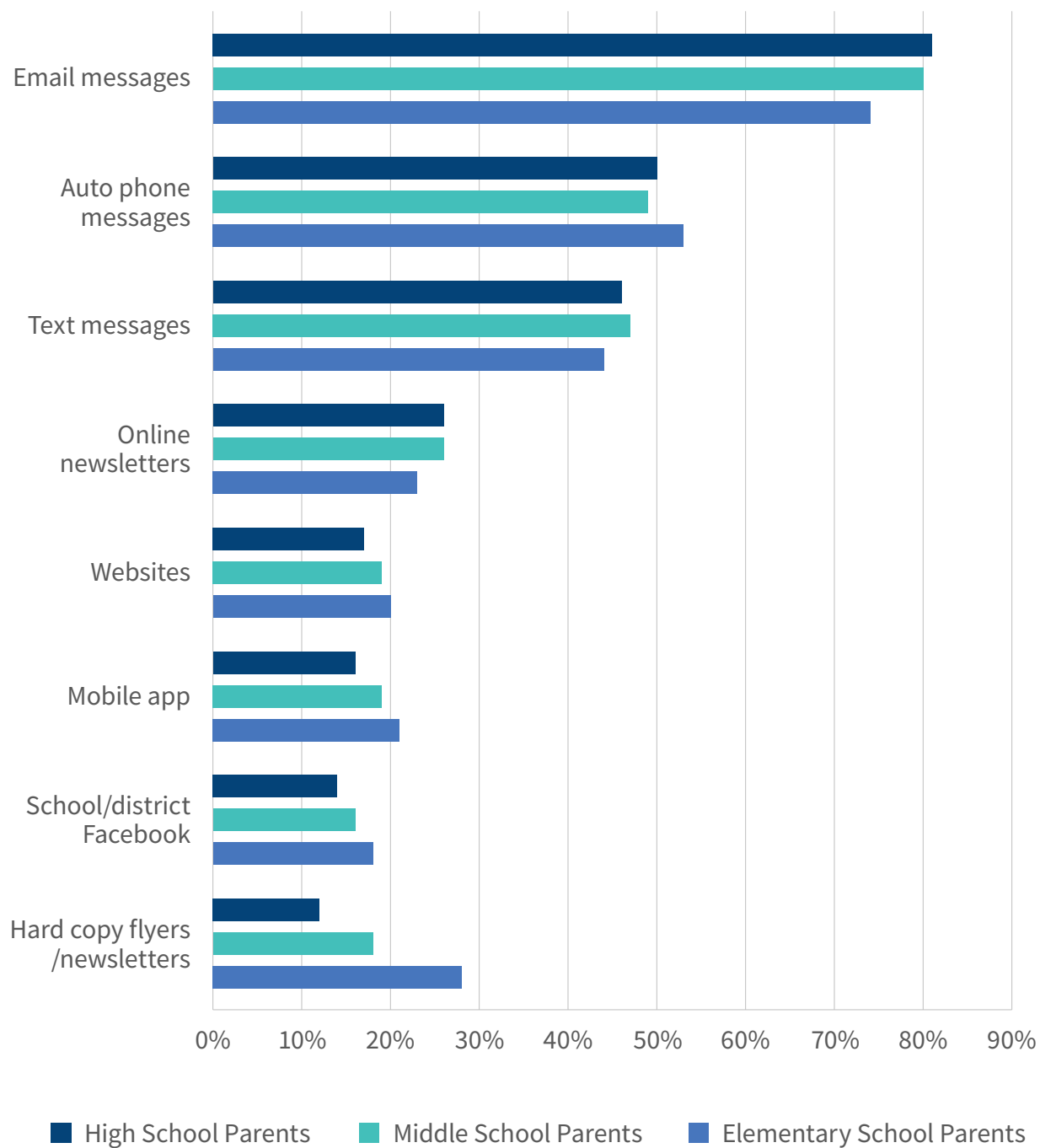


Figure D: Parents' assessment of most effective way for their child's school or district to communicate with them about general information or notifications



With both teacher communications and school communications, parents have identified six essential characteristics for effective communications and engagement:

1. **Convenience:** Make it easy for parents to get the information in a way that is most convenient for them.
2. **Push, not search:** Don't make parents search for the information, push it out to them so it is easy to see it in a timely manner.
3. **Personalized, not standardized:** Give parents information that is appropriate and applicable for their child, his or her class, grade level, and school.
4. **Timeliness:** Make sure the information being communicated is timely and current.
5. **Realization of busyness:** Realize parents are busy and need communications to be concise, to the point, and relevant.
6. **High impact/high ROI information:** Make sure the information you are providing is actionable for parents and important for them to know.



“Everything has gone mobile and very social. It’s gone that way very rapidly. We still have newsletters and email, but we’re also expanding it to more social media and more app-based communication. We’re looking at data to figure out what we can actually support, not just what people are saying, but what is the data saying our people are using? What does national data say? That helps us make educated decisions. Like I said, we’re trying to meet people where they are.”

Zac Rantz

Chief Communications Officer at Nixa Public Schools (MO)

Comparing parent preferences with current school and district strategies

Taking a strategic approach to communications strategies inherently involves understanding the preferences and behaviors of parents regarding school-to-home engagement. And a willingness as Zac Rantz explains to, “meet people where they are.” Equally important are the perceptions of school leaders around the efficacy of certain communications channels, both traditional tools and new emerging digital solutions. **The latest Speak Up research findings illustrate that parents and principals are not always on the same page when evaluating the most effective way for teachers to engage and communicate with parents.** Even given the grade level differences discussed already, parents and school leaders have both a technological and a convenience disconnect that may be based upon personal experiences with those various communications tools.

The average years of experience of a school principal in that leadership position is 8 years. This means that it is likely that the typical school principal has been out of the classroom for 8 years or more. The use of digital tools for communications, especially with parents, has changed dramatically in the past 8 years. **Consider that in 2008, only 20% of teachers reported having a smartphone, and only one-fourth of teachers conceptualized that mobile devices could support home communications. Today, smartphones are ubiquitous for adults and students, and over one-third of teachers say that mobile devices actually do improve communications between students, teachers, and parents.** It is therefore conceivable that principals may not have first hand, relevant experience with using the most current digital tools to support communications in the classroom. This may explain why principals are more likely to say that personal phone calls and face-to-face meetings are the most effective ways for teachers to connect with parents, even though parents vote for personal emails as their communications vehicle of choice (Table 2). This disconnect between parents and principals spans across all grade levels. In fact, only one-third of parents with children across all grade levels say the personal phone call is an efficient way to communicate with them while 72% of principals continue to endorse that strategy.

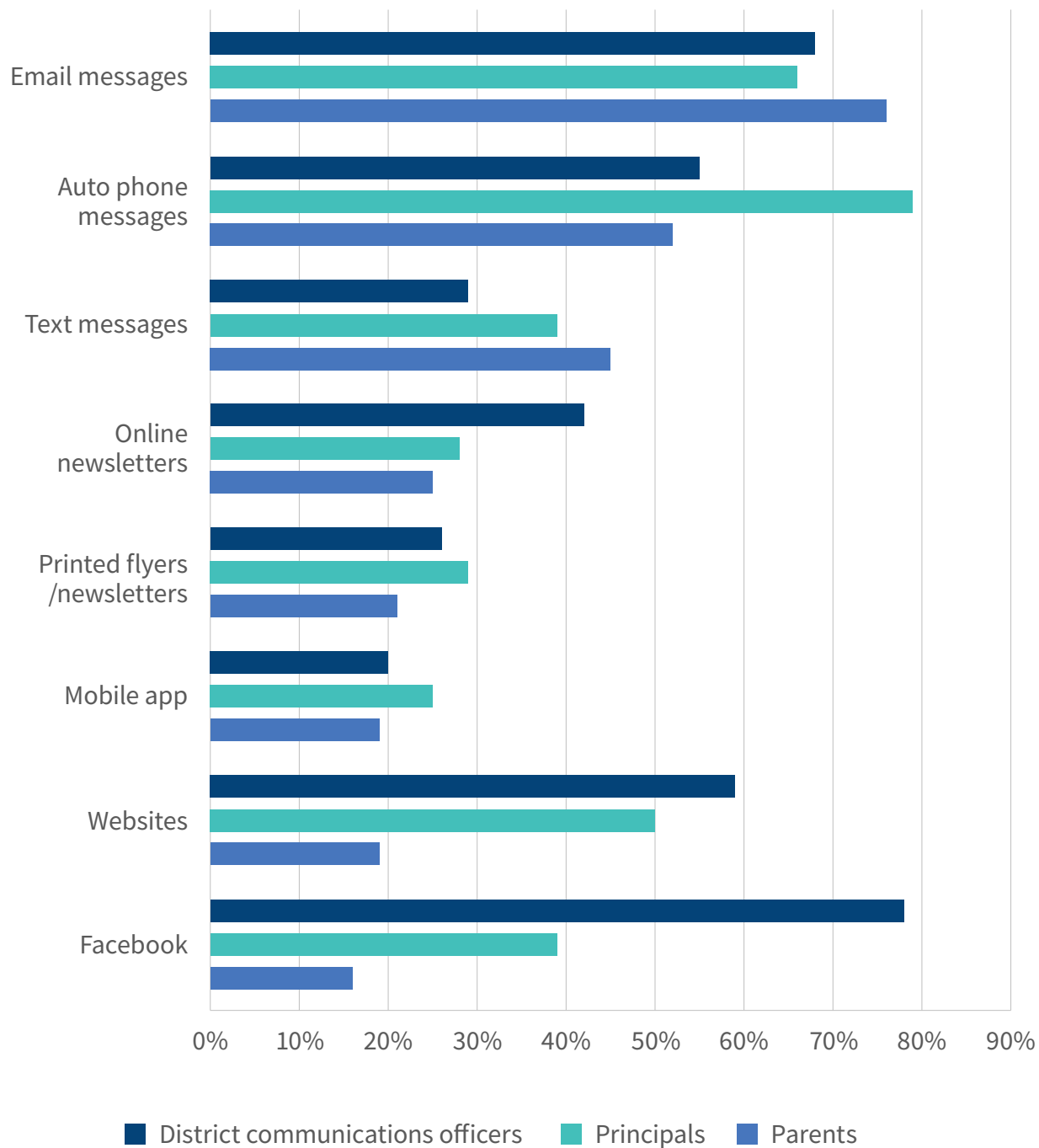
Table 2: Comparative views: Parents vs. principals' perspectives on the most effective ways for teachers to communicate with parents

COMMUNICATIONS VEHICLES	PARENTS OF ELEMENTARY STUDENTS	ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS	PARENTS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS	MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS	PARENTS OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS	HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
Personal phone calls	32%	72%	33%	75%	33%	71%
Face to face meetings	45%	73%	35%	67%	30%	58%
Personal emails	74%	64%	82%	72%	83%	73%
School portal	21%	30%	26%	42%	25%	37%
Push info through a mobile app to parents' devices	22%	28%	22%	30%	20%	26%
Auto phone messages	15%	23%	13%	22%	11%	21%
Handwritten notes sent home	27%	31%	16%	13%	10%	10%

Indicating that this disconnect may not be rigid, a subset of principals are testing the waters of new communications tools by endorsing push notifications to parents' mobile devices and auto phone messages as efficient tools. A similarly smaller portion of parents is also interested in the use of those tools. Leading the movement are both principals and parents who self-assess their technology skills as advanced. **For example, 25% of tech savvy parents and 30% of tech savvy principals believe in leveraging the capabilities of mobile technologies to send alerts and timely notifications to parents' smart phones.**

Similarly, parents and school and district administrators have a disconnect in their views about the most effective ways to communicate generalized school or district information (Figure E). Parents put high stock in email messages, auto phone messages from a mass notification system, and text messages for receiving non-student specific information such as announcements and alerts. **For general communications, principals also identify auto phone messages and email as effective tools, but place a much higher value on school and districts websites and social media tools like Facebook than parents do.** As we saw with teacher communications, parents value having information pushed to them rather than having to search and find it on their own. **Notably, 45% of parents want school and district information texted directly to them; only 19% want to have to go to a website to find the same type of information.**

Figure E: Comparative views: Parents vs. administrators on the most effective ways for schools and districts to communicate regarding general information or notifications



At the district level, communications and public information officers are aligned with parents and principals on the value of email messages, but these PR professionals are much more likely than parents to call out Facebook as an effective tool. **In fact, almost 5 times as many district communications officers (78%) as parents (16%) identify Facebook as an effective way to communicate school and district information.** Social media channels, websites, and online newsletters provide a highly efficient way for communications staff to manage messages, build their brand, and disseminate information. However, this new data states those tools might not be used appropriately to both inform and engage parents and other community stakeholders in the education system. Understanding the types of social media tools parents use in their personal lives is a good place for district administrators to start when exploring how to use these tools effectively.

The social media space for communications is highly dynamic and still evolving, especially in K-12 schools and districts. **The latest Speak Up national findings indicate a majority of school districts have endorsed Facebook, in particular, to communicate general information to their stakeholders (78%) and to share both good news (89%) and crisis alerts (69%) within their community.** Twitter is emerging as a preferred tool by some communications officers for those goals as well with 37% saying they are using Twitter to share general information about the schools and district. Parents' use of various social media tools in their personal lives indicate schools and districts may need to rethink their social media strategies to more effectively meet parents where they are in their own social media spaces. As Table 3 indicates,

- Parents' usage of certain social media tools is not as prevalent as school districts would like to assume
- Parents are using tools that school districts may not have implemented yet
- Parents' usage is variable depending upon the age of the parent

Table 3: Social media tools cited by parents of school-aged children as used “all the time + often”

SOCIAL MEDIA	PARENTS 29 OR YOUNGER IN AGE	PARENTS 30 -39 IN AGE	PARENTS 40-49 IN AGE	PARENTS 50-59 IN AGE
Facebook	64%	66%	60%	51%
Instagram	37%	28%	18%	10%
Snapchat	33%	11%	5%	3%
Twitter	11%	8%	11%	9%
YouTube	43%	30%	23%	19%
Video msg	27%	23%	19%	17%

To address some of the disconnects between parents and administrators on the most effective tools for information dissemination and engagement, school districts should keep an eye on not just what they are doing today with the parent community, but think about the evolving needs and expectations of future constituencies, especially in light of emerging digital tools and solutions. **Today's younger parents are on the forefront of using social media for communications across all aspects of their lives. It is therefore important for districts to understand and appreciate how these new digital parents are leveraging these tools as they may represent the future of home-to-school communications.** The differences in the usage and perceptions of value associated with social media tool usage provides a valuable case study for examining assumptions and conventional wisdom about the efficacy of communications tools.



Ending thoughts and new questions to consider

Educators and parents agree that effective communication between the school and home is important to ensure we are all working together for the benefit of students and their futures.

Digital tools and solutions are opening up new avenues for enhanced communications and those new approaches often result in greater parent engagement in the academic life of their child. The efficacy of those tools, however, depends heavily on understanding the expectations and aspirations of parents for a school-to-home partnership. It was the goal of this new community engagement trends report to provide educators with new insights about how to effectively develop communications strategies and plans that meet parental needs. These insights may also lead to a new understanding that administrators' perspectives on communication strategies may need a recalibration to support the emerging digital solutions. To encourage that effort, here are some new questions to consider:

- What is driving the determination and implementation of your current communications and engagement strategies? How well are you balancing authentic parent needs with organizational efficiencies? How are you measuring the success of your strategies?
- How can emerging digital tools and solutions help address the increasingly differentiated needs of parents within your school and district communities? How can you meet the needs of younger parents who are more tech-savvy, want personalized messages, and carry an aspiration for greater engagement in their child's learning lives?
- What types of professional learning experiences would help teachers and administrators use these new digital solutions to engage with parents? What personal and cultural shifts in thinking and behaviors have to occur to ensure sustainability of these efforts?
- What can you learn from the evolving perspectives of parents about effective communications strategies that can help you plan for the future of school-to-home communications? How can those lessons learned be translated into actionable plans that engage not only parents, but also the greater community of education stakeholders?

"We're making sure parents are informed. That they have the information and the resources they need to be a partner with us, and their students learning, so we are finding ways to connect better with them. To put information out to them, to take feedback from them, and just really complete that triangle that is the schools, the parents, and the kids all working together for the benefit of the student."

Stephanie Smith, APR

Director of Public Relations at Fort Osage School District (MO)

Appendix

About Project Tomorrow

Project Tomorrow is a global education nonprofit organization dedicated to the empowerment of student voices in education. With 20 years of experience in education, Project Tomorrow regularly provides consulting and research support around key trends in K-12 science, math, and technology education to school districts, government agencies, business, and higher education.

The Speak Up Research Project annually polls K-12 students, parents, educators and community members about the role of technology for learning in and out of school, and represents the largest collection of authentic, unfiltered stakeholder voice on digital learning. Since 2003, over 5 million K-12 students, parents, teachers, librarians, principals, technology leaders, district administrators and members of the community have shared their views and ideas through Speak Up.

For more information visit: <http://www.tomorrow.org>

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