

# Essential Tech for Family-School Communication



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### Summary

Over 40 years of research and practice has made it clear that what schools do to welcome and support family engagement makes a significant difference for students, families and teachers. Although there is consensus that family engagement matters, schools have struggled to engage their communities in ways that reach all families and have an impact on student success.

All families have the potential to help their children thrive if their school system enables them to work together to make this potential a reality. Thankfully, there is increasingly robust guidance about the different conditions, practices and policies necessary to make the most of family-school partnerships.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past decade, schools have used a patchwork of technologies to communicate with their students' families. From texting services to online portals and everything in between, schools use technology to disseminate critical information to families, equip them with questions and learning extension ideas, and gather their perspectives on their child's needs and progress. These platforms also provide a way for families to share information, support teachers in deepening and differentiating their instructional strategies and get a new perspective on how student learning shows up at home.

A growing body of research finds positive evidence and new approaches for family engagement in the digital age. The potential for family-school communication technologies to make an impact on student learning and well-being is vast—if implemented effectively and consistently.

Unfortunately, families, educators and school system leaders have historically struggled to keep track of the ever-growing market of technologies and, more so, to work together to figure out what they need to improve these systems. In 2020, as many schools shifted to remote teaching and learning and classrooms became virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the shortcomings of how schools and educators are implementing family-school communication technologies became unignorable. In addition to digital access gaps, many families and educators found their existing systems to be lacking or overwhelming without the bridge of in-person communication.

In 2021, the National PTA Center for Family Engagement—in partnership with the American Federation of Teachers, the School Superintendents' Association and the Consortium on School Networks—responded to this challenge by collaborating to bring research, as well as the voices of parents, teachers and school system leaders, together to determine the considerations education decision-makers should keep in mind when navigating the marketplace of family-school communication technologies.

<sup>1</sup> Mapp, K.L. & Bergman, E. (2019). Dual-capacity building framework for family-school partnerships (version 2). Retrieved from <https://www.dualcapacity.org/>

## Essential Tech for Better Family-School Communication

By better understanding the available technologies and how they align with both evidence-based practices and what stakeholders themselves have experienced and want from these systems, our hope is that this project can help educators, families, community leaders and school system leaders:

- ▶ Have one place to go to understand the wide variety of family-school communication technologies
- ▶ Build shared vocabulary about the different facets of family-school communication technologies
- ▶ More collaboratively and strategically choose platforms that fit their community's needs

Based on focus groups with diverse stakeholders (i.e., families, teachers, superintendents and district instructional technology staff), a research review, live demos and follow-up surveys with more than 20 different technology providers, we recommend that teachers and education leaders:

- 1. Define your communication purposes and map your current approach to surface gaps** by communicating clearly and often with families about why, when and who uses different technologies to facilitate family-school communication—as well as conducting regular equity audits of their existing technologies to improve accessibility.

- 2. Use more intentional and inclusive decision-making around family-school communication technologies** by listening to families and educators, alongside technology directors, to co-develop plans and tap new federal funding to improve the implementation and reach of your systems.

- 3. Invest in texting services with greater accessibility options to engage more families** by exploring new solutions or add-on services to your existing Learning Management and Student Information Systems.

- 4. Partner with technology vendors to improve implementation and support**, particularly around ways to take advantage of the many features they may already offer, while pushing for more analytics, interoperability, and parent and teacher training.

- 5. Support collective efforts to build transparency and understanding of family-school communication technologies** by advocating for easily accessible cost and evaluation information from technology providers and sharing your experiences by emailing [FamilyEngagement@PTA.org](mailto:FamilyEngagement@PTA.org) and contributing to technology reviews on [Common Sense Media](#).





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