Essential Tech for Family-School Communication

The Center *for* Family Engagement®
A National PTA® Initiative

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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.[1]

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

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

should keep in mind when navigating the marketplace of family-school communication technologies.

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

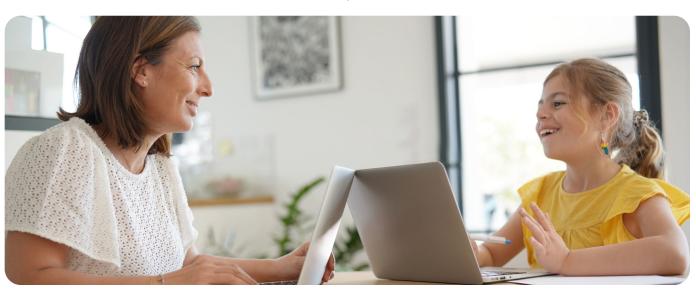◗ More collaboratively and strategically choose platforms that fit their community's needs

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 and contributing to technology reviews on Common Sense Media.

This Collaboration Guide provides readers with a starting place to improve how you are using technology to facilitate communication between families and educators. In addition to the considerations and recommendations provided here, you can:

◗ See how family-school communication technologies compare by accessing the landscape at PTA.org/FamilySchoolTechLandscape.

◗ Document and share your school's current communication strategies by using the tool at PTA.org/FamilySchoolTechMap.

◗ Invite the perspectives of families and educators to your family-school technology plan by using the discussion guides at PTA.org/FamilySchoolTechQuestions.

Introduction

Families are essential to ensure a high-quality education for every student. Decades of research shows that family engagement matters for student success—students whose families are engaged are more likely to attend school, avoid discipline problems, achieve at higher levels, and graduate.[2] Family engagement also helps schools. Research suggests it is equally as important as school leadership and a rigorous curriculum in predicting school improvement.[3]

The everyday decisions that teachers, principals and district leaders make about how they foster partnerships with their students' families has a profound effect on when and how families engage in their child's education. All families have the potential to help their children thrive—if their school system creates the goals and conditions to make this potential a reality.

Increasingly, research also demonstrates the incredible power of certain family and school partnership practices and how these impacts vary across different cultures.[4] Specifically, studies on school reform strategies, as well as behavioral economics, find that parent-teacher and family-school communication is particularly effective in a range of communities and demographics.[5] This includes not only the traditional ways schools have approached this communication (through open houses, parent-teacher conferences and sending notes home) but also the continuously evolving use of technology.

Historically, robocalls, emails, class websites, social media and calls with families have been the primary way that schools leveraged technology to communicate with their families. However, the past decade has seen exponential growth in classroom and school use of online gradebooks, apps and texting services, as well as full-service learning platforms and student information systems.

Like many other family-school communication practices, the evidence about these systems suggests many benefits, particularly reducing chronic absenteeism and supporting student literacy achievement.[6]

Varied in form and function, online gradebooks, portals, and texting and messaging services enable families to support their children's learning as advocates, partners and coaches by alerting families to student issues and progress and providing ideas and activities to extend learning at home. Teachers also use these technologies in increasingly bi-directional ways to better differentiate their instruction and support each student by hearing more from families about their students' home lives and how they perceive their students' abilities on homework and broader socio-emotional and academic skills. Newer technologies have become foundational strategies to forge strong family-school partnerships, but both families and those working in and supporting schools have struggled to manage their growth. Although there is an expanding market of products available, the time it takes to get basic facts and comparisons across platforms is a high burden for school staff, family and community leaders and advocates. Furthermore, information or referrals can come from a variety of sources, making it difficult to know what users are—and are not—committing to as part of their communication practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic also shone a light on the harm done to students when their districts and schools do not build and optimize these communication systems. Rather than serve as a tool to reach all students and families, these technologies instead exacerbated already existing inequities in school and district outreach and communication efforts with families. Many decision-makers worked to resolve the issue by addressing digital access, but access is only the first step towards effective communication. Ultimately, families and educators want better implementation of the technology systems that they are already—or could be—using. However, their voices have not always been included meaningfully in these decisions.

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[2] Henderson, A.T. & Mapp, K.L. (2002). A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family and community connections on student achievement. Austin: SEDL. Hill, N. & Tyson, D. (2009). Parental involvement in middle school: A meta-analytic assessment of the strategies that promote achievement. *Developmental Psychology*, 45(3): pgs. 730-763. Fan, X. & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13: 1: pgs. 1-22. Jeynes, W. (2012). A meta-analysis of the efficacy of different types of parental involvement programs for urban students. *Urban Education*, 47, 706-742.

[3] Bryk, et al. (2010). Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[4] Robinson, K., & Harris, A. L. (2014). The Broken Compass: Parental Involvement with Children's Education. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[5] Goodall, J. S. (2016). Technology and school–home communication. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, 11(2), 118–131.

[6] Bergman, P. & Chan, E. W. (2021). Leveraging Parents through Low-Cost Technology: The Impact of High-Frequency Information on Student Achievement. *The Journal of Human Resources*, 56, 1, 125-168; Kraft, M. A., & Rogers, T. (2015). The underutilized potential of teacher-to-parent communication: Evidence from a field experiment. *Economics of Education Review*, 47, 49-63; Doss, C., Fahle, E. M., Loeb, S. & York, B. N. (2019). More Than Just a Nudge: Supporting Kindergarten Parents with Differentiated and Personalized Text Messages. *Journal of Human Resources, Volume 54, Number 3*, 567-603

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 call for support by collaborating on a project to better understand the marketplace of family-school communication technologies. This project aims to use a variety of data sources to articulate the major considerations across family-school communication platforms and show how 22 leading technology providers compare along those considerations.

By providing information about the available technologies and how they align to 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 marketplace 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

This document is the first step on the path towards these purposes.

The report contains:

- An overview of the considerations that served as the foundation for data collection across technology providers

- A set of recommendations for educators and decision-makers to improve their family-school communication technology systems

Readers can also explore:

- A landscape of tables comparing and contrasting technologies across these considerations with summary findings about how they vary, at PTA.org/FamilySchoolTechLandscape.

- **Tools to help you plan** by mapping your current approach and inviting parent and teacher input to improve it at PTA.org/FamilySchoolTechMap and PTA.org/FamilySchoolTechQuestions, respectively.

Lastly, readers should note a few limitations and caveats of this project:

- **Situate technology in a broader family engagement and equity strategy.** Technology is now a necessary, but not solely sufficient, part of any teacher, principal or district leader's family engagement strategy. For example, there are some families who will always prefer to communicate outside of newer technology, and others who lack basic access to the systems a school uses. This project does not attempt to solve these preferences and inequities, but, rather, to provide a guidepost for helping maximize what technologies can do to support students and meet the multiple needs of their users.

- **Start with relationships.** Although using technology to facilitate family-school communication can help build more trust between families and educators, it is rarely a substitute for personal connection. This tool is designed to help educators and school system leaders build upon strong relationships between families and schools; technology alone cannot replace or repair these relationships.

- **Focus on implementation.** As anyone who works in schools understands, the best designed and planned interventions are only successful if they are implemented well. The same is true of the technologies included in this landscape, which offer a variety of features and functionalities to facilitate family-school communication, but whose implementation is ultimately decided in the hands of families, teachers, and, in some cases, students themselves.

- **Recognize the depth of knowledge necessary for success.** This project hones-in on the significant, yet somewhat niche, landscape of technologies that facilitate information-sharing (and, ideally, exchange) between families and those who work in school systems. We have attempted to "boil the ocean" to summarize what we learned from a variety of sources, recognizing that some aspects of this mapping take years of experience and expertise to fully understand. In addition, the fast pace of innovation amongst these providers means that the information in this document will quickly need revision as new technologies proliferate and as existing technologies continue to improve their offerings. The information in this document, then, should serve as a starting place for family and community advocates, educators and school system leaders to engage in a more critical reflection about how they are using technology to facilitate family-school communication and how they can improve upon current systems and practices.

If used well, technology has the great potential to facilitate both more and better partnerships between schools and families. As community leaders develop plans to address equity issues and learning loss through the large American Rescue Plan funding, they must prioritize easy and effective ways for families and teachers to communicate about student progress.

Our hope is that this project helps educators and school system leaders critically examine their family-school communication technologies and more collaboratively identify ways to improve.

Methodology

The focus for this project is to enable education decision-makers, educators and advocates to be more intentional in their selection and use of family-school communication technologies. To accomplish this, we established a clear understanding of the features and criteria that matter to the end user, and we learned the different features and criteria offered by various platforms on the market.

Identifying Features and Criteria that Matter
National PTA used three strategies to get a better understanding of the family-school communication technologies on the market and to develop a "codebook" that would guide data collection across these varied platforms:

1. A research and literature review that focused on the impacts of family-school communication technologies and the factors that affected successful implementation of these systems.

2. Focus groups with parents (n=12), teachers (n=16), district instructional technology staff (n=8), and district superintendents (n=8) across diverse communities to hear directly from stakeholders about their experiences, preferences around features, and suggestions for improvement of these systems. We also gathered supplemental input from a broader cross-section of stakeholders via surveys.

3. Key informant interviews with and written input from family engagement and education technology experts.

Based on the information and feedback captured, National PTA created a codebook that outlined the key features, functionalities and criteria deemed as important across one or more of these data sources. We also identified the criteria for including technologies in the *Comparison of Family-School Communication Technologies* (which can be found at PTA.org/FamilySchoolTechLandscape) and created a list of technologies for outreach (see Appendix A).

Please note that we specifically focused on technologies that have intentionally developed features and functionalities to facilitate family-school communication around student learning and progress.[7]

Learning How Technologies Compare
National PTA invited technology providers (see Appendix A) to guide a live demonstration of their product and complete a follow-up questionnaire aligned to the codebook of key considerations. If the vendors were unresponsive, we identified parent users to help us complete self-paced demonstrations and/or we gathered information available publicly online. This is noted in Appendix A where relevant.

The demonstrations covered information about the platform's content, accessibility features and communication capabilities. The codebook-aligned follow-up product questionnaire provided more information on data modernization, training and support, evaluation and cost. The information collected through the demonstrations, follow-up product questionnaire and independent research was then used to complete the landscape. Review our *Comparison of Family-School Communication Technologies* at PTA.org/FamilySchoolTechLandscape.

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[7] General communications outlets such as social media, phones and email were not included in this project.

Considerations for Family-School Communication Technologies

Seven major considerations emerged across the input we gathered from families, educators and school system leaders, as well as what we learned across research and expert advice.

The areas of priority are:

1. **Content**

2. **Accessibility and ease of use**

3. **Communication capabilities**

4. **Training and support**

5. **Data modernization and privacy**

6. **Improvement and evaluation**

7. **Cost**

These considerations can help decision-makers better outline the functionalities of their current platforms and then work with their community to collectively reflect on and improve their existing approach to using technology to facilitate family-school communication.

1. Content

Family-school communication technologies serve as a gateway for the people with some of the most important insights into a child—their family members and teachers—to exchange information to help students thrive. Four major areas of content consideration emerged across the research and input from families and teachers, who placed a premium on this aspect of technology:

▶ **Personalized student information.** This includes whether a platform can display student schedules, attendance, behavior, grades and assignments.

▶ **Learning amplifiers.** These include whether the technology can share rubrics to help families gauge assignment success and whether educators can share recommended activities or questions to extend learning at home.

▶ **General information.** This includes whether the platform can share whole-class, school and/or district notices, messages or event reminders determined by the school user.

▶ **Coordination.** This includes whether the platform allows for more detailed communication around volunteer and parent-teacher conference scheduling.

The type of content shared within a platform is fundamental to making parents equal partners in their child's education. Having a platform that meets your community's content needs and streamlines them into one place is efficient and has the potential of engaging more families.

> "I wish there was one place we could go to for two-way school communication and grades and scheduling. I fear missing out on important school communication."
> **Parent**

2. Accessibility and Ease of Use

We discovered that one of the most varied features across platforms is how they help make it possible for families and educators to enter and use their systems. This includes equity considerations around disability and language access, as well as efforts to increase useability through multiple devices and minimize time spent opening and navigating the platform. Specifically, this project identified four major functionalities related to accessibility and ease of use for decision-makers to consider:

▶ **ADA compliance.** This includes whether the platform provides text-to-speech, speech-to-text and visual display modification options. Some platforms shared that these options were limited to a specific portion of their content, and those exceptions have been noted.

▶ **Language accessibility.** This details the extent to which languages other than English are available in the technology's interface menu and layout. Note that for some platforms the response to this was different than their language availability for more specific communication capabilities.

▶ **Device access.** This describes whether the platform is available on mobile, mobile-responsive websites, iOS/Android devices like Chromebooks, and/or desktops and laptops.

▶ **Friction reducers.** These include whether the platform can minimize additional steps for families to use it, including automatically enrolling parent users (opt-out as opposed to opt-in) and whether a download is required to use any app-based platforms.

"In terms of making these platforms accessible and easy to use, we always want to know if the platform is accessible on multiple devices. If a teacher can use it on their phone, Chromebook, PC in their classroom, then those are huge wins."
IT District Leader

3. Communication Capabilities

Another set of considerations that surfaced in this project are the specific capabilities that different technologies have related to communication, including:

- **Two-way communication.** This indicates which users can send and receive messages from each other among administrators, teachers, parents and parent groups.

- **Communication method.** This includes whether the technology offers communication via texting, email, mail, robocall, app notification and/or even voice calls.

- **Notifications.** These describe whether users can customize notification frequency and delivery mode. Given the various options and feedback we received from parent focus groups claiming to be overwhelmed with notifications, we also asked platforms if notification frequency and mode of delivery was customizable.

- **Message attachments.** This highlights whether communications can include photo, video and voice recordings, a popular request from both families and educators in this project.

- **Translation options.** This details whether the technologies provide automatic translation of messages shared among users and, if so, in which languages.

"I like being able to share the photos, which for preschool, it's also good to send, like when we're sending activities to send the parent a visual."
Teacher

4. Data Modernization and Privacy

Data modernization and data privacy were key considerations among school and district technology leaders and, to a lesser extent, among families. This consideration encompasses the

ways that technologies ensure a seamless and safe experience for users. For example, interoperability with district systems that house student data can help reduce challenges to tracking updated contact information, while also allow for a more integrated picture of student success.

Although information-sharing is important, it should not be done without proper safeguards in place to ensure privacy. Specific considerations for data modernization and privacy for this project include:

- **Single sign-on.** This describes if a platform offers users the ability to securely use a single set of login credentials (i.e., username and password) on multiple platforms or software systems.

- **Interoperability with LMS.** This notes whether the technology matches the same data standards as popular Learning Management Systems and lists the systems with which it is compatible.

- **Interoperability with SIS.** This notes whether the technology matches the same data standards as popular Student Information Systems and lists the systems with which it is compatible.

- **Data Standards Compliance.** This lists the state, national and/or global standards the platform complies with to safely exchange user data and information.

- **Student Privacy Standards.** This lists the state, national and/or global standards the platform complies with to protect student privacy.

- **Data Privacy Policy**. This provides a link to the privacy policy when provided by the platform.

> "With everything going virtual, everyone is expected
> to have a new sign in for
> everything … it's very overwhelming."
> **Parent**

5. Training and Support

From onboarding to ongoing training and technical support, a platform's ability to meet evolving community needs in this area is crucial. In multiple focus groups for this project, it was mentioned that platforms often offered many "good" features, but not everyone knew how to adopt them, or even that they existed.

For the landscape, we asked platforms about:

▶ **Basic user training** provided in some format to onboard and orient users to the platform

▶ **Advanced user training** offered ongoingly as new updates and features are added to the technology

▶ **Technical support** available for users, including what types of support are offered and whether live or bot support is offered to users

▶ **Support languages** available for users who speak languages other than English

Both families and educators need training and support for schools/districts to make the most of these communication technologies. To make the most of their systems, education leaders should discuss what support is available "off the shelf" from their providers, what support is personalized, and what the school or district will need to do to wrap-around these offerings to ensure adequate training and support for teachers and families.

> "There needs to be consistency and TRAINING
> for staff AND families. So often teachers don't
> use features due to lack of training."
> **Parent**

6. Improvement and Evaluation

Platforms often evaluate what they are doing and pivot to remain competitive in the market of family-school

communications. As the target customer of these platforms, school and district staff should be able to understand and anticipate the benefits of using these systems, both in terms of their reach and their impact.

Decision-makers should consider whether a platform offers:

▶ Engagement analytics. This includes whether the technology offers an administrative account that can receive or access reports about who is using the system and how often.

▶ Studies available. These are the links provided by platforms to case studies, evaluations and/or research specific to the family-school communication aspects of their technology.

We also asked technology providers about the study design and the outcomes assessed in evaluations of their platforms. Many providers did not offer this information. For those who did, in some cases the information shared in these questions did not align to the information provided in the study links.

With such limited and sometimes conflicting information, the landscape tool simply shares the study links. We encourage advocates and educators to more critically evaluate the potential benefits of each technology based on the information provided.

> "You have to consider which of these
> technologies are having independent
> studies conducted on their implementation
> and their impact."
> **Key Informant**

7. Cost

The final key area—and often the one of the main determining factors for educators and systems leaders—is cost. For this project, we asked platforms to share information regarding their:

▶ **Free option.** This describes whether a free version of their technology is available. It is important to note that these options frequently offer fewer features and less training/support than paid versions.

▶ **Cost model.** This itemizes whether the technology charges by student, classroom, school and/or district.

▶ **Average cost.** Note that this item shows the average cost when it was provided by the platforms.

▶ **Pricing plan.** This shares the links to cost information when provided by the platforms.

Like consideration six (evaluation and improvement), cost was an area where platforms did not provide in-depth information, so for accurate quotes for your specific classroom, school, or district it is best to contact the platform directly. We also encourage vendors to improve transparency in their pricing.

> "One of the major factors in our district knowing if we can adopt a platform is obviously cost. We use the filter of 'We're not just looking at what's good for today, but what's good two years from now.' If we are not going to fund that in two years at its full price, we're not going to use it when it's free."
> **IT District Leader**

Recommendations

Family-school communication technologies offer the promise of low-cost, scalable and differentiated support that enables families and educators to better collaborate with one another. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that technology will be an essential part of learning—and communicating—in the future.

Specifically, we recommend that educators and education decision-makers:

1. **Define communication goals and map the district's current approach to surface gaps.** This project surfaced a deep desire shared across families, teachers and school and system leaders to have a common understanding about why these technologies are being used and what to expect from their use. Educators and leaders should communicate clearly and often with families about the purpose of each technology they use, who is using them and how often, and who parents can contact if they have questions or issues. Teachers, principals and district leaders should also conduct regular equity audits of their existing family-school communication technologies to identify families whose accessibility needs are not being met by their current systems and then work with these families to co-develop alternative communication strategies and outlets. Get started with our tool, Map Your Family-School Communication Technologies, at PTA.org/FamilySchoolTechMap.

2. **Use more intentional and inclusive decision-making around family-school communication technologies.** An important revelation from this project is that there are inherent tensions among families, teachers and school and system leaders around which features are most important to them and who, ultimately, chooses which features will be the deciding factor when purchasing family-school communication technologies. The market for family-school communication technologies changes rapidly, so leaders should consider prioritizing funding to develop and implement a plan specifically for their district's use of family-school communication technologies. Many of these technologies meet the recently released American Rescue Plan's preferences for evidence-based interventions to prevent student learning loss. School and district plans for family-school communication technology use should be informed by the perspectives of families and teachers in particular, whose ability to communicate with one another is

central to and predictive of student success. Get started with our tool, Questions to Ask Families and Educators to Improve Your Family-School Communication Systems, at PTA.org/FamilySchoolTechQuestions.

> "We try to put together a group of stakeholders, often the end users and power users, to get some feedback about new products ... I rely on the input from those users to make sure they're happy with it."
> **IT District Leader**

3. **Invest in texting services to engage more families.** The market of family-school communication platforms is constantly expanding, and so are the features that they offer. In focus groups and surveys, parents and teachers prioritized being able to send and receive text messages over other forms of communication. More so, research on texting interventions consistently finds positive student benefits, as well as contributing to more parent-teacher trust.[8] Texting also eliminates the barrier of internet accessibility and technical literacy that might be required for communication via an app or web interface and can be less costly. Outside of the technologies listed in this project, schools and districts should consider ensuring that their existing Learning Management and Student Information Systems have text notification options for families. We also encourage school system staff to be intentional about the content of these messages so that they are equipping families with the information they want and need to support their child's learning.

4. **Partner with technology vendors to improve implementation and support.** Education decision-makers should communicate with their existing and potential technology providers to ensure that their needs can be met. Specifically, school and district leaders should ask for and share internal reports and metrics for teachers to be able to identify which families are and are not accessing family-school communication technologies. They should also develop comprehensive support plans with their technology providers, including ensuring adequate training and technical support for families and teachers and pushing for more use of data standards and privacy compliance.

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[8] Kraft, M. A., & Monti-Nussbaun, M. (2017). Can schools enable parents to prevent summer loss learning? A text messaging field experiment to promote literacy skills. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1-50; Bergman & Chan (2021), Ibid. Kraft & Rogers (2015), Ibid; Doss, Loeb & York (2019), Ibid.

5. **Support collective efforts to build transparency and understanding of family-school communication technologies.** This project skims the surface in cataloging the ways in which family-school communication systems compare to and differ from one another, as well as what different considerations should be kept top of mind when deciding which and how to use these systems. This project also identified gaps in transparency in the cost and evaluation efforts of technology providers offering these family-school communication services. We encourage crowdsourcing, centralized data and review hubs (including those with online search features), and more public dialogue around how these technologies are used and what they offer. Additional research is needed to square what is available and possible with the realities of how decisions around family-school partnerships are made in a school system, as well as to identify the implementation needs to successfully scale these systems.

Conclusion

In analyzing the technologies available and how they align to both evidence-based practices and what stakeholders prioritize, it is clear that many communities can benefit from evaluating their current approach to communication. Fostering an open dialogue between educators, families, community leaders and school system leaders should help to inform the selection of technology platforms and their day-to-day use. As school and system leaders take on this work, they must focus on collaborating with the community to determine their goals and invest in accessible and responsive products and approaches to implementation to ensure more equitable outcomes.

Acknowledgements

Additional Tools

Tool: Comparison of Family-School Communication Technologies

Visit PTA.org/FamilySchoolTechLandscape to access a set of tables that provide an at-a-glance comparison of 22 different technologies across each of our seven areas of consideration.

Tool: Map Your Family-School Communication Technologies

Visit PTA.org/FamilySchoolTechMap to access a template that can help you better communicate with families about which technologies your school or district is using across a variety of purposes to help families be engaged in their child's education.

Tool: Questions to Ask Families and Educators to Improve Your Family-School Communication Systems

Visit PTA.org/FamilySchoolTechQuestions to access questions and guidance that can help school and district leaders improve their current technology use for family-school communication by ensuring the voice of families and educators informs their plans.

Appendix A: Technologies Included in This Landscape

Below are the descriptions of the many platforms included in this project, as well as whether they participated in an online demonstration and follow-up survey with PTA staff (if not, this information was gathered from demonstrations with parent users and publicly available information online). In addition to the information in this toolkit, district and school staff, as well as parent and community advocates, can read more about these platforms and contribute to reviews via Common Sense Media and EdSurge.

Although these technologies have overlapping functionalities, they have different design specialties and fill different niches in the ed tech landscape. For ease of comparison, we have grouped the participating platforms into four categories:

1. **Messaging and Texting Platforms** have parents as the clear end user. These apps and services are most frequently used by teachers to connect families with information and ideas to support learning but may also be used by school and district leaders.

2. **Learning Management Systems (LMS)** help educators manage student learning by tracking assignments, tests, etc. The LMS included in this landscape have created ways to add parents as users of these systems.

3. **Student Information Systems (SIS)** are broader warehouses of student data typically housed at the district level. School staff use these to record attendance, access contact information and other student data. Some SIS can also be accessed by parents.

4. **Single Sign-On (SSO)** serves as the connector and secure pipeline between the district's data and the other applications used within the schools.

Messaging and Texting Services

Name	Description	Participated in Project	EdSurge Review	Common Sense Media Review
Bloomz	Bloomz incorporates several aspects of school communication, coordination and classroom management into its platform.	Y	**Product Review**	**Product Review**
ClassDojo	ClassDojo is a school communication platform that teachers, students and families use to share what's being learned in the classroom through photos, videos and messages.	Y	**Product Review**	**Product Review**
ClassTag	ClassTag allows teachers to communicate classroom information home. ClassTag Connect provides school districts with a platform for mass broadcasts, parent messaging and reporting.	Y	**Product Review**	**Product Review**
EveryDay Labs	EveryDay Labs is a text and mailing-based program focused on reducing absenteeism by providing personalized outreach paired with inbound support for families in their home language.	Y	**Review not Available**	**Review not Available**
Let's Talk!	Let's Talk! enables two-way communication between community members and school districts. All communications—online forms, text messages, phone calls, emails, etc.—are unified into one system and automatically routed to the right team for support. Let's Talk! also offers self-service tools, including a chatbot, allowing districts to provide support to community members 24/7/365.	Y	**Product Review**	**Review not Available**
FASTalk	FASTalk (Families and Schools Talk) promotes equity and builds partnerships between teachers and historically underserved families by sharing engaging at-home learning activities via text messages in each family's home language.	Y	**Review not Available**	**Review not Available**

Name	Description	Participated in Project	EdSurge Review	Common Sense Media Review
ParentSquare	ParentSquare engages families with school communications and communications-based services—from the district office to the classroom teacher, and all in one place. Schools know who's not being reached and have the reports and tools to improve communications equity while maintaining privacy and security.	Y	**Review not Available**	**Product Review**
PowerMyLearning	PowerMyLearning Connect offers Family Playlists, which are fun learning assignments that empower students to "learn by teaching." Family Playlists invite families to participate in deeper, more meaningful learning conversations with teachers about students' learning.	Y	**Product Review**	**Product Review**
Ready4K	Ready4K provides families with an evidence-based family engagement curriculum delivered via text messages while giving educators the data and insights they need to make family engagement easier and more effective.	Y	**Review not Available**	**Review not Available**
Remind	A two-way text first solution, Remind facilitates communication (via texts, email or in app) between the school and their families while keeping track of all communication histories and transcripts.	Y	**Product Review**	**Product Review**
SchoolCNXT	SchoolCNXT is a family engagement/ messaging platform that overcomes barriers of language, adult literacy, and access to enable every family the ability to engage with their child's teacher(s), school(s), activities, and district.	Y	**Product Review**	**Product Review**
TalkingPoints	TalkingPoints connects and empowers families and teachers by using two-way translated communication and personalized content. This approach eliminates barriers including language, time, mindsets, and capacity to foster strong family engagement in the development of students' academic success.	Y	**Product Review**	**Product Review**

Learning Management and Student Information Systems

Name	Description	Participated in Project	EdSurge Review	Commonsense Media Review
Altitude Learning	The Altitude Learning platform facilitates transformation from teacher-led to student-centered learning with a comprehensive platform coupled with intensive support. The platform is grounded in research about how children learn best and is informed by practice.	Y	**Review not Available**	**Review not Available**
Blackboard	Blackboard is a virtual classroom and learning management system that provides a variety of tools and features for teachers, students and families to teach, learn and stay connected.	N	**Product Review**	**Review not Available**
Brightspace by D2L	Brightspace for Parents and the aligned communication tools support communication/collaboration between/among parents, teachers and other stakeholders. Some features include the ability to share students' work with family in a single click; offering parents a direct window into classroom schedules, course lessons, assignments and completion status, grades, announcements and events; and sharing teacher reflections, feedback and comments.	Y	**Product Review**	**Review not Available**
Canvas	Canvas provides teachers, students and parents with a consistent, familiar digital learning environment. With one system to navigate, a single source for all communication, and one place to connect the tools you need with the other apps you use.	Y	**Product Review**	**Product Review**
Edmodo	Edmodo is an LMS that allows for communication, collaboration and Zoom video conferencing. Edmodo	Y	**Product Review**	**Product Review**

Name	Description	Participated in Project	EdSurge Review	Commonsense Media Review
	network enables teachers to share content, distribute quizzes, assignments and manage communication with students, colleagues and parents.			
ItsLearning	ItsLearning is a digital learning management system developed by the Norwegian company Itslearning AS. It is designed for both K12 and higher education.	Y	**Product Review**	**Review not Available**
Schoology	Schoology is a virtual social networking hub that allows users to create, manage and share academic content. Schoology is designed for a K-12 audience and for higher education institutions.	Y	**Product Review**	**Product Review**
Seesaw	Seesaw is a tool used primarily by Pre-K through fifth-grade students to master a variety of subjects. Seesaw gives students creative tools to capture their learning. Students can show their learning to classmates, teachers, and families in the app.	Y	**Product Review**	**Product Review**
Unified Classroom	A product of PowerSchool that centralizes gradebook, LMS, assessments, analytics, student information and special education data for parents, students and educators.	Y	**Review not Available**	**Review not Available**

Student Information Systems

Name	Description	Participated in Project	EdSurge Review	CommonSense Media Review
Infinite Campus	Infinite Campus is a comprehensive, web-based K-12 student information system (SIS) that provides access to administration, instruction, communication, curriculum, reporting and more.	**N (Parent Demo)**	**Product Review**	**Review not Available**
PowerSchool	PowerSchool strives to provide schools, districts and states with interoperable solutions that support students and teachers, streamline operations and provide actionable data.	**Y**	**Product Review**	**Product Review**

Single Sign-On (SSO)

Name	Description	Participated in Project	EdSurge Review	CommonSense Media Review
Clever	Clever is a digital learning platform for K12 schools-it serves as one place for single sign-on, messaging, analytics and more.	**Y**	**Product Review**	**Review not Available**

Appendix B: Related Resources to Expand Your Learning

Learn more about the technologies available and how to decide between them:

▶ EdSurge offers reviews of over 80 communications tools that schools are currently using

▶ Dig deeper into family-school communication platforms and what they offer by exploring Common Sense Media's review of popular communication apps and websites and check out the article, "The Best Family Communication Platforms for Teachers and Schools"

▶ Get advice from Education Week's guide to making the best tech decisions for schools and read through "10 Variables That Matter Most in Making New Ed-Tech Successful"

Learn more about the key aspects of family school communication technologies:

▶ Project Unicorn offers a high-level overview titled Interoperability 101, as well as a glossary of related terms

▶ CoSN shares a more in-depth look in Working Together to Strategically: Connect the K-12 Enterprise: Interoperability Standards for Education

▶ Review Common Sense Media's guide, Privacy and Distance Learning: Tips for Parents

▶ Dig into the research around best communication practices in "Write Less to Say More" and learn how you can optimize your outreach

▶ Read through "Trimming Truancy" to see how "nudges" support student performance.

▶ Understood shares helpful tips for enhancing accessibility in "How to Break Down Communication Barriers Between Teachers and Families"

▶ Learn more about translation resources and other supports for English Language Learner (ELL) Families in Colorín Colorado's "Communicating with ELL Families: 10 Strategies for Schools"

▶ Visit PTA's One Voice blog and read Increasing Family Engagement in Diverse Schools for strategies to help you connect with families your school has struggled to reach

▶ The Dual Capacity Building Framework for Family School Partnerships lays out the training, support and conditions needed for school systems to create lasting change

▶ The National PTA Standards for Family School Partnerships highlight the building blocks of effective family engagement, and can help you prioritize what and how you communicate with your community

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