

Fostering equitable communication in a diverse school district

How an Indianapolis school district strengthened family outreach with a unified communication platform



From creating a learning environment at home to participating in school activities, family plays a key role in education. A report from the Campaign for Educational Equity, a nonprofit research and policy center at Teachers College, Columbia University, says family involvement is one of the strongest predictors of children's school success.¹ To make it easier for families to get and stay involved in their children's education, school districts across the United States are evaluating ways to open lines of communication between teachers, administrators, families, and students.

With the prevalence of smartphones and other digital devices, schools have more tools than ever at their disposal. The challenge comes in using those channels effectively. According to a 2022 survey conducted by ParentSquare, more than two-thirds of schools and districts surveyed used five to six different communication channels: email, a school website or portal, text, social media, and telephone calls topped the list. A surprising 47% still use paper flyers and newsletters to deliver information.²

"One of the biggest obstacles schools face stems from the diverse populations they serve — not only in terms of cultural backgrounds, but also with their familiarity with technology,"

says Anupama Vaid, founder and president of ParentSquare, a cloud-based platform for schools. "Some parents use email, some don't. Some parents would rather text than use an app. Schools struggle to bring together all communication channels and languages preferred by parents."

The Metropolitan School District (MSD) of Wayne Township, a community on the west side of Indianapolis, Indiana, used multiple channels to communicate with families, but its approach confused parents.

"They didn't know how communications were going to occur or where to go for messaging," says Jeff Butts, superintendent of MSD Wayne Township. "Some teachers were communicating more effectively than others with students and families. We needed a communication tool that could be easily utilized by our families, students, and teachers."

With about 70 languages spoken among 16,000 students, the school district also needed a tool that translated messages into multiple languages. "We wanted accessibility to be equal for all our families — from those just arriving to this country to those who have lived here for a long time," Butts says. "Hiring a translation service isn't as warm and welcoming as the ability to communicate directly in one's native language."

The search for a unified platform

The district's IT team evaluated multiple platforms for usability, flexibility, and accessibility. ParentSquare provided all the above. "It's a very usable app that offers multiple ways to send and receive information," Butts says. "We also felt it was a viable product we could use for a long time."

With ParentSquare, teachers and administrators send messages via one secure, unified platform. The platform delivers the message to the recipients' preferred communication method: text, email, phone call, or the ParentSquare app.

Importantly for MSD Wayne Township, ParentSquare delivers messages and notifications in the recipient's native language using real-time translation. For example, a text message written in English gets delivered in Spanish. The parent responds in Spanish, and that's delivered instantly in English. Parents choose the language in which they receive messages, which helps eliminate communication barriers.

Rolling out ParentSquare

MSD Wayne Township rolled out ParentSquare gradually: first with the IT department, followed by administrators and teachers. Training took place over the summer and initially included a few communications tools. After staff

became familiar with messaging features, ParentSquare worked with the district to create templates to enable secure document delivery.

“Instead of mailing paper forms, schools can use templates to create PDFs of report cards, progress reports, and other documents and send them by email, text, or another channel,” Vaid says. “Parents can access these documents any time through the platform. It saves the schools paper, printing, and postage as well as a lot of time.”

To encourage adoption among staff and parents, the district recruited early adopters to spread the word. Teachers helped educate colleagues on the platform’s benefits. IT staff attended parent-teacher conferences and back-to-school nights to help parents set up their accounts.

The district’s efforts, over time, resulted in a high degree of contactability — an important metric for school communication. Instead of simply tracking messages delivered, ParentSquare tracks whether one, two, or no family members receive and read messages. Schools can then reach out to remaining contacts to update necessary information.

“One hundred percent contactability is important to districts, because if there is an incident and the school closes unexpectedly, they need to know they can reach every student family,” Vaid says.

ParentSquare partners

ParentSquare is made possible through several technology services and

applications. The team uses Ruby on Rails for development, Google products for translations, and Twilio for district communication, among others.

Powered by Amazon Web Services (AWS), ParentSquare provides a range of communication tools and analytics, contactability data included. Amazon Redshift and QuickSight provide business intelligence, while Amazon CloudFront helps distribute media assets. Other AWS essentials include CloudFormation for deployments and infrastructure configurations, Simple Queue Service for application communication, and Relational Database Service for main operational data store.

“AWS has products and solutions to fit almost all our areas of need,” Vaid says. “Anytime we need support — from a solutions architect to marketing — we can reach out. And we know as our company grows, we’ll never outgrow the solution.”

Communicating on a unified platform

MSD Wayne Township rolled out ParentSquare not long before the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools shut down and students shifted to remote learning. Butts says ParentSquare left schools well prepared to manage all the additional communication that came with that transition.

“Had we not had the capability to communicate as easily and frequently as we did with ParentSquare, we wouldn’t have had nearly the success

in getting meals, technology, and assignments to children and their families,” Butts says. “Families also needed to reach out to teachers individually. ParentSquare was critical in providing that secure line of communication.”

As students came back to the classroom, teachers reported other improvements. For example, the district had 100% engagement during parent conference week.

“ParentSquare has been extremely valuable in making sure we connect with every single parent,” Butts says. “Whether it’s in person or virtual communication, it’s been a vital tool for engagement and for the ease in which we are able to have conversations, especially with our non-English-speaking families.”

Looking ahead, MSD Wayne Township plans to improve connectivity for families with spotty or no Wi-Fi access. It also plans to streamline communication to ensure messages don’t get lost in inboxes.

“There’s so much information that comes at people today so quickly,” Butts says. “One of the things we’re working hard on is to make sure we clearly identify those messages that are important, so that they can get those messages about their children, the school, and the district, and stay as engaged in their children’s education as possible.”

This piece was written and produced by the Center for Digital Education Content Studio, with information and input from AWS and ParentSquare.

¹ http://www.centerforeducationalequity.org/events-page/equity-in-education-forum-series/past-events/reframing-family-involvement-supporting-families-to-support-educational-equity/11924_ExecSumm_Vol5.pdf

² <https://www.parentsquare.com/engage/communications-future-survey/>



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ParentSquare is relied upon by millions of educators and families in 48 states for unified, effective school communications. ParentSquare provides parent engagement tools that work from the district office to the individual classroom, supported by powerful metrics and reporting. ParentSquare’s technology platform features extensive integrations with student information and other critical administrative systems, translation to more than 100 languages, and app, email, text, voice, and web portal access for equitable communication. ParentSquare (<http://www.parentsquare.com>), founded in 2011, is based in Santa Barbara, CA.