ParentSquare

Best Practice Guide

Effective Family Communications: From Content to Cadence

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The Challenge: Effective Communications

Effectively communicating with families has never been more important, but many districts are finding it increasingly difficult to connect with key stakeholders. Why?

School is usually one commitment out of many for busy families, and school communications can easily get buried among everyday responsibilities. If schools and districts send uncoordinated messages from too many places and too often, it's easy for parents and guardians to experience message fatigue and stop listening. Combine that with message content that is inconsistent, wordy, or disorganized, and you have a recipe for communication difficulties.

The results of ineffective communications are far-reaching. Districts and schools don't know which families are and are not receiving messages, let alone paying attention and taking action if necessary.

In turn, this translates to low response rates for requests from districts, schools, and teachers for things like supplies and volunteers. And without insight into details like a parent or guardian's preferred language, an institution can't provide equitable access to information relating to students—furthering the communications divide.

This guide focuses on the critical components of effective family communications—content and cadence—and will walk you through the best practices for each. You'll get practical tips on how to make your messages actionable and absorbable throughout the school year. Whether you're new to school-home communications or a veteran just interested in a refresher, the following steps can help you focus on what works in K-12.

Here are some important things to consider when evaluating your current communications efforts.

The Key Questions

Whether you have a long-standing communications plan or implemented one in response to the pandemic, now is the time to inventory and review communications practices across your school or district to determine their effectiveness. Here are 10 fundamental questions to ask yourself about your current communications, from the district to the classroom level. We'll help you answer these as we go.

Content

1. Who is communicating? Have you checked with each department or school to find out?
2. What are they communicating? Are they sending urgent and short alerts, long detailed messages about activities, regular newsletters from teachers, and/or something else?
3. Do you have communications guidelines? Who updates them and trains staff?

Target Audience & Cadence

4. Who is your audience? Is it all parents, or, for example, is it just parents of first graders?
5. What time of day are you sending communications? Is it throughout the day, during evenings and weekends, or both?
6. How many and how often are messages being sent? Do you send daily, weekly, or monthly communications from district leaders, administrators, teachers, PTA, etc.?

Measure & Adjust

7. What tools are you using, and do administrators have oversight into what's being said? Are you able to audit past interactions or respond to external information requests?
8. Do you know who's receiving, opening and responding to your communications? Is there a single dashboard or place to see the impact of your messages?
9. Are parents/guardians satisfied with your communications, and how do you know?
10. How would your teachers and other staff rate the current quality of your communications?

Can you answer all 10 questions? It takes time and effort to audit what's being communicated across your district or school, as it can involve multiple platforms and levels of communication. However, it's essential to understand your entire school-home communications ecosystem, so you can identify gaps and prioritize areas for improvement.

You can't get to where you want to be unless you know where you are now. The more details you have, the more you can impact messaging, structure, branding, scheduling, and other factors we'll cover ahead.

Step One: Make Your Content Easy to Absorb and Act On

1 2 3

It's a good idea to determine who is sending communications to families throughout your district or school and what the content covers. This can be as simple as sending out a survey to all staff, including those responsible for curriculum and assessment, technology, family engagement, and principals and classroom teachers. Your questions for staff might include:

- Do you send communications of any type to parents/guardians or students?
- What form do they take? Text message, messaging app, email, classroom blog, social media site, paper flyer, etc.?
- What type of things do you communicate—what's the usual content?
- How often do you send communications?
- Do you coordinate your communications with any other staff members or departments?

Once you know the who, you can improve the what.

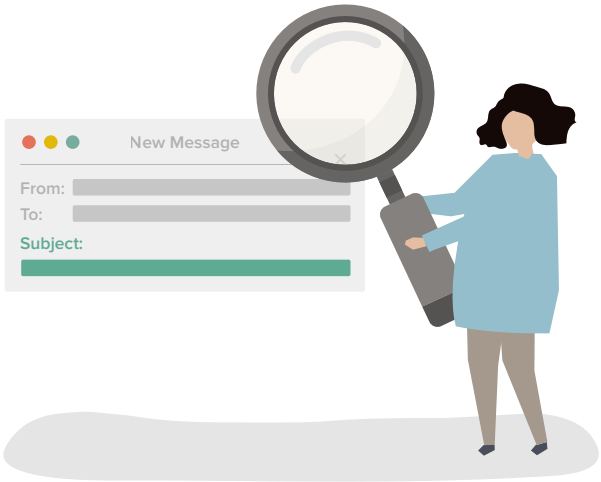
Whether you're sending an update for the week or requesting district forms, make it as easy as possible for your audience to absorb the information and act on it when necessary.

Here are some best practices we recommend that you master and embed into your communications guidelines and training programs. Remember, communicating with families is one of the many responsibilities that staff and teachers have. Help make communications as easy as possible with these simple yet powerful tips.

Give Your Subject Line a Lot of Thought

We've all seen them—bad subject lines that fall flat and get lost in the sea of emails and app notifications competing for attention. If the subject lines for your communications are generic, confusing, or require a second glance, then chances are you may lose parents before they even open your message. What's specific, wins.

To maximize opened emails, give your audience some clues as to what your message is about and what you're expecting them to do with it.



Check your subject line:

- Is it easy to absorb?
- Does it accurately communicate the topic so readers will open it?
- Will it translate to other languages?
- Can readers tell if a response or other action is required?

Here are some examples of how to take a subject line from boring and vague to eye-catching and informative.

Instead of this:	Try This:
Principal's Update	Welcome Back, Students! Events, Class Change Requests, Clubs
Back-to-School Night	RSVP: Back-to-School Night, Tue, Sept 14th
Lincoln USD November Update	Lincoln USD in November: College Night & Important December Dates
News From Ms. Johnson	Ms. Johnson's Class: Field Trip Photos, Weekend Enrichment, Volunteering

Organize and Focus Your Message

In addition to a punchy subject line, the body of your message is critical for conveying information. Reading, understanding, and engaging with your communications shouldn't be a time-consuming task for busy parents and guardians. Long paragraphs of plain text take valuable time to read and understand, and they're sure to fatigue parents and make them less likely to engage and act.

Here are seven writing tips for easy-to-absorb, engaging messages.

- Is the essential information at the top of the message, with more details available for those who want them?
- Do you have a clear call to action? What do you want people to do with your information?
- Is it visually easy to absorb? Use section headers, bulleted lists, and bolded text, so information stands out.
- Is it interesting to look at? The days of compelling clip art are long past; try using video, images, emojis, and color.
- Is your tone right for your message and audience? Does it need to be more formal (yet clear) for staff or more friendly (and warm) for parents?
- Before sending to everyone, have you sent a test to yourself to make sure your message looks good? Do images, paragraphs, and line breaks show up correctly?
- Do you avoid K-12 jargon, as well as idioms and expressions that parents may not understand?

Which of these two posts would you prefer to receive?

Before you send a message to parents or guardians, consider what kind of message you would want to receive. One that lacks enthusiasm, lacks details, and is full of long paragraphs? Or one that shows excitement and has specific information, clear-cut expectations, and positive reinforcement broken down into digestible bullet points and sentences? Probably the latter. Take a look at these two very different posts to understand better how to structure and write your messages to resonate with families.

Instead of this...

Subject Line: Homework

Hello Parents,

I sent home an assignment for students today about fractions. The assignment covers how to add, subtract, divide, and multiply fractions. They should have it completed by tomorrow morning because they are going to start our next math unit, decimals, after this worksheet is completed. Fractions can be a challenging, onerous, and difficult activity for some students, so I wish them luck with the assignment. Learning fractions is actually a very essential part of our curriculum, as students will be tested on them on the state tests at the end of the year. I explained the assignment to them in class, so they should be able to get most of it done without much help. If they have questions, they can ask me in class tomorrow, or you can email me ASAP.

Thanks,

Ms. Smith, 5th Grade, Lincoln Elementary

Try this...

Subject Line: Information and Tips for Tonight's Fraction Assignment

Hello, Room 20 families!

This year is off to a great start. I am so grateful for all of your hard work so far!

This week, we are learning about **fractions**. I sent home an assignment about fractions with your students that you should try to **complete by tomorrow morning**. For your reference, I have attached a copy of the assignment here.

This assignment is about:

- Multiplying fractions
- Adding fractions
- Dividing fractions
- Subtracting fractions

I have included a video here that covers what I expect from your student in this assignment.

You can do this! I know that this can be a difficult subject for students, but we will go over the assignment on Wednesday, so do not worry if you get stuck on some questions. I am always here to help!

Sincerely,

Ms. Smith, Room 20, Lincoln Elementary

Use Consistent Branding and Structure

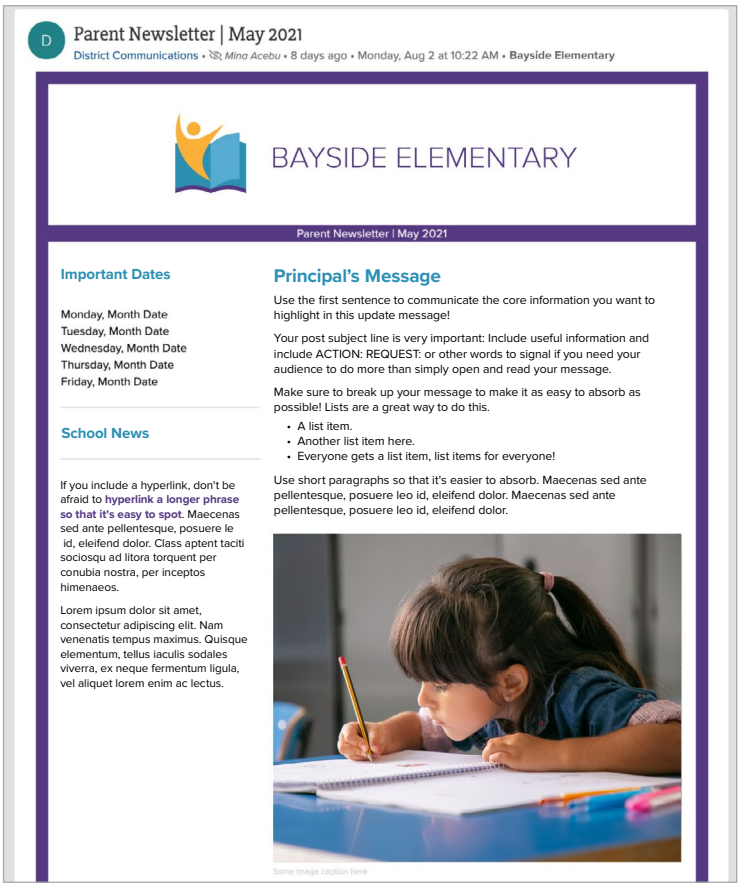
Communications regularly sent—such as district newsletters, principal messages, or classroom updates—can benefit from consistent visual branding and structure.

Why is branding important? There is lots of information competing for your families' attention every day. Thoughtful branding helps you break through the clutter, so your communications are immediately recognizable and delight your school community.

Templates are a great way to make consistently branded and well-structured communications possible for everyone who sends them. They can help administrators, educators, and other staff save time and stick to content best practices, which you can include in your templates.

Templates

With ParentSquare, you can create custom, branded templates with an easy-to-use drag and drop interface and make them accessible to your principals, teachers and/or staff across all school sites.



This monthly newsletter template includes tips and best practices so staff can produce great newsletters all the time.

Get Everyone on the Same Page: Guidelines & Training

Now that you have consistent branding and some structure, make sure your teams know how to use them properly. That's a matter of guidelines and training. Consider doing the following to get your teams up to speed on what's expected for district or school communications:

- Develop a set of simple, clear guidelines that highlight best practices for subject lines and content organization. Plus outline appropriate use of key elements, like district or school logos and student photos, preferred fonts, and any approval process for more sensitive or far-reaching communications.
- Then train key people in each department and building. Make them your communications champions, staff who can train others and answer ongoing questions or help you evaluate your communications efforts throughout the year.

And don't forget, communications needs change, and there is unavoidable staff turnover. Consider scheduling an annual refresher course to re-train the trainers.

Resource: Match Your Mode to the Message

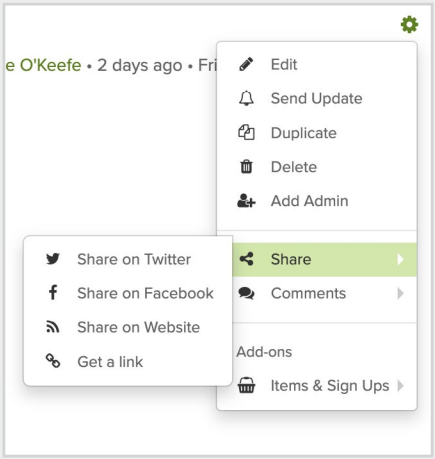
Before sending your next communication, consider what mode is best for the type of message. Some common examples are in the chart below. In all cases, consider the length of a message, whether it's urgent, if it has to support an attachment (like video or a PDF), if you need a response, and if it's for just the school or a broader community audience. While many modes may seem to work for a particular communication, it doesn't mean they're the best modes. The right mode helps families easily understand and act on messages.

ParentSquare can support many types of messages sent using modes like SMS text, voice, app, email, website, and social media.

Emergency Alerts	Email	Text Msg	App/Portal	Website	Social	Voice Call
Weekly Newsletters	Email		App/Portal	Website	Social	
Forms/Permission Slips	Email	Text Msg	App/Portal			
Progress Reports/Letters	Email	Text Msg				
Conversation About Student	Email	Text Msg				
PTO/Booster Info	Email		App/Portal			

Website, Social Share

Sharing district and school news across Twitter, Facebook, and your website has never been easier with ParentSquare's Social Share feature. Designated ParentSquare administrators can publicly share ParentSquare posts via social and websites to amplify important messages.



Step Two: Set Your Target and a Smart Communications Cadence

4 5 6

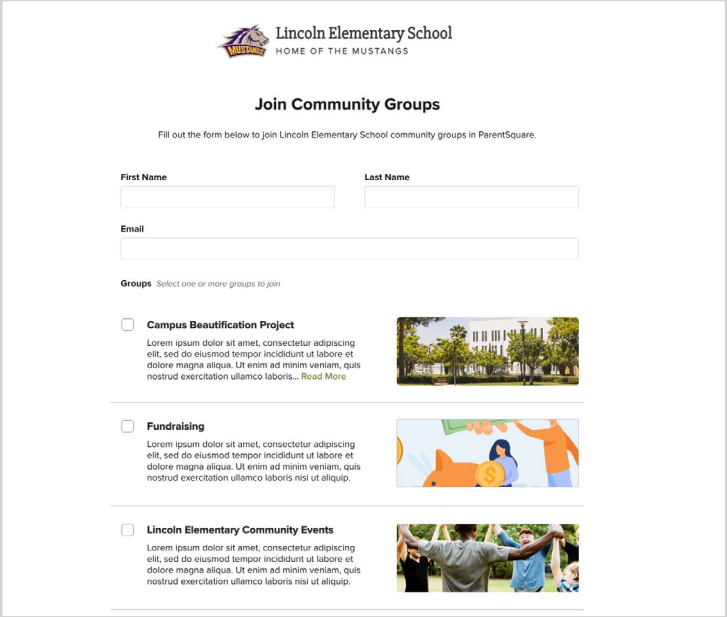
While blanket messaging can work in many cases, it's also important to determine if and when to target your messages. Sometimes you may have specific information that only applies to certain audiences—not every parent in a K-12 district may need to know about elementary school night.

Here are some suggested steps you can take to improve your targeting and increase engagement:

- Use your Student Information System (SIS) to build distribution lists by teacher, section, grade level, campus—can you sync contact data with your communications platform to keep groups up to date?
- Translate your messages to ensure you're reaching all parents/guardians if they prefer to receive communications in a language other than English.
- Set up additional groups for special interests like athletics, extracurricular activities, PTO/PTA, community opportunities, and booster club, then allow parents to opt out/opt in if they wish.

Community Groups

Tell even more of your community about what's important to your district or school with ParentSquare Community Groups. Community members can sign up for communications on an external, district or school-branded webpage in as many categories as a ParentSquare district or school desires, such as fundraisers, after-school programs, school sporting events, alumni gatherings, and so much more.



Don't Bombard Parents With Too Many Messages, Too Close Together

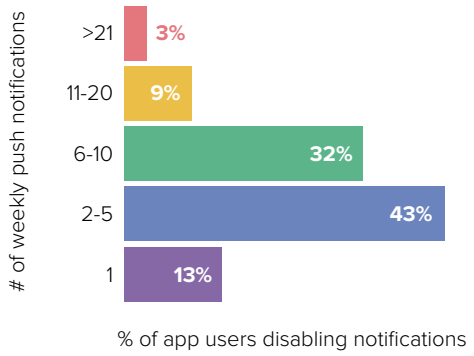
After a long day at work, how do you feel when it's time to clear all the emails, text messages, and app notifications you received that day—less than enthusiastic? If an organization floods you with messages, how long does it take to block, mute, or turn off app notifications? Probably not long.

Parents deserve the same consideration. While they may not unsubscribe from an email or block all school notifications, too many interruptions can hurt parent satisfaction and dampen their willingness to engage. Critical messages also risk getting lost if too many uncoordinated announcements are competing for attention.

Optimizing the volume and timing of regular school-home communications is a powerful way to increase parent engagement and reduce the risk of message fatigue.

How many weekly push notifications from one app will cause you to disable notifications for it?

In a survey from Help Lama, an online customer support company, they discovered that it only takes **2-5 push notifications a week** for the majority of users to turn off their notifications.



Consolidate Communications for Fewer Interruptions

What volume of school-home communications goes out on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis? Consider messages from the attendance office, district leaders, principals, teachers, counselors, sports teams, the PTO/PTA, room parents, etc. It can add up fast.

One strategy to reduce message fatigue is consolidation. Consider grouping regular communications into a single, daily message for your families to review all at once. A unified communications platform like ParentSquare can support this automatically. Or, consider a manual process at the district or school level, like a centrally managed daily bulletin. Both are effective ways to consolidate messaging.

ParentSquare Digest Setting

Empower your families by encouraging them to choose when and how they want to receive routine school communications. Parents and guardians can personalize their notification settings to receive all messages in one batch early each evening. While parents can't override emergency announcements, the digest feature is especially helpful for parents with multiple children at different schools using ParentSquare.

Pay Attention to Your Timing

Do you know what time of day works best for communicating with busy families? Rather than immediately sending messages that aren't time-sensitive throughout the day, identify the best time windows and schedule your communications to maximize attention and interaction. Many districts and schools schedule messages for 6 p.m. or later when working parents are likely to be home and family members together.

Don't forget to also take into consideration the time of year. Sending a survey or permission slip right before families are off for winter break or a long holiday weekend may guarantee that it gets overlooked and requires yet another message—or reminder—later.

To identify the best time of day to send regular announcements, look at your message, consider typical parent, home, or work schedules in your area, and/or ask families about their communication preferences.

Establish a Regular Schedule (Daily, Weekly, Monthly)

When should parents and families expect to hear from you? Create a regular communications schedule so announcements are expected and don't seem like interruptions.

Having an agreed-upon, regular schedule across your district or school also reduces the risk of too many uncoordinated messages arriving on the same day, which can overwhelm families.

Here are some suggested steps for effective scheduling:

- Identify regularly recurring communications categories (superintendent's update, principal's update, classroom memos, community resources, plus routine messages from athletic teams, PTO/PTA, after-school clubs, etc.).
- Collaborate with the appropriate staff members to agree on daily, weekly, or monthly timing and a schedule.
- Measure and improve cadence by getting feedback, adapting, and adjusting until everyone—including parents—are on the same page and satisfied.

Step Three: Measure & Adjust

7 8 9 10

Earlier, you did an inventory of your current communications. By now, you should have a better idea of how to make your content easy to absorb and act on, target your audience, and set a smart communications cadence. Now it's time to consider how to measure and adjust your communications efforts on an ongoing basis.

The Importance of Communications Insight

If you're using multiple communications tools, then it's critical that you have oversight, analytics, and reporting capabilities. For example, district and school leaders should have the administrative ability to audit or pull a record of communications if necessary. Not only does this help protect all parties involved, but it also allows leadership to see how teachers, for example, are communicating with their classes and highlight a job well done.

If you're using a unified or primary platform for all levels of communication, make sure you understand your analytics and reporting dashboards. Without analytics and reporting, you can't truly measure the effectiveness of your communications efforts—making it difficult to ensure communications equity. Analytics and reporting dashboards can help you:

How many messages are your parents receiving from everyone across your school or district?

ParentSquare's in-depth dashboards with data insights and analytics can help you quickly and effectively take stock of how your communications are performing.

- Identify who's receiving, opening, and responding to communications. If you notice parents are not opening or engaging with your communications, you can identify alternative ways to get in touch with them (like a personal phone call or home visit).
- Pull impact reports and pinpoint communications trends and correlations.
- Better plan and adjust your messaging based on how many people engaged with it.

It's especially important to know exactly what's being measured. For example, take contactability. When you see a 5% email bounce rate, don't assume 5% of parents are unreachable. It's a possibility that they still received the message, but via text or app notification instead. Measure by taking all channels into account, and fill the holes first for those families that are not receiving notifications by any channel.

Robust oversight, analytics, and reporting will allow you to make data-informed decisions and strategically guide your communications goals.

Gauging Parent/Guardian Communications Satisfaction

You may find that many of your parents/guardians open and act on your communications, but do you know if they're satisfied with them? Now that we've addressed the key factors that go into effective communications, it's time to find out how happy your parents really are so you can keep improving on those efforts.

Here are three ways to gauge parent/guardian communications satisfaction:

- Send out an annual communications survey to all parents (be specific with your questions and allow space for additional feedback at the end).
- Issue periodic polls throughout the school year to see how your communications are measuring up. Ongoing data allows for continuous improvement and helps you spot any situations affecting parents' satisfaction early so you can act before it impacts more parents.
- Create a parent focus group to give you important insight and feedback—review communications together. Go the extra mile by facilitating a group discussion with your ELL families and a translator as well.

These ideas also apply to how you might internally rate the current quality of your communications. Surveying staff annually, periodic polling, and staff focus groups (be sure to involve your communications champions) can be especially helpful in determining the quality of your communications. Remember, communications are a team effort—internal opinions and sentiment are just as important as external feedback.

Every district and school will have its unique messages that families need to receive and react to. However, with a smart approach—including training, monitoring, adjusting, and staying flexible—it is possible to have a successful communication plan no matter what challenges this school year or any other presents.

> "When we recognize our parents as necessary and important partners, it's easy to maintain a positive tone with them. Let your parents know that they're important. Tell them that. Always maintain an upbeat tone, especially when it's the hardest."
>
> **TONY WILLIAMS, INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY LEADER**

About ParentSquare™

This best practice guide was developed by ParentSquare, the leading provider of modern family and community engagement solutions for K-12 schools. Millions of educators and families in 49 states rely on the multipurpose unified platform that includes mass notifications, classroom communications, school websites, and other communication-based services, all supported by visual dashboards. ParentSquare's technology platform features comprehensive integrations with school administrative systems, translation to more than 100 languages, and app, email, text, voice, and web portal access for equitable communication. Founded in 2011, the company is headquartered in Santa Barbara, CA.

If you're ready to discover the power of more effective school-home communications for your district or school, **click here** to schedule a ParentSquare demo or call **1-888-996-4156** to speak with our team.