



Using school websites to support parent engagement

This school website supports community outreach and helps families establish home environments to support their children as students.

A middle school of 1,000 students is a busy place. With dwindling resources and increased accountability, a well-designed school website is vital. Students and parents visit high quality websites through a variety of devices and expect equally high quality school-to-home communication. With the support of a professional web design company, our new school website attracts the attention of parents, and supports outreach and engagement both on the school campus and in the community.

Framework for parent involvement

Joyce Epstein studies and builds parent partnership programs. Over the course of her research, she developed a framework of six types of parent involvement (Epstein, 2001). Our school website is designed to support each of these types of involvement.

1. Parenting: Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.

Our goal is to make school information accessible to all parents, not just our “regulars” who are often at the school. One of the

challenges identified by Epstein is to provide information to all families who want it. A recent survey showed that 87 percent of our families have Internet access via a home computer or smartphone. The staff demonstrates the school website to students and parents during the first month of school. Teachers and administrators conduct ongoing training throughout the school year.

A slide show of student pictures cycles through the banner regularly. Our staff works to make sure that all groups of students are represented on the banner slide-show and changes the photos weekly. Students share the website with parents to show off their photos.

The link to our student information system is prominently displayed on the home page. The website designer enabled cookies, so that once a parent signs in with their student information system username and password, the website will remember the login information for them each time they return to the site.

In the counseling section of the website, information about contacts for parent support and links to the websites of local support agencies are provided.

2. Communicating: Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school programs and student progress.

Epstein advocates for many ways of communicating with parents. We mail letters home and regularly send automated phone calls. The school website is an additional mode to communicate with parents and families. Some parents subscribe to dynamic calendar updates using iCal or RSS feeds; others simply check the website calendar on a regular basis.

We attach documents to calendar events using the file hosting service. For example, chaperones attach all field trip permission slips to the calendar item so parents can access them regardless of the state of their child’s backpack. In contrast to a printed calendar that is obsolete by the time it arrives home, the dynamic calendar of the school website is always accurate, even with unexpected changes in schedules.

Our website supports parents who may not easily access curricular materials be-

By Tracy Piper

cause of language or reading barriers. The Google translate feature at the bottom of the home page translates the entire website into a wide range of home languages. Parents who have difficulty seeing or reading the webpage can select larger or different color fonts to make the text accessible.

The parents' ability to communicate with the school is as important as our ability to communicate with parents. All teacher emails are hyper-linked to their teacher pages and all information pages include live links to the staff member responsible for coordinating the activity or program. For example, a visit to the debate team's page includes a link to the debate coach's email address to ease communication.

A banner feature includes up-to-the-minute announcements, and the news feed shows upcoming events.

3. Volunteering: Recruit and organize parent help and support.

Volunteers are anyone who "supports school goals and children's learning or development in any way, at any place, and at any time – not just during the school day and at the school building," according to Epstein.

A dedicated parent volunteer page is included in the website. On this page, parents view participation opportunities and sign up to help at school. For upcoming events, the supervising staff member generates a list of parent volunteers to ensure they are welcomed at the door and given visitor's passes identifying their duties on campus.

Parent volunteer opportunities include everything from chaperoning dances and helping with lunchtime supervision to helping out in the library or classroom. The digital media class creates a parent volunteer of the month feature for the website to highlight the activities of the parents who make a contribution to the success of students or the school.

Some parents do not volunteer at the school, but support students in other ways. Our staff trains local community service organizations, including the public library, the Boys and Girls Club and local sports groups, to provide information on the website to parents and community members. A

parent survey, offered one week per month, asks parents about their volunteer availability and feedback.

4. Learning at home: Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning.

Each teacher displays his or her course



guidelines and expectations on a teacher page. The hosting service supports document and video attachments. Each teacher uploads class documents, such as syllabi and class expectations, assignments and videos to support their students' achievement. These pages honor the needs of working parents and parents with a lower level of education by providing them tools to help their children with homework.

School-wide instructional initiatives are highlighted on the webpage on a monthly basis. To support increased rigor in the classroom, the district-wide Thinking Maps implementation is highlighted through a Thinking Map of the month item in the principal's letter. The digital technology class videotapes the principal modeling Thinking Maps to help parents support their students at home.

The school subscribes to a number of web-based curricular programs. Among them is Achieve3000. The Achieve3000 link is among the first seen on the home page.

Students establish an account at school. The school provides training so that parents can open their own account and improve their reading skills.

Using the program, parents and students hone their reading and writing skills through reading selections tailored to the reader's lexile level. The program provides guiding questions to help parents discuss homework reading selections with students.

Again, the cookies feature allows parents to set up a login username and password and the website will automatically populate these fields when the parent signs on from the same computer or device.

Placement tests drive accelerated math class placement, and the website provides links to study materials and extra practice for placement tests. Two math teachers are piloting "flipped instruction" curricula by posting video lectures on their teacher pages on the website. With this method of instruction, students can go back and review a lecture multiple times until they understand the material, while spending class time working on problems and projects with teacher support.

5. Decision making: Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.

All school parent committees, including the School Site Council, English Learners Advisory Committee, and the Parent

Teacher Group, have dedicated links on the website that include agendas and minutes. As part of a federal review, a survey regarding the parent-student-teacher Title 1 compact provides input on the document.

Students serving on school and civic committees post updates on the website monthly. Weekly surveys and annual Title 1 surveys are featured on the website. Staff members schedule monthly open computer time for parents to complete surveys and provide feedback.

Decision-making opportunities and results are shared on the website. These items



provide valuable feedback to teachers, administration and staff on parents' perspectives on the school. The information is two-way between the school and families to build strong partnerships.

6. Collaborating with the community: Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

Our families come primarily from Palm Springs, but we also serve a large number of students who transfer from surrounding communities. Community service opportunities, including not only the immediate

community but also the broader area influenced by our school community, are posted on the website to provide all students the opportunity to give back to the school and local community. The community service coordinator maintains sign-up sheets to inform other organizations of community service volunteers scheduled for specific events.

As a public website, all community members are encouraged to interact with the school electronically through a "contact us" link.

Engaging parent participation

Our school website enhances traditional types of parent communication and engagement. Through the website, the school communicates with and supports parents. The website provides tools for all parents to support the achievement of their children. Lastly, parents communicate with the school regularly through the website links, creating a partnership between our families and the school.

For up-to-the-minute parent participation and engagement, a dynamic school website is, indeed, the bomb. ■

References

Epstein, Joyce L. (2001). *School, family, and community Partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Tracy Piper is principal of Raymond Cree Middle School in Palm Springs.

Technology finds its place

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support critical services, with the goal of spending increased amounts of their time on the ultimate goal – technology-enhanced instruction and student learning.

A time of optimism

For these three districts in Silicon Valley, it's a good time. A time of expanding options and optimism, a time of seeing technology impact learning in natural, welcome ways. Each district faces its challenges. Some

themes are similar, others unique to the setting. Yet with each, there is an energy, a passion, and a belief that the more the conversation is about learning, the more technology finally has found its place. ■

Editor's note: Randy Phelps is now with the Eastside Union School District.

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