



Partners for Education
BEREA COLLEGE

2-WAY COMMUNICATION

- *The Research*
- *Tools and Tips*
- *Sample Plans and Messages*
- *Especially for Middle School*
- *Rewards for You*
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FOR YOUR PLCs

in person or virtual

facilitated by

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THE RESEARCH

Thanks to the work of Harvard professor Todd Rogers and his team, we know more than ever before about effective communication with families. Rogers describes messages as a “tax” on caregivers’ time¹. In and out of school, we all receive too many emails, too many text messages, too many EVERYTHING every day. Rogers and his team have found effective ways to help parents be willing to “pay the tax” of reading and responding to a message from teachers.

Keep messages short – The shorter and more skimmable a message is, the more likely families are to read it. Decide on the absolute “must have” information in your message. Cut everything that’s not a must-have.

Messages should use every day and simple English – Many adults struggle to read at the high school level or above. Ideally, messages to families should be written at a fourth grade level for universal accessibility. If adjusting the readability of a text is new to you, use a tool like <https://www.wordcalc.com/readability/>. Leave out educational jargon and acronyms. Even for highly literate parents, educational jargon is a barrier.

Messages should give the family an action to take – People like to feel that they have something to do with the information being given. Actions can be as simple as:

- *Please check your student’s grades and help them come up with a plan to turn in missing work.*
- *We are writing newspaper articles this week. Ask your student what topic they chose and why.*
- *Come to the school spaghetti dinner and be sure to stop by my classroom to say hello.*

Messages should be chunked out for different subjects – Try to keep to one topic per message. It seems like families might want to receive all the information they need in one big message. Rogers’s research is clear that parents are more likely to read messages that have just one subject. To keep from overwhelming your families with messages, work with your team to create a communications calendar.

Messages should be scheduled and predictable – Parents are more likely to open and read a message if they are used to receiving messages on a predictable schedule. For example, if you send out a brief message every Monday evening, families will know to expect that message and they’ll get into the habit of reading it. You can use your communications platforms to schedule messages well in advance so that you don’t have to commit to being on your computer at the same time every week.

Messages should appear on mobile devices – Like the rest of us, families are dependent on their phones. Rogers’ research shows that parents are more likely to open text messages than other messages².

¹ [todd rogers - write shorter messages - the boston globe.pdf \(harvard.edu\)](#)

² [Thinking About Texting Parents? Best Practices for School-to-Parent Texting \(Opinion\) \(edweek.org\)](#)

TOOLS FOR MESSAGING

Infinite Campus Or Another Platform Tied To Infinite Campus

Pros	Cons
Lists of your classes and their contacts are either already generated or easy to create	Not user-friendly. Lots of screens and tabs to click through
Most platforms let you schedule messages in advance	If phone numbers and email addresses aren't accurate in IC, your messages won't go through
Track data about who opens and reads your messages so you can reach out to specific families without access	If families are already burnt out on communications through district platforms, they won't open messages
Saves your messages so that you can use the same templates every year and save yourself time	Teachers may need to ask school leaders for access to platforms
School-wide consistency so families don't have to remember different platforms.	
Some platforms let you send out a phone call, email, and a text which helps you reach all families in your classes	
Message history gives you a "paper trail" for communications with families when needed	

Your school gmail account

Pros	Cons
Convenient and familiar to both you and your families.	You must remember to send messages to classes by BCC so that families do not accidentally "reply all" and reveal private student information
Easy to share links from google drive	Many adults do not check email regularly, so this is not the best platform for urgent messages
Takes the least time once you have lists for your classes set up	
Schedule messages days and weeks in advance so that you're not tied to your computer	

Remind and other text messaging apps

Pros	Cons
Protects your privacy so that families don't have your personal number	If teachers in your school are using different apps, parents get frustrated about remembering how to contact each teacher
Saves your message history in case you need to show a message stream to your principal. More secure than screenshots from your phone	Can be difficult to convey complex information in a brief message
Allows you to schedule "office hours" so that you are not getting message notifications around the clock	Don't use WhatsApp or other personal messaging platforms because they don't save your message history in the same way as an app specifically for educators
Families can easily update their phone numbers so that messages get through	

SAMPLE COMMUNICATION PLAN

Be sure to check your school's communication plan before making your personal communication plan.

Sample Plan

Time	Action
August	Introductory Communication – Tell your families about yourself. Give an overview of what students will learn this year in plain English. List ways for families to contact you with questions. Invite families to share information about their student with you.
Weekly	Schedule a weekly message about the upcoming week. This message should not take you more than 2 minutes to write. Samples are on the next page.
January	Reintroduce yourself to families. You will have new students since the beginning of the year, and your “old” families may have forgotten a lot of the information from August. Make sure you include your contact information and encourage families to reach out to you with any concerns.
May	Thank your families for the time their student has spent in your classroom. Share school contact information which they may need over the summer (front office, FRYSC, guidance, etc.)

Weekly Message Templates

IC platforms and texting apps will store your messages so that you can use them again and again. If you're using gmail, a google doc can help you save your templates. Bolding phrases makes the most important information "pop."

October 11, 2021 – 6th grade English

What we're reading: We are finishing our unit on *Holes*. All students should be finished reading the book by this Friday.

What families can do to support learning: If your student is behind on their reading, you can help them make a plan to get back on track.

Life Skills: We've been learning about how to use a planner to plan our studying. Here's a link to an article for families about how students can use a planner in middle school: [How Planners Help Students Learn Organizational Skills](#)

If you have any questions or concerns, I'm here! **I update grades on the parent portal every Friday afternoon.** You can reach me at 555-5555 or by replying to this email.

Mr. Smith

October 11, 2021 – 7th grade social studies

What we're studying: the economic systems of the Incas

What you can do to support learning: Ask your student to tell you about one part of the Incan system that is completely unlike our own and one part that is like our own.

Life Skills: We learned how to use a **unit study guide to study for a test.** Help your child set aside some time this week to use the guide to study for our test on Monday.

If you have any questions or concerns, I'm here! You can reach me at 555-5555 or by replying to this email. I will have grades posted for our unit test by next Friday. If you have concerns about your student's grades for the nine weeks, please schedule a conference by replying to this email.

Ms. Harris

ESPECIALLY FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL

- Evidence suggests **teenagers value their parents' opinions.**³ Positive communications home, especially phone calls or notes, are as important to students and their families as they were in elementary school.
- According to recent research by Bachman et. al., there are two key messages to convey to middle school families, **“It’s essential to support your young adolescent’s learning; you just have to do it differently”** and **“It’s essential to provide structure and support for your young adolescent’s growing independence.”**⁴
- As you teach important life/school skills like note-taking, using a planner, or studying for a unit test, send communications to your families which can help **parents reinforce those skills at home.** (See sample messages on the previous page).
- Homework can be a big source of conflict for middle schoolers and their families. **Students are more likely to do better on homework when the adult in their home is able to maintain a positive attitude** during homework time. Regular, two-way communication about homework with your families will help you tweak homework plans so that they lead to student success.
- Adjusting to the middle school transition and a young adolescent’s new phase of life can throw families and students for a loop. By regularly communicating with families, you can help ease the transition. **An easier transition to middle school makes your life as a teacher easier, too.**
- Families don’t like to be surprised to learn that a student is failing a middle school class. By communicating school and district information about using a **parent portal and by keeping your grade book up to date,** you will solve most problems before they start.

³ [The Influence of Parents on Teenagers is Real. And More Than You Think.](#)

⁴ [The Role of Parents During the Middle School Years: Strategies for Teachers to Support Middle School Family Engagement](#)

REWARDS OF COMMUNICATION FOR YOU

The last several pages have been technical and dry, with tips and tricks for whole group communication. These best practices will help promote achievement in your classroom. They are not necessarily things that give YOU personal satisfaction and help you enjoy your job more. Here are some practices that can remind you why you got into teaching and make your year more enjoyable.

3 positive phone calls a week

Set a goal to make 3 positive phone calls home each week. Families like to receive texts for information, but there is nothing like a personal call from a teacher telling them something positive about their child. Most of the time, you will need to leave voicemails. Don't get discouraged because that voicemail is still meaningful to the family. Occasionally, you will get to speak to a parent and hear how much it means to them to hear something good about their child from the school. Begin working through your roster in September. If you get to the end, start again. **Just three phone calls a week! Don't burn yourself out by trying to do more.**

OR

3 families a semester for personal communication

Take a moment to think deeply about your classes. Who do you worry about in the evenings after you leave school? Which students do you think are at risk of disconnecting to school? Who has too many absences? Whose behavior often disrupts the class? Who do you see trying, but struggling? Choose three of those students and make a commitment to build a partnership with their caring adults. Make regular positive phone calls to the parents/guardians. Commit to working together to improve behavior, attendance, etc. Personally invite the families to school events so that they feel welcome. Ask questions about their child and their family. As you build this partnership, the difference you see in the student will make you feel good about your work. **It can be tough to limit yourself to 3 families when you have over 100 students, but it's important to set limits so you don't burn out.**

TROUBLESHOOTING

Families complain about getting too many communications from the school: “I get an email, phone call, and text for everything! It’s too much!”

- Explain that most school platforms don’t allow families or schools to choose their preferred way of communication, and that’s why they get messages on all devices. Explain that the school sends texts, phone calls, and emails because many families can only get one kind of message. Thank them for sharing all of their contact information with the school since that allows the front office to contact them quickly in case of an emergency. Thank them for putting up with different types of messages so that all families can get communications.
- Afterwards, work with your team to make sure you’re streamlining the number of messages you send.

I don’t speak the same language as some of my students’ families

- Always look for ways to avoid asking a student to interpret for their family.
- Work with your school’s ELL teacher. They may be able to help.
- When talking with the family without an interpreter, use your phone’s translate app when you run into confusion
- Use google translate to translate written communications you are sending home. Make sure your families know that you’re using an app and there are likely to be some errors.
- Talking Points is a free app similar to remind that lets you message families and get responses in over 100 languages. Go to [TalkingPoints](#) to set up an account.

We have a lot of grandparents as parents in our school, and they don’t respond to my messages.

- Grandfamilies need a warm, personal welcome from the school to know that they are wanted. They are often experiencing grief or shame about the situations that led them to become guardians of their grandchildren. They need to know that you really want to hear from them.
- School has changed a lot since the grandparents were children. Whenever possible, make your classroom as transparent as possible for them so that they know how to help their student.
- Many grandparents are young and tech-savvy. Others face real technological barriers and require personal attention to connect with you.
- Use inclusive language with your students and with your families. Grandfamilies feel excluded when they only hear the term “parents.” So use “families” and “caregivers” in your newsletters.

Learn More

For source material for the previous pages and to go more in depth, check out these helpful links.

Todd Rogers' Research and Best Practices

[Write Shorter Messages](#) – Start here with a brief news article

[EveryDay Labs Resources | Toolkits for Educators on Attendance](#) – Communications toolkit with focus on absences and rebuilding communications routines after pandemic school closures

[The Science of Corresponding with Busy People Webinar | Harvard University](#) – Webinar with much of the same information in the listed articles. For folks who prefer to watch or listen to learn

[Engaging Parents Through Better Communication](#) – Research summary in an engaging article

[Todd Rogers - How to Communicate with Families Effectively](#) – overview of the research, with a particular focus on communicating during school closures

[Thinking About Texting Parents? Best Practices for School-to-Parent Texting](#) – digging deeper into texting strategies

Family Engagement at the Middle School Level

[The Role of Parents During the Middle School Years: Strategies for Teachers to Support Middle School Family Engagement](#) : a deep dive into all the information presented on the middle school specific page of this document

Grandfamilies

[Grandfamily School Engagement Brief](#) – Six core strategies for engaging grandfamilies

Language Barriers

[TalkingPoints](#) – nonprofit texting service that will allow you to messages families in 100+ languages

[Family Engagement and Its Impact During Distance Learning](#) – a deep dive into how communication with ELL families has been impacted by COVID-19