How to Communicate with Families Effectively: Insights from Todd Rogers, Behavioral Scientist and Professor of Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School

A Recap of

DMGroup's Member-Only Virtual Roundtable

How to Communicate with Families Effectively: Insights from Todd Rogers, Behavioral Scientist and Professor of Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School

How to Communicate with Families Effectively was the topic of one our recent weekly members-only virtual roundtable discussions. Our guest speaker was Todd Rogers, behavioral scientist and professor of public policy at Harvard Kennedy School and director of the Student Social Support R&D Lab at Harvard. Given the uncertainties surrounding school reopening in the fall and the possibility of closures and periods of remote learning, effective communication with families — especially the most vulnerable families — is critical to best supporting students.

Todd Rogers, renowned for his work leveraging behavioral science to implement innovative communication strategies to increase voter turnout in the 2008 presidential election and elections since, has since been applying behavioral science to the education sector to help districts combat chronic absenteeism and raise student achievement though family engagement. As much of his research centers on increasing engagement with families, we asked Todd to provide his insights and recommendations on how districts can most effectively communicate with families.

So how can districts best communicate with families?

Collect valid digital contact Information
While this seems obvious, many districts do not have digital contact information for a significant portion of their most vulnerable families — some studies show districts do not have contact information for 50% of their lowest-performing students.

Digital contact information (email addresses or cellphone numbers) is particularly critical for communicating time-sensitive information and educational content. Given the possibility of sudden school closures and periods of remote learning, having valid digital contact information will be particularly important for the coming school year.

How can you get at this information and maintain contact?
- Conduct a mailing to obtain updated digital contact information: Mailings via the U.S. Postal Service are a relatively effective way of making contact as USPS maintains a national change of address clearing house.

- Another adult: In all contact information collected, ask for the contact information of another adult in the student's life who can be contacted in the event that the school cannot reach the student's primary guardian.

<u>Communications need to be Readable, Programmatic, and Purposeful</u>

- READABLE
  - Minimize Words: Remember this quote often attributed to Mark Twain? — "I am writing you a long letter because I don't have time to write you a short one." Take the time to write a short letter. A 15-word sentence takes 10 seconds to read. If you have 5,000 readers, just one additional sentence adds up to 14 additional hours of reading for your 5,000 readers. Don't put added burden on your readers. And more words will make them less likely to read your message at all.
  - Accessibility: Use simple words. Write short sentences. Keep in mind the Flesch-Kincaid readability test. Aim for a third or fourth-grade reading level to keep your communications accessible.
  - Skimmability: Make your communications easy to skim. The format should reinforce the message. Use bullet points or lists. Underline or highlight key points.
- PROGRAMMATIC
  - Plan: In March, school closings took everyone by surprise. But now, we know there is a good chance that a school or schools may need to shut down at some point for some amount of time this fall/winter. Plan ahead now for a program of communication. Think ahead to how you will communicate, when you will communicate, and what you will need to communicate. Have communications drafted and ready to send to the degree possible.
  - Chunked: Every communication doesn't have to include everything. Deliver what needs to be known at the time it is received. Chunk up the information into pieces and plan the release of different pieces with your broader communication plan in mind.
  - Timely: Useful information that cannot be used right away usually becomes useless. Deliver information just-in-time when it can be acted upon.
  - Routinized: Manage your readers' expectations so they can know when they can expect to receive what kinds of information from you. "Every Wednesday by 3pm, you will receive an update," or "Every Sunday by 5pm, your child's assignments will be posted."

- PURPOSEFUL
  - Match purpose to mode:
    - Text: Good for things that require quick and immediate action. For example, if a student didn't turn in their homework today, a text to the parent can prompt quick action. But texts are not good for communications regarding actions to be taken in the future.
    - Mail/Hardcopy: A physical letter or a postcard sticks around — it gets put on the fridge or left on the kitchen counter; it becomes a "social artifact". These hardcopies can bridge time until the action is to be taken. For example, mailings are useful for addressing absenteeism since missing school occurs in the future sometime and communications on the topic need to stick around and maintain attention until they are relevant.
  - FYI: What is the point of the communication you are sending? Make sure the main point is clear in the first couple sentences of the communication.
  - Motivate an action: There is a lot of behavioral science on how to help people follow through on behaviors. Here are two particularly relevant insights:

- Planning prompts: Give parents a plan of what needs to happen so they can support the student.
- What's normal: Telling parents what's normal can be motivating. In a recent survey conducted this spring by Todd's lab, 85% of parents said they would find it useful to know what the "normal" level of work is for students. Behavioral science shows time and time again that human beings tend to conform to the behavior of others. In a remote learning environment, parents especially want to know how much work other students are doing and how often other students are logging in. This information can be used to increase engagement and logging in.

While the above recommendations may seem like common sense, they are proven techniques for effective engagement proven through randomized experiments conducted by Todd Rogers' research lab at Harvard and elsewhere. And, while they may seem like common sense, take a scan through your emails and see how many communications you receive that successfully adhere to the above recommendations. And see how many of these emails you have not read carefully, perhaps exactly because of their non-adherence.

Communicating with parents effectively will be more important than ever in the coming academic year. We hope Todd Roger's recommendations shared here will help you as you face the year ahead.

The above is a recap from "Best Practices for Engaging Families and the Community," one of District Management Group's weekly member-only virtual roundtable discussions.

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