



A Guide to Selecting a Comprehensive Platform to Unify School-to-Home Communications

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
SCHOOL COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES	4
Protecting Student Data.....	5
Data Accuracy and Security.....	5
Benefits of Efficient School-Home Communication	6
QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN EVALUATING COMMUNICATIONS PLATFORMS	6
<i>Checklist</i>	
The Basics	6
For Parents	7
For Teachers	7
For Students	7
For Principals	8
For District Administrators & Communications Staff	8
For Office Tasks	9
For Data Privacy and Security	9
Upgrade to an All-in-One Tool	10
PARTNER SUCCESS STORIES	11
MSD Wayne Township	11
Gilroy USD	12
USING FEDERAL STIMULUS FUNDS FOR PARENTSQUARE.....	13
ABOUT PARENTSQUARE	14

Introduction

Achieving the goal of efficient and effective communication with students' families is one of the difficulties that school districts face – particularly in times of national crisis like the current COVID-19 pandemic. The shift to 100% distance learning tested communication capacity in districts across the country. This buyer's guide focuses on both the communications challenges schools and districts face and the evaluation criteria that should be considered when a new platform is under review. The guide also includes experiences of districts that have moved to unify information channels into one comprehensive communications platform that keeps all parent contact information and preferences up to date.



School Communication Challenges

Most school districts have added school-to-home communication technology platforms in much the same way they have acquired all technology – one program at a time. As is often the case with legacy systems, each stakeholder group has its own preferred method of communicating with students' families. Teachers, principals, and districts themselves are using multiple systems. The results are often a mish-mash with no coherent approach to how messages are sent or who sends them, leaving families with questions and concerns about what they do not know.

Parents are often overwhelmed by the volume of inbound messages and variety of messaging channels, leaving them with questions like:

- Did the school newsletter go to the spam folder?
- Where is the Friday Folder?
- How to add money to lunch accounts or submit health screening forms?
- Where is the email about signing up for the parent teacher conference?
- Was there a practice schedule in the app the coaches use?

Some schools and districts have eight or more communication channels, including robocalls from the central office. And if a parent's primary language is not English, attempting to find and decode all the school news becomes even more difficult. It is hard to get parents to engage in their child's school if they are not sure what is going on – particularly in the changing environment of in-person, remote, and hybrid learning.

Replacing multiple communications platforms that are pieced together with one integrated system can streamline school communications and make them more efficient. An easy-to-implement, multipurpose unified system also holds the promise of a more engaged relationship between schools and their families, where everyone works together to enhance students' academic lives.



Protecting Student Data

When it comes to data privacy, communications with specific student information should only reach authorized family and guardians. All communications should be FERPA and COPPA compliant, and many states, such as New York and Texas, have additional privacy regulations to protect student and teacher personally identifiable information (PII).



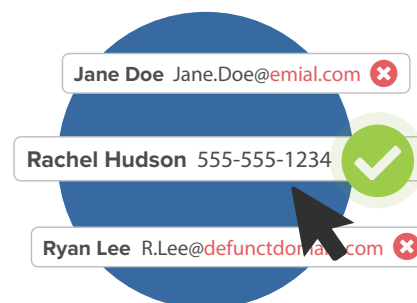
For example, the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) that went into effect in 2020 also regulates student data privacy because it includes all education companies doing business with school districts. Additional states have begun to strengthen their own data privacy laws based on the California law. The new laws put education companies, schools, and districts under additional scrutiny.

Data Accuracy and Security

In most districts, parent or guardian contact information is stored in the student information system (SIS). However, these systems were not designed with communication with parents as one of the primary functions and updating records requires significant administrative overhead.

The inevitable changes in parent emails and phone numbers, particularly in a district that has frequent changes in student population due to shifts in employment and other economic factors, can be difficult and time consuming to identify and correct. Maintaining accurate parent contact information is the first essential step in effective communication with families.

The many data breaches and ransomware attacks in recent years highlight the importance of managing user access and establishing ongoing network security protocols. Whether student data is provided by parents and families or collected in the process of using an education technology program, the shift is toward greater protection of student data.



Benefits to Efficient School-Home Communication

Implementing a unified communication solution in a single platform has multiple benefits for districts. An intuitive, easy-to-use program can standardize communication between school and home and increase parent engagement overall. Instead of different channels for email announcements, texts, and phone calls, a leading-edge platform would allow two-way communication where families could choose how frequently they want to be contacted, opt in or out of communications, and have a direct channel back to the school with questions or concerns. It also makes it much easier for parents to know where to go when they are looking for trusted information from the district, school, or classroom. An integrated communications platform also offers updated privacy protections in line with newer legislation – removing any concerns about student data privacy. It also provides administrative oversight and reporting.

When considering options for a home-to-school communications system, use the following checklist to ensure that your new system provides these features.

Questions to Ask When Evaluating Communications Platforms

THE BASICS

	YES	NO
Does the tool offer one unified platform for all school-to-home messaging?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it involve all stakeholders from district administrators to teachers and parents?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do the functions work together seamlessly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it offer voice, text, app, and email communication tools?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it provide two-way communication?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it support communications equity by providing two-way instant translation and language preferences?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

FOR PARENTS

	YES	NO
Will parents be notified of updates only relevant to their child?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the platform functions easy to navigate?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it allow parents to select their preferred mode and frequency of communication?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are real-time translations available for families who don't speak English?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it allow parents to securely verify their preferred contact details and easily update their school information if needed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

FOR TEACHERS

	YES	NO
Does the solution provide classroom communication for teachers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will it free up teachers' time in their day-to-day schedule?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will it make communications-based tasks, such as asking for classroom supplies and organizing parent-teacher conferences, easier?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will teachers be able to communicate with families about classroom needs, particularly with parents who do not understand English?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it provide teachers with accurate contact information by class, student, and grade that is automatically maintained?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

FOR STUDENTS

	YES	NO
Does the platform provide secure communications between student and teacher?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it allow students to receive push communications, text messages, emails, and alerts?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can teachers reach students directly with messages or posts?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can students engage with communications by commenting on posts?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

FOR PRINCIPALS

	YES	NO
Does the platform allow building administrators to address all stakeholders?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the solution include internal communication so the principal can communicate directly with various staff groups?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can school administrators monitor and oversee communications coming from the school, teachers, and parents?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can administrators delegate tasks by assigning special permissions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

FOR DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS AND COMMUNICATIONS STAFF

	YES	NO
Does the platform embed interactive services such as forms, conferences, attendance records, and progress reports?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it provide complete administrative oversight, security, and reporting?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it consolidate all parent contact information and preferences – voice, email, text, app – into one login for contact data management, verification, and updates?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can the district send emergency alerts to all contacts simultaneously?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will all communication maintain consistent district branding?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the solution provide insight into how individual schools are communicating to stakeholders?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it report metrics on parent response and engagement?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it provide information on who is not receiving messages so contact information errors can be fixed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it offset existing budgeted items by replacing existing platforms and tools?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it streamline the number of communication solutions the district has to manage and support?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

FOR OFFICE TASKS

	YES	NO
Can the tool send home secure, personalized documents like report cards?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the tool provide online forms, surveys, permissions slips and support digital signatures?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the tool send notifications for absences, lunch balances, and bus routes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the platform allow for payments and invoices?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the platform simplify FOIA request fulfillment?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the platform provide content archives for up to five years or as needed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

FOR DATA PRIVACY AND SECURITY

	YES	NO
Does the platform streamline IT support?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it integrate with the district SIS?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it offer Single Sign On with the tools you already use?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it allow you to control access and restrict permissions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is it hosted on a secure platform?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it reduce time-wasting manual account merges and password resets?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is it FERPA and COPPA compliant? Does it adhere to industry student privacy principles and education privacy agreements?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>


Upgrade to an All-in-One Tool


As you evaluate school-to-home communication platforms, compare and contrast the features in the chart below.


	 ParentSquare	Blackboard	SchoolMessenger	Remind	Peachjar	
Mass Notifications	Urgent Alerts Send with a few clicks	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
	Attendance/Lunch Balances Day/period absences + excuse notes	✓	✓	✓	Lunch Balances Only	✗
	Social & Web Share Post to existing sites and channels	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
	Secure Document Delivery Save paper, maintain privacy	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
Classroom Comms	Direct/Group Messaging Connect students/teachers/parents	✓	Course Messaging Only	Separate App	✓	✗
	Appointment Sign Ups Schedule conferences, pick-ups, etc.	✓	✓	Separate App	Partner App	Link Only
	Volunteering & Sign Ups Fill needs faster, chase less	✓	✗	✗	Partner App	Link Only
	Newsletters Streamline, ensure brand consistency	✓	✓	✓	Partner App	Delivery Only
School Services	Forms & Permission Slips Save time and paper	✓	No Permission Slips	No Permission Slips	✗	✗
	Calendar & Event RSVPs Increase attendance	✓	No RSVP	Separate App	✓	RSVP via Link Only
	Invoices & Payments Accept secure online payments	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
	Health Screening Forms Fast, daily checks for students/staff	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗


Disclaimer: All competitive information is gleaned from consumer-facing materials (web, blog, YouTube, etc.)

Partner Success Story: MSD Wayne Township—Indianapolis, IN


Name
MSD Wayne Township


Type
District comprised
of 20 public
PK-12 schools


Students
16,865


Location
Indianapolis, Indiana

Chief Technology Officer Pete Just wanted to streamline MSD Wayne Township’s communication system to make it more efficient. Teachers, principals, the district office, and even the superintendent all had different messaging systems. As a result, parents missed some messages, and there was both overlap and gaps among the different systems. “None of the messaging was in real time, and all of it required the collection of information and then the distribution of information, which was not efficient,” said Just.

The other challenge in MSD Wayne Township was that students speak upwards of 75 different languages at home, depending on the day. The district had limited capacity for translation services and that was only for Spanish speakers. “We needed to find a way to engage more of our parents in their child’s education in addition to streamlining our messaging,” said Just.

The district chose ParentSquare. “With a fully reliable system, we’ve traded mass communications for family engagement,” said Just.

“Not only did we streamline our communications, but by working as a team, we were able to focus on the success of each of our students.” ParentSquare also had the language support the district needed. ParentSquare supports more than 100 languages and uses the latest Google technology to translate accurately.

“You have to have that effective connection with families,” said Just. “They need to have a feeling of being part of their child’s education and to be knowledgeable about what is happening day to day in a

simple, straightforward manner.” The easy-to-use platform has significantly improved contact with student families and empowered teachers to have more two-way conversations about their students. “I think we’ve moved parents from spectators to participants in their children’s education,” said Just.



Partner Success Story: Gilroy Unified School District—Gilroy, CA

Two significant events caused Melanie Corona, public information officer at Gilroy USD, to change their communications platform to ParentSquare. The first was the Garlic Festival shooting in July 2019 and the second was COVID-19. “In both incidents we needed effective crisis communications,” said Corona, “and we did not have all the functionality we needed.” There were delays in getting complete communications out to everyone. The district closed schools on Friday, March 13th and launched 100% remote learning on Monday, March 16th.


“We began to prepare for a communications system transition in June 2020 and made the shift in August in the middle of a pandemic,” said Corona. The district’s leadership team made the executive decision to not train their staff on ParentSquare as they were already being trained on so much instructional technology. “Even without planned staff training, our experience with ParentSquare has been second to none,” said Corona. “I recommend the platform to anyone who asks and even to people who don’t ask.”


Gilroy found the program easy to use. “The app is fantastic, and families can revisit messages when needed,” said Corona. She reported that the platform’s ease of use made it easy to engage the staff. “There are few silver linings to the pandemic, but streamlining our communications has been one of them,” she said. “We are now able to funnel all our information through one platform, and everyone knows to access the ParentSquare platform if they’re looking for information.”





“Another one of the really wonderful things about ParentSquare is that it looks like other social media platforms that parents are using, so it is familiar and easy to navigate.” Corona believes that ParentSquare has made her job as the district’s public information officer easier as it has allowed the district to build communication and family engagement with consistency.

“We think a lot about the user’s experience on our website and in our communications,” said Corona. “It’s important that we have oversight for message consistency and even something as basic as synching all the school calendars,” she said. “ParentSquare just makes it all so easy.”


Name
Gilroy USD


Type
District comprised of 15 public PK-12 schools


Students
11,400


Location
Gilroy, California

How to Use Federal Stimulus Funds for ParentSquare

All three federal stimulus funding packages can be used to acquire the ParentSquare platform. The **CARES Act** (March 2020), the **Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act** (CRRSA, December 2020), and the **American Rescue Plan** (ARP, March 2021) all include flexible funding for educational technology.

Allowable Uses of Federal Stimulus Funding for ParentSquare

CARES Act, CRRSA, and ARP allow districts to build technology capacity. The ARP **specifically allows**, “**purchasing educational technology** (including hardware, software, and connectivity) for students who are served by the local educational agency that aids in regular and substantive educational interaction between students and their classroom instructors.”

Other Allowable Uses for the Federal Stimulus Funds Include:

- Planning and implementing activities related to summer learning and supplemental after-school activities.
- Addressing “learning loss” by providing information and assistance to parents and families on how they can effectively support students and address interrupted learning.
- Other activities as necessary to maintain operations and continuity of services, including continuing to employ existing or new district school staff.

Spending Deadlines

- **2024: ARP** Funds must be obligated by September 30, 2023 and spent by September 30, 2024. The U.S. Department of Education **Fact Sheet** on the ARP provides specific guidance to help districts navigate the various funding options.
- **2023: CCRSA** funds must be spent by September 30, 2023.
- **2022: CARES Act** funds are retroactive to March 2020 and must be spent by September 30, 2022.

5 Reasons to Add the ParentSquare School-to-Home Communications Platform to Your District

1. ParentSquare is federal stimulus fund friendly and qualifies for funding under the **CARES Act**, **CRRSA**, and the **ARP** as education technology.
2. It helps districts build technology capacity to support remote, in-person, and hybrid learning models.
3. The platform enables developing procedures and systems that improve the preparedness and response efforts of districts and implementation of a return to normal.
4. This educational technology platform supports substantive interaction between teachers and students.
5. ParentSquare allows schools to reach everyone in the district, regardless of language or socioeconomic barriers.

About ParentSquare

This guide was developed by ParentSquare, provider of the premier unified school-to-home engagement platform for K-12.

ParentSquare is the only fully unified product that engages every family with school communications and communications-based services – all the way from the district office to the classroom teacher, and all in one place. Schools know who's not being reached, and they have the reports and tools to improve contact and communications equity while maintaining privacy and security.

Click here to schedule a ParentSquare demo or call **(888) 996-4156** to speak with the Sales team.