Best Practice Guide

Reaching the Last 10%:

Engaging the Hardest-to-Reach Families

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Introduction: School-to-Home Communications and Reaching 100% of Families

It's clear that the role of effective and equitable school-to-home communications is more important than ever before. But districts and schools across the country are struggling to engage with 100% of their families — especially the hardest-to-reach parents and guardians, or the persistent last 10%.

Consistent connection through communications with all families is just *one* of the many commitments that districts and schools strive to fulfill throughout a busy year, and it is quite possibly one of the most influential and important steps towards closing gaps in education and increasing equity. **A study reviewing over 40 years of research by the Center for Educational Equity (CEE)**, a nonprofit policy and research center at Teachers College, Columbia University, uncovered that "family involvement is one of the strongest predictors of children's school success." Yet, for many schools, the pandemic has further strained resources, time, and strategic focus on the many benefits of involving families in a student's education; and families, for a variety of reasons, continue to be unreachable.

So, what happens when districts and schools don't engage all families? Students with disengaged parents and guardians can have **lower grades and test scores, inconsistent attendance, negative attitudes towards education** and more. Parents, in turn, are not involved in the day-to-day activities of their students, upcoming school events, and important meetings and conferences, among other things.

The challenge of engaging hard-to-reach families through communications is multifaceted, and factors that may act as barriers to connecting include cultural, socioeconomic, technological, institutional, and psychological. This guide focuses on five common situations that impact family engagement that ParentSquare has identified through years of work with K-12 districts and schools across the United States, including:

1. Language and cultural barriers
2. Non-tech-literate families and low bandwidth devices
3. Inaccurate contact information
4. Families facing non-school-related challenges
5. Information overload

We'll provide **practical communications-related recommendations** to address each of these situations to help your district or school reach the last 10% of families — in a consistent, effective, and more equitable way.
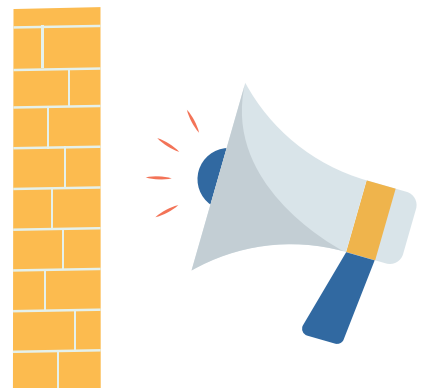
1. Language and Cultural Barriers

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that **U.S. schools are becoming increasingly diverse**, and English Language Learner (ELL) percentages are steadily increasing — highlighting the need for districts and schools to anticipate and find ways to overcome language barriers.

However, many districts lack the necessary resources such as on-site interpreters or family engagement coordinators who can bridge language gaps; and if they do, they don't necessarily speak every language needed to connect with all families. There is a trickle-down effect that takes place: **when districts can't transcend language barriers, many times, school sites and classrooms can't either.**

⊘ Support Translation at All Levels

Supportive translation has to exist for ELL families at all levels — from the district office to school sites to the classroom. The first step in making this happen is for districts and schools to take inventory of the languages and dialects their school community speaks. District messaging, whenever possible, should be **translated into multiple languages** before it's sent to families — and the same applies to school site and classroom messaging. While having translation set up at every stop is the most equitable solution, it can be hard to achieve with multiple, disconnected communications tools. Communications tools that provide instant, two-way translation and allow parents and guardians to set their preferred languages can create a more equitable, two-way dialogue.

Confidently communicate in parents' preferred language and increase communications equity within your school community with ParentSquare's language translation feature. User preferred language can be synced from your student information system (SIS) or parents can update their language settings on their ParentSquare account. Google Translate technology offers 100+ languages, plus automatic, real-time translation, translation of forms, permission slips, posts, and important alerts. Families can also direct message school staff with instant, two-way translation.
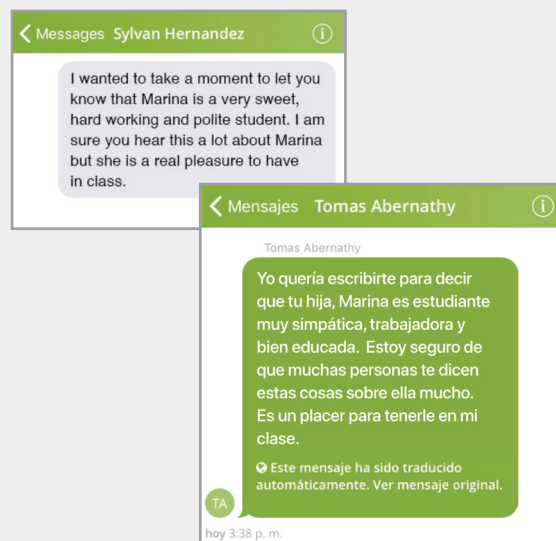
✅ Leverage Family Engagement Coordinators

Family engagement coordinators are a critical resource for connecting with hard-to-reach families because their role focuses on building stronger connections and involvement with, among others, parents and guardians. However, it's important to **remember that the term "engagement" is subjective**. Family engagement coordinators have to take the time to learn about cultural differences, how different families view school, and what they consider meaningful engagement to build greater trust and participation. Being culturally responsive by communicating with parents in the language they're most comfortable with is a constructive way to get insight and feedback from all families.

✅ Enable Human Translation of Livestreamed Zoom Meetings

The pandemic spurred what is now known to many in education as the "Zoom era." Not only does Zoom help increase accessibility to information, but it also increases interconnectedness within the school community. For districts that already use Zoom, for example, or would like to, they can now leverage the Language Interpretation capability, which allows for the inclusion of live interpreters during meetings and webinars. Districts and schools can offer live interpretation to help reach and engage all families in the language they're most comfortable speaking.

✅ Use Automated Captioning For Parents and Guardians Who Are Deaf

You can never assume that all parents and guardians are hearing. To increase equity and inclusion of all families, districts and schools should make a concerted effort to provide captioning across all meetings, webinars, and videos. Video conference platforms like Zoom have live caption capabilities that can be used in meetings and webinars. For video, there are many services that can provide captioning for school community members who are deaf. The **Federal Communications Commission's rules for closed captioning on television** may also help you bridge barriers.

2. Non-Tech-Literate Families and Low Bandwidth Devices

The pandemic widened the family "digital divide" — contributing to district and school difficulty in engaging the last 10% of families. And with many districts' rapid shifts to 1:1 to address technology accessibility during remote learning, gauging a family's technical ability and knowledge beforehand can be challenging. Additionally, **a Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults** found that "**about four-in-ten adults with lower incomes do not have home broadband services (43%)**." Lack of internet access coupled with low bandwidth devices like prepaid throwaway phones, which can limit the amount and type of messages that can be sent and received, leave room for parents and guardians to miss out on important school communications.

✔ Consider *All* Forms of Communication

For parents and guardians with low bandwidth devices (phones with low data transfer rates and slow or no internet capability), districts and schools need to remember that, in many cases, communication modes like text, voice, and paper flyers are the most accessible forms of communications. And in this day and age, where most forms are offered digitally, giving parents the option to fill out and sign paperwork on site is another way to ensure you reach everyone.

✔ Meet Parents Where They Are Technologically

All district or school-based technology should be as accessible and easy to use as possible to ensure that *all* parents can participate. As you evaluate your current or future technology, consider the following:

- Use tools that don't require the use of email.
- Push information to parents rather than expecting them to pull information (mobile push notifications help to ensure parents passively receive information).
- Deliver information through modes that work for parents instead of forcing them to adopt a mode that the school uses.
- Use single sign-on (SSO) so parents don't have to remember multiple passwords and minimize the need for multiple logins.

✔ Provide Technology Workshops and Training for Parents and Guardians

Districts and schools can leverage their technology teams to train parents on how to use technology. Setting up virtual and in-person workshops is a great way to connect with parents and help familiarize them with the technology your schools are using. Leverage your communications leaders and family engagement coordinators to help get the word out to hard-to-reach parents and guardians in a way that resonates with them (like a personal phone call or a flyer). Have your IT team host workshops at the beginning of the school year to get families comfortable with technology use, followed by a mid-year training to train new families, and refresh existing ones.
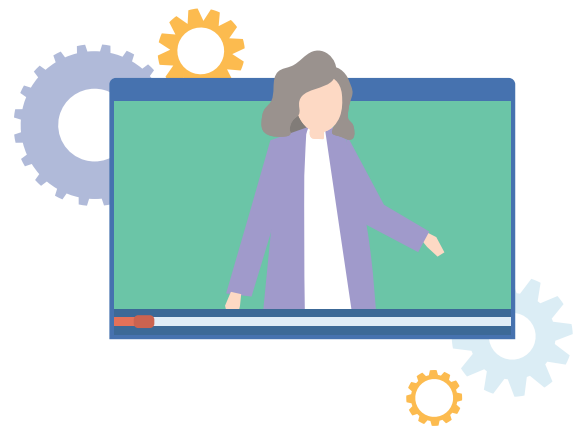
Additionally, you may want to **develop and send simple, clear guidelines for using various technologies and resources in the languages your school community speaks**. Another approach is partnering with your local library branches or recreation centers to provide technology training to parents and guardians.

> 🔲 **ParentSquare customer, Selma Unified School District (CA), has a Parent University Program focused on engaging with parents several times a month through various themes.** During a recent Parent University session the district helped parents load the ParentSquare platform on their computers and mobile devices. A school IT professional reviewed and verified the number of users on the system while the district began sending out alerts, posts, and attachments. Read about it **here**.

✅ Train the Trainer

If your IT department is limited in time and resources to provide ongoing tech support to families, consider "training the trainer." **Enlist your tech teams to train your most tech-savvy staff, teachers, and students on technology best practices**, and how to set up users with tools like Zoom, the learning management system, communications platforms, and more. Then, make it known to students and their families that they can reach out to select staff, teachers, and even other students for assistance with technology. You may find that hard-to-reach parents are more comfortable reaching out to their student's teacher for tech support than your IT department.

3. Inaccurate Contact Information

Maintaining parent contact information is an ongoing challenge for schools, but it's vital for reaching families in an emergency and for important day-to-day communications. However, keeping contact data up to date and consistent can be difficult when parents and guardians change their phone numbers (sometimes using prepaid throwaway phones), families come and go from the school system, main points of contact for students shift, and schools use freemium apps for classroom communications.

✅ Regularly Verify Contact Information

As contact details change during or across school years, reality and what's listed in a school database or communications tools can get out of sync. Setting up a process to verify student information throughout the year helps ensure schools and districts have the correct information on file to reach parents and guardians. There are several ways to verify contact information, such as:

- Have students fill out parent information in class.
- Send a survey through email.
- Use a communications platform that allows parents to update their contact information as it changes.

In any case, it's key to **remind parents several times throughout the year that you need them to either verify or correct the information you have on file**.

✅ Have a Dedicated Person or Team to Keep Data Clean

Too many people involved — or none at all — is never a good idea when it comes to keeping parent and guardian contact information accurate and up to date. Many schools designate a person or team to maintain the integrity of student and parent data. Whether it's a single database administrator or a data team that keeps your contact information clean and up to date, dedicated roles are becoming more necessary than ever.

✅ Consolidate Multiple, Disparate Tools and Apps

If you were asked to identify how many free tools school staff and teachers are using right now, could you? When a district or school doesn't provide guidance on which communication tools can be used, it forces parents to navigate a complicated web of apps and portals. What's more, freemium apps put the onus of data integrity on teachers — making it their responsibility to keep student contact information up to date, grant and remove parent access, and roll over data from one school year to another. Try consolidating your tools and apps to decrease the chances that your contact information is inaccurate, so you can reach more families.

> **With ParentSquare's contact verification feature, parents can log into their account using any of their emails or phone numbers and can share contact methods with other family members.** If details are wrong, parents can suggest corrections. For school staff who are also parents, they can maintain staff and personal contact details in a single account. Schools receive real-time reports with all parent updates so they can update their SIS and save time spent chasing families with bad data.

✅ Integrate Your Communications Tool With Your Student Information System (SIS)

If your district or school doesn't yet have a primary family communications tool, or you do but it isn't connected to your SIS or regularly synced, consider integrating and synching with your SIS or adopting a tool that does. **Your SIS should be viewed as your "source of truth" for your student information**, so ensuring contact information is up to date in that database will be key to ensuring you can reach families with your integrated communications platform.

> **ParentSquare integrates with all student information systems (SIS) via direct API-based integration, SIS partnerships, SFTP transfers, or partnerships with data integrators.** All integrations are built with data quality checks to prevent duplicates and data errors.

4. Families Facing Non-School-Related Challenges

Educators know the pandemic amplified hardships for families in areas like food, job, and housing security. Resulting stresses include:

- Older students caring for younger siblings as parents work multiple jobs.
- Students themselves working to help support their families.
- Parents under intense pressure separating or divorcing.

When families deal with hardship, it distracts them from education, but it doesn't mean they're not interested. These obstacles are in addition to traditional engagement challenges like being extremely busy if, for example, both parents work. There are ways for schools to reach these families to connect, provide resources, and show they care.

✔ Conduct Home Visits

Parents who are hard to reach because they're experiencing non-school-related challenges may greatly appreciate a personal home visit. Some schools send their principals and teachers to conduct home visits or put together bilingual family engagement task forces to conduct community outreach and check-in with disengaged families. It's also always good to work in groups for safety and mutual support.

✔ Leverage Community Resources and Partnerships

Consider leveraging your community resources and forming partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and faith-based groups to help your students and their families off campus. Community partners also serve as a conduit to connect with your families to see if they're *really okay* and to let them know that someone else cares about their wellbeing. Partnerships can provide sanctioned after-school activities, homework help, or just a place where students feel safe.

✔ Make Personal Phone Calls

Making personal phone calls to check in is a relatively easy way to help teachers and school staff establish deeper connections with families and address the distraction from school, not the disinterest in school. It may take giving a parent or guardian just five minutes of your time to tell them how their student is doing, what you appreciate about their child, and what the class is currently working on to re-engage them. Phone calls require a fair amount of time, so another great way to personally address parents is by sending them an email or a message through a secure, school-home communications platform.
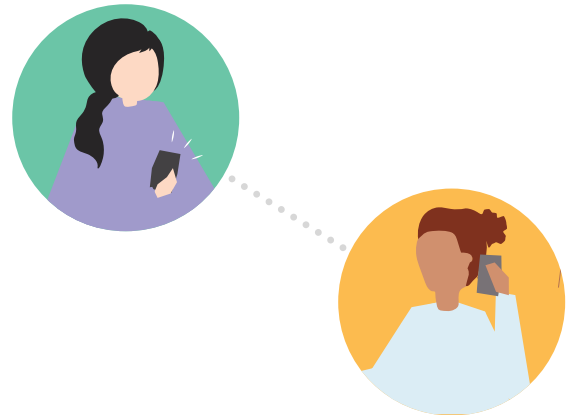
✔ Host After-Hours Drop-Ins and Town Halls

A busy parent doesn't always mean a disengaged parent — sometimes, a conflict between working hours and school hours doesn't allow for a parent to be involved in their child's day-to-day activities. Offering parents after-hours drop-ins and hosting live-streamed town halls are two ways you can provide families who may otherwise be unavailable to participate in a traditional 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. school day with other options. If you're going to offer these resources, remember to offer multiple days and times for after-hours drop-ins. For town halls, create a set schedule (try for monthly) so families can anticipate and plan accordingly.

5. Information Overload

The pandemic alone contributed significantly to parents experiencing message fatigue, and that can lead to apathy. Apathy can also come about as a result of schools using too many channels of communication (apps, paper flyers, postal-based mail, websites, social media, text messaging, and more), too much uncoordinated communication even if using a single tool, too many passwords to remember, and communication modes that don't resonate with parents — such as email for younger parents.
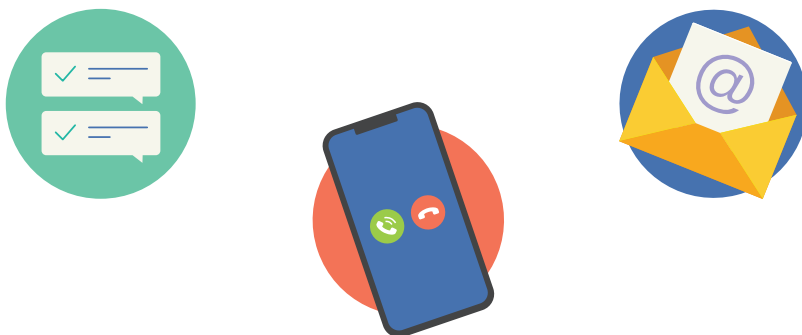
✅ Implement a Tiered Communication System

A great way to prevent information overload is by setting up a tiered communication system to prioritize communications home according to parameters set by the district or schools. For example, some districts might categorize:

- **Tier 1** communications as the **most important communications** (these are communications that a district or school can't afford to *not* issue, like emergency alerts).
- **Tier 2** communications are also **important but are not necessarily time-sensitive** (such as parent-teacher conference announcements).
- **Tier 3** communications are for communications that are **useful, but not critical** (such as information about a book fair).

Using a tiered communication system to prioritize messages also lets you establish a schedule for regular communications to avoid overlapping messaging.

> **Oregon Trails School District (OR) has its own take on tiered communications and implemented a highly effective plan utilizing the ParentSquare platform** that involves three levels of messaging:
>
> - **Level 1** is building communications, where teachers send out individual posts and newsletters with information about school-wide events, activities, etc.
> - **Level 2** is district-wide communications that contain information about district closures, celebrations, or programmatic changes.
> - **Level 3** is public-facing information posted to channels such as Facebook or Twitter.
>
> The district found that this three-level system gave parents multiple ways to receive information and effectively engage more parents in school-home communications.

✅ Inventory All Tools and Who Uses Them

Due to limited financial and staff resources, a lot of districts and schools have taken an ad hoc approach to engage families, and that can mean using multiple apps and tools. Taking an inventory of all the tools your district or school is using is a critical first step towards evaluating the need, effectiveness, security, and insights provided by each tool. If possible, **use a primary communications platform**. This allows you to consolidate all forms of communication into one tool, improving oversight into who is sending messages, how many are being sent, and whether parents and guardians risk message fatigue.

✅ Send Only Relevant Information

As much as possible, personalize your messages, so parents and guardians are more likely to engage. You can do this by making sure to provide families with information that is appropriate and applicable to their student, class, grade level, and school. While blanket messaging can work in some cases, it's also important to determine when and if it's necessary to target your communications.

✅ Use Engaging Writing That Spurs Action and Attention

Families are more likely to become apathetic to your school communications the moment they wonder if what's written is for them or not, so you're most likely to see positive responses when you take the steps to carefully organize and focus messaging *before* sending it. For engaging and easy-to-absorb messages:

- Make sure the essential information is at the top.
- Have a clear call to action.
- Ensure the copy is easy to absorb with section headers, bulleted lists and bolded text.
- Make sure your tone is right for your audience and message.

Graphics are always a plus, but be sure that they don't distract from the information you're trying to convey. See our best practice guide, "**Effective Family Communications From Content to Cadence**" for more writing tips.

Conclusion: Small Communications Improvements Lead to Engagement Progress

Overcoming communications barriers to reaching the last 10% of families can feel daunting. But taking **small, consistent steps over time** as outlined in this guide can lead to major improvements in your relationships and connections with the hardest-to-reach families. Remember, the reason you're addressing this challenge is to help ensure better student outcomes, which is the overarching, long-term goal of building strong relationships with parents and guardians.

About ParentSquare™

This best practice guide was developed by ParentSquare (**www.parentsquare.com**), provider of the premier unified school-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. ParentSquare is relied upon by millions of educators and families in 44 states for unified, effective school communications, and its technology platform features extensive integrations with student information and other critical administrative systems, translation to more than 100 languages, and app, email, text, voice, and web portal access.

If you're ready to discover more effective and equitable 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.