

Family Relationship Management

A MISSING PIECE OF THE EDTECH ECOSYSTEM



Untapped potential

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS

Decades of research supports the strong connection between family engagement and student success. More recent research suggests this relationship extends to virtual forms of engagement, like logging into a Learning Management System (LMS).¹ Despite the evidence, schools involve parents and guardians inconsistently. Most schools find that they can only reach 60% to 85% with their existing data.

Conventional methods of engaging families are too unreliable, too infrequent, and fail to account for the diversity of families they serve. Home addresses, emails, and phone numbers change, causing parents to miss important updates. Parent teacher conferences and report cards only happen a few times a year. In a recent national survey:

- **60%** of parents reported *never* receiving a phone call home from their student's school that year.
- **34%** *never* received a note or email about their child that year.²



Many of the other systems and channels for school communication assume a single household, with one or two legal guardians, missing the complexity of child custody and caregiving arrangements. Language assistance is mandated by federal law, but many families don't get the translation or interpretation services they need regularly, if at all.

A DIGITAL DIVIDE

The pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and underscored the importance of effective parent engagement. Communication with families went from “nice to have” to a top priority. Two-way communication between teachers and parents increased to facilitate remote learning.³ **79% of educators who said parent communication increased said that the uptick had a positive impact on academic results.**⁴ However, positive effects were uneven. Low income families with inconsistent access to devices and broadband internet fell behind better-resourced peers. Non-English-speaking parents were less likely to receive guidance in their home language on how to support their children during remote learning.

The pandemic offered a rare opportunity to build upon the bright spots of educator-parent communication, while also tackling the inequities it exaggerated. Sonja Brookins Santelises, CEO of the Baltimore City Public Schools, expressed the unique opportunity well in EducationWeek in 2020, “We have a choice about this crisis. As educators, we can make our *new normal* better than the old, engaging parents as the partners they are. Or we can wait for parents to lose whatever faith in us remains.”⁵



We can make our *new normal* better than the old, engaging parents as the partners they are.

Sonja Brookins Santelises
CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools

IS TECH A SILVER BULLET?

Even before the pandemic, near universal access to smartphones was starting to change how many educators communicate with families. Mobile technology has the potential to mitigate issues that exist with the most common forms of communication used by schools.

- **Mobile apps** offer a way to reach guardians, even if phone numbers and addresses change.
- **SMS alerts** and messaging are more convenient and immediate than older forms of communication.
- **Automatic translation**, powered by quickly evolving technology like Google Translate, can help level the field for families with a home language other than English.

Although promising, mobile technology isn't a silver bullet for family engagement. Simply offering a messaging tool or parent portal is not enough. Adoption can be patchy and inconsistent, even with training and support for staff.⁶ The way in which districts enroll parents can have a big impact on engagement. A study in DC public schools showed that when families are automatically enrolled in communications, enrollment and retention was near universal. **For "opt-in" communication, even by text, only 1% to 8% of parents enrolled.** Worse, opting in was correlated with prior student achievement and parental engagement. If the goal is to include all families, then administrators must think carefully about how they deploy new platforms and tools in their districts. Bergman and Rogers concluded, "It can be challenging for organizations to decide whether a new technology is a worthy investment because the expected benefits are difficult to assess. To make this assessment, organizations must forecast user adoption as well as the impact the technology would have on the outcomes they value."⁷

THE HARSH REALITY

As districts and individual educators have digitized systems and communication, the number of products and portals grew without much thought about how navigation might overwhelm or confuse users. Parents tend to log into these systems at the very start of the school year, and then stop using them, if they ever use them at all.⁸ In their study of a mobile communication app, Kraft and Bolves (2022) concluded that changing habits at the individual level depends on choosing a single common platform for all staff to use

and establishing clear expectations about the cadence of parent outreach and engagement.

Adopting only one parent platform is considered best practice, but this ideal is at odds with the reality of our rapidly expanding edtech ecosystem. The number of products that need or want to engage with students' families keeps growing. Some may want to ping parents daily (e.g. Seesaw, Possip, GabOn, Edsby), others may only need to touch base a few times a school year (Panorama, SnapRaise, SchoolMint). Districts must figure out how to integrate and sync each new product with existing systems, like their SIS and SSO partners, and even when they do so, a significant percentage of parent data is wrong and/or poorly organized. When districts don't establish a single tool or clear expectations for digital communication, the void is filled by solutions adopted at the school or classroom level. In those cases, there's little to no oversight.

Given the challenges and opportunities, school system leaders need new and formalized approaches to family engagement technology.

PARENT EXPERIENCE



Feeling overwhelmed with too many usernames and passwords and applications?

Here is a Parent Refresher on the different applications you will use while your student is at Gilbert Schools.

The following should help you better navigate the e-Registration process and it will also help you when looking up information and making payments throughout the school year. You may want to print this page and keep it for a handy reference.

Every parent/family has 3 separate accounts/logins. Each one provides access to a different application. The applications are integrated to work together.

In 2017, a school district in Iowa distributed the flyer above for "overwhelmed" parents. It explained when to use which username and password for three different systems: SIS, online payments, and school lunches. These functions have since been replaced by one parent portal account in a different SIS. However, communication at the district, school and classroom level is still scattered. The district website links to a news and calendar app, digital flyers, email newsletter sign-ups, Google forms for new student registration. No specified means or guidelines for communication at the classroom level was listed.



A path forward

THE FUTURE IS “FRM”

We believe transforming parent engagement through technology must be driven by equity and family-centered values. It should leverage insights from behavioral science, and focus on interoperability as a necessary condition. This vision is captured by the nascent product category, **Family Relationship Management (FRM)**.

Students are members of families, and families are the biggest influence on student achievement. After all, students only spend 13% of their waking hours at school. It only makes sense for schools to prioritize organizing and leveraging family relationship data with as much attention to detail as businesses do with their customers. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platforms drive sales and revenue by aggregating data, providing visibility, and integrating communication tools. What if the same principles could be applied to drive engagement and collaboration between parents and educators? In 2020, we launched Actionaly to do just that, creating the first official FRM platform.

THE KEY COMPONENTS OF A FRM

Simplicity for users

Ideally, all stakeholders in a child's educational journey, from district administrator to counselor to athletics coach would utilize the same platform to reach families. This eliminates the confusion of multiple tools and accounts. Families are more likely to engage when there is a single, consistent, and easy-to-use conduit. In our work with partner districts, we have seen that this combination of factors creates a habit in parents, where they respond promptly to outreach. As an important bonus, that simplicity and frequency of use also helps schools regularly validate contact details and other key information about a student's household(s). Actionally supports our partner districts with annual information updates, sent via email, app, or text, effectively automating data cleanup on a regular basis.

Family data interoperability

New developments in interoperability standards will soon be able to connect families into the education ecosystem, providing access to data and features that are helpful and applicable to users, based on their roles. Standards would need to account for family structure and home language to ensure that family diversity is taken into account. The **1EdTech™ OneRoster® Product Steering Committee (PSC) is already at work on family data extensions** that would enable a FRM platform to automatically sync parent preferred language. In the future, open data standards should evolve to include consistent formats for parent contact information as well as relationship to the child, including guardianship and parental rights. This would come closer to accounting for the complexity of family structure and caregiving arrangements found across and within communities. The adoption of explicit norms for storing all this information should also help ensure that more of the information stored in systems of record is actually useful to school districts and their partners.

Improved metrics

Existing products in the field of family engagement focus too narrowly on communication or attendance at in-person events and workshops. Creating more meaningful metrics would provide schools with the insights they need to prioritize effective home-school partnerships.⁹ An FRM could provide visibility of communication and parental engagement for school leaders at each level (individual, family, classroom, teacher, school). Interoperability between SIS, LMS and FRM platforms can help institutions

leverage parental engagement data and feed it into various algorithms to predict outcomes like high school graduation. With sufficient research data, districts could eventually leverage a “family engagement index,” in addition to student attendance rates, as a component of their school funding formulas.

Connection to partners and community

Educating the whole child necessitates involving a broad range of services that operate within or in the orbit of schools, each of which have a need to inform or engage parents. FRMs are positioned to enable innovative solutions without putting personal user information at risk or over-sharing student or family data with third parties. A district could improve connections to partners, from within and/or outside the local community, including:

- Parent-teacher associations
- Athletics teams
- Extracurricular programs
- Social services
- Community-based nonprofits
- School clinics
- Special education services
- SEL & wellness partners
- Payment services

CASE STUDY

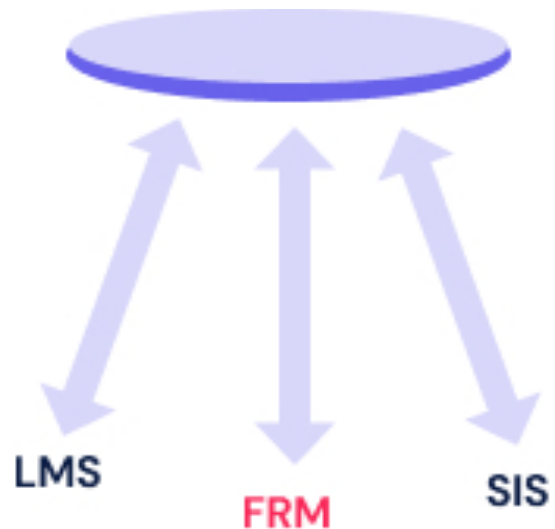
Supporting student behavioral health

Terrace Metrics is a company that offers behavioral health surveys, analysis and curriculum. Even with a Single Sign On integration, implementation is a challenge. School staff could spend hours distributing, collecting, and cross checking parental consent forms to generate lists of approved students. “Our schools want to focus on students and their survey results, not on the process of collecting parent consent and assessment management,” said CEO Rich Gilman. Actionaly addressed these hurdles with a module that automated the communication, consent, and rostering process. This allowed Terrace Metrics to operate smoothly with its district partners and saved time for school-based staff.

CONCLUSION

No app or platform resolves all the complex issues schools and families face, but mobile technology is already changing the way schools and families engage with one another. K-12 education is at a critical juncture post-pandemic. This moment demands a proactive approach that leverages technology to tackle existing inefficiencies and inequities while boldly imagining what a family-inclusive digital ecosystem could look like.

- A **SIS** is the single source of truth for student data.
- A **LMS** holds and shares academic information and performance.
- The missing leg of the stool is a **FRM** platform that secures and optimizes family data for responsible use by schools and their partners.



All three together create a stable foundation for a rich edtech ecosystem, one that welcomes parents and trusted adults to partner in their child's education. To realize this potential, districts, platforms like Actionaly, and organizations like 1EdTech™ must advocate for the evolution and widespread adoption of interoperability standards like OneRoster®. It's the foundation for building the future we all want for our students and their families.

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- Nina Barraclough and Gauthier Philippart

ABOUT ACTIONALY

Actionaly helps school communities effortlessly customize outreach to engage every parent, in any language, and on any device. It's our superpower. A power we now leverage to connect districts with innovative partners. This evolution led us to create the first "Family Relationship Management" (FRM) platform. Visit our website at actionaly.com

ABOUT 1EDTECH

1EdTech is a member-based non-profit community partnership of leading educational providers at all levels, government organizations, and edtech suppliers working together to enable better digital teaching and learning. Together we power learner potential by accelerating an open, trusted, and innovative education ecosystem in which products work together to enable better learning.

1EdTech hosts the annual Learning Impact conference and other engagement opportunities to advance the leadership and ideas that shape the future of learning. 1EdTech is supported by an affiliated public charity, the 1EdTech Foundation, that puts philanthropic funds to work for our cause. Visit their website at 1edtech.org.

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