

Social-Media Tools

Increasingly, social-media tools, such as Facebook and Twitter, are helping teachers keep parents and other community members informed. Teachers are encouraged to go where the parents are; more parents are apt to be on Facebook or Twitter every day, whereas they might check the class webpage only once in a while or when reminded.

Facebook

Since many parents are already on Facebook, it makes sense to communicate with them on a platform with which they are already familiar, one that is already part of their daily routine. As the use of Facebook continues to grow, more and more issues arise regarding its use. Although some teachers remain unsure about whether or not to have a Facebook profile, others see it as a new opportunity for communicating with parents.

Facebook allows you to share class news and information with the parents of your students. You can create a parents' group for your class and share information only with the parents of your students. Some types of information you might share: details of upcoming field trips; school closings (scheduled or unforeseen); special events or parties; pictures of student projects; students' published writing; etc.

If you are considering using Facebook, it is important to be informed about policies or guidelines concerning its use that might be set out by your school district. For some teachers, Facebook will be strictly off-limits. However, if your district permits teachers to use Facebook for communicating with parents, there are some things you should keep in mind:

- Be professional. Maintain the same personal boundaries that you have with parents in the classroom setting.
- Your classroom Facebook page should relate only to your classroom. Nothing should be on the page that you would not proudly share with your principal or superintendent.
- Keep the focus on teaching and learning. The page you create should be a digital representation of your class and curriculum, and be a place where you encourage feedback.
- When you set up your page, use more than just your first and last name. Be sure to include the name of your class; e.g., Mrs. Macintosh's Grade 4 Class.
- Use a picture of your class mascot or a favorite image (perhaps a child's drawing of you) as your profile picture to keep the page geared to the classroom and curriculum. It should not be a picture from your personal life unless it relates to your classroom; for example, a picture of you reading a new children's book is fine.
- Include your Facebook address in your first letter home to parents and explain what you will use the forum for. Be clear and explicit so parents will understand your reasons for having a variety of ways by which you will communicate with them.

Facebook has a feature that allows you to post updates that parents will see immediately when they log onto their page. You can post information that pertains to homework—for example, “Don't forget that the Science Fair project is due on Wednesday”—to clarify a new policy, or to detail directions for an assignment. Parents can also send you a private message to ask questions about homework or to ask for a meeting. Parents who might be uncomfortable asking questions in person might feel more at home when using this medium.

Twitter

Twitter is another platform with which many parents have experience—or are eager to learn about. Twitter is a communication tool in which information is communicated in short posts of up to 140 characters (called Tweets). It is also possible to post links, photos, and videos.

Just as with Facebook, it is possible to set up your Twitter account so that only approved followers can view your Tweets. Tweets are most often sent using a smartphone, but can also be sent via computer. Twitter can be used to

- post reminders about events
- share news of the day
- share photographs and information from school-wide activities and class trips

Teachers of young children can use Twitter to let a parent of an upset or nervous child know how that child is doing. With children who are on a behavior plan, building Twitter into the plan can let the child know that the parent and teacher are on the same page. A Grade 5 teacher who uses Twitter has designated one of the jobs in her classroom as that of Tweeter. The student with this job Tweets two or three times a day about classroom learning activities; sometimes a photo is included (the student also has Photographer as a class job).

Teachers using Twitter find they can contact parents quickly if a child is sick or can keep parents informed of an activity they might do with their family to extend their child's learning in a particular curriculum area. When new children's books come out, a Grade 2 teacher I know Tweets about them. A Grade 6 teacher I met started using Twitter to see if more parents would attend his parent-teacher conferences if he reminded parents of them the morning of the conference. You might consider having a session for parents to help them set up their Twitter accounts.

Not every parent will want to use Twitter. It is not designed to replace e-mail communication, which can be more expressive, or the class webpage, which gives much more detail. It is just one more communication tool worth investigating to add to your toolkit.

Online Surveys

Surveys are excellent tools for gathering information from parents. They allow you to find out the best date and time for an event or meeting; how parents prefer to be contacted; whether they feel the homework given is too little, too much, or just right.

There might be no limit to the number of questions you can ask on a survey; however, just as with a paper survey, it is best to keep the number of questions between eight and ten. Usually there is no limit to the number of participants you can have. Some survey-creator tools, such as Smart-survey, allow you to offer questions in different languages. After the online survey is completed by your students' parents, the survey-creator tool usually calculates and displays the results.

Keep in mind that, although you might have parents who prefer an online survey, you will also need to send home a paper version for those who don't. Make sure you find out how parents wish to respond in your first questionnaire at the beginning of the year.

Online Resources

There are numerous free, user-friendly online survey tools. A few of the more popular ones are

- Survey Monkey: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/>
- Smart-Survey: <http://www.smart-survey.co.uk/>
- Google docs also allows you to make surveys.

Online survey creators are simple and user-friendly. Many offer ready-to-use professional templates to make survey creation easy. They also feature a number of other benefits.

SAMPLE ONLINE SURVEY CREATOR



Permission for screenshot granted by SurveyMonkey

Internet Phone

You can download Skype for free at <http://www.skype.com/intl/en-us/get-skype/>

Software applications like Skype provide a way to talk to people over the Internet for free using a web cam and microphone. Calls can be audio only or include video. It is an excellent way to communicate with parents whose jobs or schedules do not permit them to communicate with you in person. Teachers I have spoken with have used it with parents who

- are in the military and are posted out of the province or overseas
- have work hours that are hard to schedule around
- have childcare, transportation, or personal-health needs

Video conferencing allows these parents to take part in the conference, feel involved, and even see some of their child's work.

Virtual Pinboards

Platforms like Pinterest support a virtual pinboard that allows users to pin images from blogs and websites, making them easier to refer to later. Virtual pinboards

are visually appealing and easy-to-use. You can use this tool to set up boards that will be of interest to your parents and students. Create boards that you think would interest your parents:

- Arts and Crafts
- Books and Activities
- Nutrition and Recipes
- For and About Parents
- Places to Go, Things to See
- Kids and the Environment
- Math and Science Activities

You can add boards and change content as you wish. For example, if it is Science Fair time, you might have a board dedicated to science activities and experiments; you can devote a board to a particular social studies topic. Make parents aware of your site and how to set up an account so they can access it.

Once they have a account of their own, they can follow you and add content to their site by *repinning* the ideas and activities they see and like or by *pinning* ones they find on their own.

Pinterest is a lot of fun to use and is very easy for both you and your students' parents. Starting parents off with something that is practical, enjoyable, and easy-to-use is a great way to initiate them into using technology. Once parents are successful with Pinterest, they might be more open to exploring your website, using e-mail, or commenting on your blog.

Regardless of whether you use some or none of these tools, try to keep abreast of what is out there. You might hit upon just the right way to communicate with your parents and make parent-teacher communication a truly interactive experience for you both.