



THE NEXT GENERATION OF TEXTING: Communication Solutions For Teachers and Parents

Teachers need to continually communicate with students and parents. But some of the most common ways to engage parents are challenging for all involved. Traditional ways to communicate with students and parents are not working as they used to or as some might wish. This white paper discusses these limitations and presents the Next Generation of Texting, as a stand-alone solution or as a part of a larger communication solution, to improving student and parent engagement.

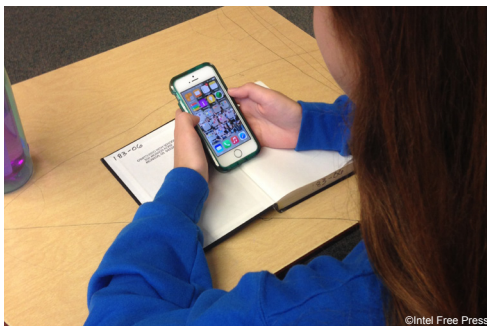
Texting is the ultimate push technology, coming to your cell phone without the recipient thinking about it or doing anything to make it happen. Today, systems can be set up to automatically send text messages about homework, upcoming tests, and project due dates. Ninety-seven percent of text messages are opened and responded to within five minutes. If a teacher thinks it is important for students to do the homework, come prepared to class, be ready to take the test, then a message about that is important too. Sending reminders the one way that students and parents respond to the most, is the best way to engage both students and parents in the education process and increase successful education outcomes both short and long term.

BACKGROUND:

This white paper presents academic and marketing research on how businesses, schools, and non-profit organizations are using texting to effectively reach out to young people.

On the other hand, some of the most common ways to engage parents are challenging because they are not complete communication solutions and have many gaps. Email and class newsletters sent via email are often the first line of communication for busy educators. MailChimp, an email marketing

company with more than seven million customers, publishes email open rates, the percentage of emails opened divided by the total number sent. In February 2015, the education and training category email open rate was 23.33 percent. More than three quarters of the emails were never opened. The rate for clicking on a link inside the email was only 3.15 percent; therefore, on average, out of 1,000 emails sent, seven or eight people are interested enough to click on a link¹



Another traditional way to reach out to parents is in-person: Back-To-School night, Parent-Teacher conferences and even home visits. While all of these can be effective, they are labor and time intensive. In-person communication is inherently limited by the time required to be effective and probably not sustainable on a regular basis across even mid-size student populations. Instead, quick, short communication is needed to fill in the gaps and maintain consistency.

New social media technologies, such as Facebook and Twitter, are often considered as a way to have regular communication about what is happening in the classroom with parents and others. However, social media is designed to be a public--not a private forum. An excerpt from Twitter's Terms and Agreements sum this up: "What you say on Twitter may be viewed all around the world instantly. You are what you Tweet!"²

Class letters and notes home continue to be common forms of communication. These rely on paper and the postal service which is becoming more expensive every year. Paper notes home are often lost at the bottom of the backpack. Some families move often and do not provide the most current street address to the school, making mail an unreliable as well as expensive, communication tool.

Many teachers are now creating their own class website. Depending on how they design the website and which tools are used, the class website, with photos of students, schedules, and contact information may be available to anyone in the world with internet access. Besides these privacy concerns, parents and students may not know when the site is updated due the nature of "pull" technology, which requires that parents and students know to go to the website to find new information. Push notification with texting can be added to inform people when important new information has been published on the website, increasing usage and communication.

Teen Cell Phone Ownership in 2009 ³		
Percent of cell phone ownership	Age	Time Spent Texting Per Day (hours:minutes)
31%	8-10	N/A
69%	11-14	1:13
85%	15-18	1:51

Educators and others are using texting to reach out to students and parents about classroom activities, important deadlines, and ways to avoid risky behavior. Some important case studies and research follow.

1. **Improve homework completion rates and classroom engagement.**

In a Harvard Graduate School of Education study with a local charter school summer program, English teachers made daily phone calls about what was going on in the classroom, how students could improve, etc. Each day the math teachers sent home text or written messages. “On average, teacher-family communication increased the odds a student completed their homework by 42% and decreased instances in which teachers had to redirect students’ attention to the task at hand by 25%. Class participation rates among 6th grade students increased by 49%.” After two weeks, they could quantify noticeable improvements in student classroom engagement and on-time homework completion. However, daily phone calls were not sustainable, not only because teachers do not have time to call each family every day, but also because parents actually stopped accepting the phone calls. Within one week, talking to a real person and completing a phone call dropped from three quarters of the calls being completed to a little more than half being completed.⁴

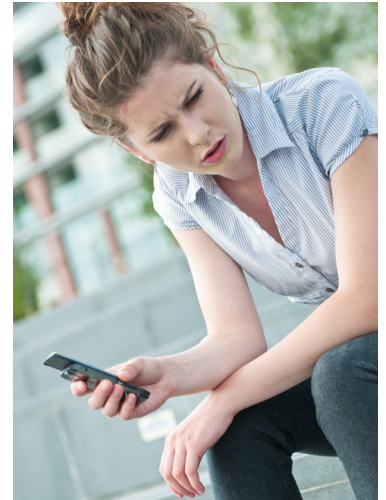


2. **Proactively nudge students and parents about important events and deadlines.**

“Summer Melt” is the term for students that graduate from high school, but do not start at any two or four year program the next year as expected. Recently Benjamin Castleman, (University of Virginia) and Lindsay Page (University of Pittsburgh) used text messaging during the summer to remind students about tasks related to starting college. They included practical information on such things as housing forms, completing FAFSA, etc. and served as a liaison to peer mentoring, to address other academic, social and non-financial issues. “Students in Lawrence and Springfield, MA assigned to receive the texts were over seven percentage points more likely to enroll in college than their control group.” Two-way text messages encouraged students to reply via text to meet with a counselor or linked to a web form to complete. The messages helped all students, but “we observe a consistent pattern of positive and significant impacts among students with GPAs in the middle of the distribution.” The study focused on low-income students, many of whom still had not finalized their college plans, making them at risk for never advancing to higher education.⁵

3. Develop relationships with at-risk young people.

Crisis Text Line in New York City provides a crisis help line that operates exclusively via text messaging and is prepared to respond to any issue. Its users are predominantly young people, who amazingly hail from every state and every area code across the US. Each day, on average, Crisis Text Line helps rescue *via text* one person believed to be in immediate danger of suicide. Young people are often more honest and forthcoming via text. "Text messaging affords a level of privacy the human voice makes impossible. If you're hiding from an abusive relative or you just don't want your classmates to know how overwhelmed you feel about applying to college, a text message, even one sent in public, is safer than a phone call. What's more, tears go undetected by the person you've reached out to, and you don't have hear yourself say aloud you most shameful secrets."⁶ Texting as a mode of communication is inherently more appealing to young people and helps provide an additional safety net for those who are at-risk.



4. Connect with individuals that are hard to reach via email or phone.

Missing forms, scheduling Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings and bureaucratic paperwork can be the most cumbersome part of facilitating excellent education. Texting reminders that allow for replies may be easier and more appealing for many. Some texting applications will



translate the original message, making it even easier for messages to be understood and non-English speakers to reply. According to a 2011 Pew Research Center report, 31 percent of adults prefer a text message to a phone call; another 14 percent said it depends on the situation. The average 18-24 year old sends or receives 109.5 text messages a day. Non-whites text more often than white adults and low-income and less educated adults text more than those with more education and higher incomes.⁷

5. Timely reminders to students about schedule changes.

Snow days, muddy fields and very early morning field trips often require real-time updates. Text messages are an easy way to convey important information quickly. A 2010 Pew Research Center report found texting is the favorite way for young people to communicate with their friends, more popular than email (which they check weekly), more popular than talking on the phone (which is for Mom and Dad), more popular than social media sites, and even more popular than hanging out in person with their friends⁸

Texting offers parents and educators many solutions to leverage communication issues with young people, non-English speakers, and low-income families “where they live.” When considering a commercial texting vendor, look for the following features:

- One-way broadcast notification and two-way texting to allow replies.
- Privacy issues have been addressed, phone numbers are masked—including the teacher, parent and student.
- Teachers have the option to control when and how replies arrive.
- Spanish translation
- COPPA issues addressed
- Permanent message log for all messages. This can be an important research tool as well as a resource that allows users to review the texts later to answer questions or concerns.
- Solution meets your budgetary criteria.

“We used Athena’s Workshop to text students and parents during summer camp to stay in touch and again during our trip and winter performance at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Both times it worked great. Thanks so much for assisting us with this interactive program! We hope to use it again for camp!”

*Jennifer Lapple, Director of
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Endnotes

1. <http://mailchimp.com/resources/research/email-marketing-benchmarks/>
2. <https://twitter.com/tos?lang=en>
3. <https://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/8010.pdf>, p. 18
4. <http://scholar.harvard.edu/mkraft/publications/effect-teacher-family-communication-student-engagement-evidence-randomized-field>
5. http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/9_Castleman_SummerTextMessages.pdf
6. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/09/r-u>
7. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/09/19/americans-and-text-messaging/>
8. <http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2010/PIP-Teens-and-Mobile-2010-with-topline.pdf>



Athena's Workshop
Helping You Build Successful Students

Athena's Workshop safeguards the privacy of educators and students when texting. We protect teachers, parents, students, and coaches so they can text without revealing their cell phone number. A permanent message log means deleted messages can still be reviewed months or years later. Moreover, we enhance communications after school through direct two-way texting, collaborative group texting and Spanish-English translation. We offer customization and support for schools that trust and purchase our products and services.

Call or email for more information.

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