Logged In
Using Technology to Engage Families in Children's Education

Engaging families in student success is emerging as the next stage in leveraging internet and wireless technologies to boost student success. Family engagement is related to a range of benefits for students, including improved school readiness, higher student achievement, better social skills and behavior, and increased likelihood of high school graduation.[1] Research on school reform also indicates that strong family–school ties are one of the essential elements in transforming low-performing schools.[2]

How is technology being used to strengthen family engagement? Based on research of promising practices in school districts and communities, the Harvard Family Research Project has identified a range of technological innovations that have the potential to boost key dimensions of family engagement: positive parent–child interactions, home–school communication, and parent responsibility for a child's learning. Although the digital divide continues to be a challenge, schools and communities that are committed to using technology for family engagement are working to address accessibilty and training issues.

Technology can enhance parenting interventions. In a collaboration between the Juniper Gardens Children's Project at the University of Kansas and the Center for Children and Families at the University of Notre Dame, a randomized clinical trial aimed to test the results of adding cell phone technology and communication to an existing evidenced-based intervention to improve parenting, prevent abuse and neglect, and improve child behavior among a cohort of low-income families in Kansas and Indiana.[3] In the experimental group, parents of 3–5 year old children received two text messages per day and at least one phone conversation from a family coach who trained them on parenting skills. The text messages contained prompts to help parents manage children's behavior. Parents in the experimental group showed bigger improvements in parenting skills on most observed parenting behaviors than the control group.

Technology is being used in innovative ways to boost communication and learning. The United Way Worldwide is supporting 15 communities across the country to integrate family engagement in their school dropout prevention efforts. A common innovation across 10 of the 15 communities is using technology such as text messaging and online data systems to enhance direct, home-school communication with busy parents. Parents and teens are also using wireless technologies to support academic performance.

Online data systems:
- In Reno, Nevada, the United Way worked with the Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC) to train parents on the use of an online monitoring tool tracking school attendance, assignments, and grades. Training includes information on high school graduation requirements and college or post-secondary options, and the system links parents with a teacher or counselor to work with the family and teen to develop a high school graduation plan.

Logged In, Continued…

- In Gurnee, Illinois, the United Way is working with business partners to get used computers that can be refurbished for families. School and community volunteers will design and conduct a four-part training series for small groups of parents, which will cover computer basics as well as how to access the online student data system and high school graduation requirements. Families without computers that attend and complete the training will earn a computer. Family resource coordinators will follow-up with parents to help them with school matters.

Wireless technology:

- In Brownsville, Texas, parents of failing ninth graders said they wanted schools to report on student attendance and grades through text messages. Because texting is widely used among families, many of whom are poor and with little formal education, the local United Way will use text messaging to automatically inform parents about student absences.
- In Greenville, North Carolina, the United Way has used iPod Touch devices with focal students and families to engage them in academic content and demonstrate how wireless technology can help support students' learning. Students and their parents work together to navigate educational applications related to math and reading that have been preloaded onto the devices.

Technology-based assessment systems provide timely information that can help parents monitor their child's school attendance and performance. Through online student data systems parents are able to access information when they need it most: as a preventive measure to intervene at the first signs of truancy or academic problems. The New York City ARIS Parent Link is a web-based system that compiles data on all students, grades K–12, who attend a school operated by the New York City Department of Education. Families interested in accessing the system to monitor data on their child's performance receive a log-in identification number and password. Over 340,000 accounts have been opened and accessed, with the highest sign-up rates occurring at parent–teacher conferences. Once logged into ARIS, families are first able to see their child's attendance, updated both daily and weekly. They are also able to view data on assessments, course grades, middle and high school transcript information, current enrollment, and enrollment history. Tutorials that help parents understand the data are the most frequently visited pages.

Technology provides access to a wide range of learning resources that parents can use with their children at home. The Poway School District in California has created a culture of assessment for learning that equips teachers, students, and parents with data to track progress on core academic subjects. Teachers use the district's online data system to individualize teaching and learning; students use the data that teachers share with them to prepare their learning goals; and parents receive hard copies of their child's performance in order to help with goal setting and learning activities in the home. Parents can turn to the district's website to access a broad range of online resources that align with a child's learning goals.

[1] Weiss, H. B., Bouffard, S. M., Bridglall, B. L., Gordon, E.W. (2009). Reframing family involvement in education: Supporting families to support educational equity. *Equity Matters: Research Review No. 5*. New York: The Campaign for Educational Equity, Teachers College.

[2] Bryk, A., Bender Sebring, P., Allensworth, A., Luppescu, S. & Easton, J.Q. (2010) *Organizing Schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

[3] Bigelow, K. M., Carta, J. J. & Lefever, J.B. (2008) Txt u ltr: Using cellular phone technology to enhance a parenting intervention for families at risk for neglect. *Child Maltreatment* 13(4)362-367.