

# Keeping Students Competitive:

## USING TARGETED COMMUNICATION TO DRIVE STUDENT SUCCESS IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY

To remain competitive, students of today must be prepared to work in tomorrow's global economy. The development of higher-order thinking skills are critical to this global competitiveness, and educators face the challenge of training students for careers *that don't yet exist* with technologies that are rapidly changing and difficult to predict. Yet reduced resources make meeting these challenges problematic, if not seemingly impossible.

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How then can educators start preparing students for entry into this global workforce—with no expectation of budget improvements or educational reform in sight? Targeted, proactive communication is the key to ensuring every student has the skills necessary to compete globally. Districts are using communication to engage parents, encourage active involvement from community leaders, and deploy better technology. Through routine outreach and targeted messaging, school leaders can share responsibility and allow for greater accountability in producing strong, competent leaders of tomorrow.

Preparing students takes a multi-step approach, an approach that is spearheaded by school leaders. Without waiting for external help from the state, educators can—and should—create a positive foundation by:

- ▶ **Engaging parents in the academic lives of their children**
- ▶ **Recruiting active involvement from community leaders**
- ▶ **Utilizing innovative technology in the classroom to teach students skills necessary for real world work environments.**

## Supporting Globally Competitive Students

Coverage of education reform in the US has focused almost exclusively on structural issues: class size, teacher performance pay, and funding mechanisms. Yet as the debate focuses on the process of education, the media is not asking the most important substantive question facing educators today: how can we prepare students for working in the global and rapidly changing economy of the future?

*High schools will have to reevaluate not what they teach but how they empower their students to use information.*

Richard Murnane  
Harvard Graduate School of  
Education professor



Vanguard educators and administrators are grappling with global preparedness--a concept that demands not only a dramatic shift in focus but an uncanny amount of prescience. Educators today face the task of preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, and perhaps more startlingly, these jobs will use technology that hasn't yet been invented.

For American students, having a seat at the global work table will require more than traditional academic proficiency. Students will need to develop a broader range of complex communication and expert thinking skills, skills that will enable them to manage open-ended and unfamiliar situations. To remain competitive, students will need to be able to:

- ▶ **Seek and synthesize information**
- ▶ **Think critically about that information**
- ▶ **Adapt to change**
- ▶ **Work in a team**

## **The Challenge: Raising Expectations, Falling Resources**

Fostering these higher-order skills will be key to ensuring that students have the opportunity to thrive in a cross-disciplinary, technical world. Yet the need to raise expectations comes at a period when both time and money are in painfully short supply. Schools today are expected to accomplish more with less, and shrinking budgets and larger class sizes place seemingly crippling demands on dwindling resources. At the same time, an increase in ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity complicates the situation, as teachers and administrators scramble to facilitate learning environments that cater to individual students.

Amidst such challenges, how then can educators begin preparing students for entry into the global workforce—with no expectation of budget improvements or educational reform in sight?

## **Using Communication to Drive Global Competitiveness**

How do you drive global competitiveness at the micro-level of schools and classrooms? **The key is communication.** Targeted, proactive communication from schools to parents and to the larger community is a critical component in preparing students for their futures. Using tools most districts already have at their disposal, school leaders can build a collaborative education community that works together to ensure each and every student is ready to compete as a full-fledged member of the global workforce.

Education research has shown a strong and positive correlation between student achievement and parental involvement. Studies conducted by the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) showed that increased family involvement resulted in higher academic achievement, enhanced preparation, and an increase in earned credits. Additional studies have shown that enhanced communication between schools and parents significantly reduced absences, while communication regarding performance similarly resulted in “fewer disciplinary actions” and reduced behavioral issues.

Parental engagement can also have a meaningful impact on a district’s bottom line. Another study by researchers at Cornell University and the University of New Hampshire found that when a district’s parents talk with their children about their classroom activities and study habits, schools can achieve student performance outcomes roughly equivalent to an additional \$1,000 in per pupil spending.

Yet all types of communication are not created equally. While newsletters and event flyers may serve to help parents feel included in the school community, they do not always qualify as meaningful engagement, if for no other reason than because there is little guarantee that they will make it home, much less be read and acted upon. Parents become instrumental in student achievement when the information they receive is specific and targeted. While newsletters and event reminders report what is going on within the school and throughout the district, parents expect more. One-on-one communication relevant to individual student performance, like grade threshold notifications, helps create dialogue not just between parents and schools, but between parents and children. Parents who are aware of their child’s performance—in both positive and negative aspects—are more likely to become significantly involved, a key factor in helping students prepare for a global work environment.

Consistent and targeted communication, like messages about key district policy issues and meetings, can also be used to enhance parental advocacy. When parents are aware of the education issues at stake in the greater community, they can also advocate for meaningful change. Parents who are armed with information are more likely to know the class options available to their child, the scholarship opportunities open to them, and the funding issues that allow for additional programs and curriculum offerings in the school. These parents can then become effective advocates for higher standards and can implement change that better prepares students for a competitive life.



*Two-way communication between home and school helps build an on-going, productive, and trusting relationship between parents and educators, which increases parent participation in learning activities both at home and at school.*

*The Center for Innovation and Improvement*



*A synthesis of more than 51 parental and community engagement studies discovered that, in general, higher community involvement resulted in student benefits, including higher grade point averages, increased participation, and even improved social skills.*

## **Actively Involve the Greater Community.**

In the context of supporting the development of a global workforce, the role of community cannot be underestimated. While teachers and parents are obviously instrumental in learning and support, community leaders provide a critical bridge between students and the new and ever-changing work environment. Mentoring, internships, and other social activities and relationships can help students use and build upon global preparedness skills by participating in real world scenarios.

Some schools already boast of having strong and active networks within their communities; however, global preparedness demands a new level of interaction and commitment between schools, parents and influential figures within the community. In an environment where team building, expert thinking, and adaptability are critical to future success, the strength and effectiveness of any one school will become a function of the community as a whole. Businesses, higher education, and faith communities play a pivotal role in producing successful, productive members of society. Schools must engage and encourage participation from the larger community to help students grow and develop.

Strong relationships with local businesses and companies can help administrators and educators propel students to success after graduation. For many students, choosing a rewarding and fulfilling career path can be difficult as they are bound by the limited professional opportunities they are exposed to in classroom settings. School leaders, however, can help bridge the gap by facilitating relationships and building solid professional networks with the help and involvement of influential community members. Through online mentoring programs or regular career and professional networking events, schools and districts can help better prepare students by exposing them to new career opportunities and possibilities. With targeted communication, students, parents and the greater community are not only made aware of this available professional network, but they are also actively invited and encouraged to participate.

Many schools and districts have seen significant community participation and interaction via popular online social networking sites. With public profiles available to anyone in the community, school leaders can speak out directly to community members and influential leaders. As schools generally send information to parents of enrolled students, posting announcements, updates and meeting or event reminders within online forums distributes information among a larger network and encourages more dialogue between the schools and the community. By communicating through available, public channels, schools can establish and nurture a strong connection with the community, thus providing students with access to real work opportunities prior to graduation.

## Using Mass Notification to Drive Global Preparedness

Proactive, targeted communication is a critical tool in facilitating efforts for driving global preparedness. By connecting with parents and the community, educators enhance their ability to prepare students for a rapidly changing global workplace while simultaneously bringing their extended education community together. In light of existing and burgeoning time commitments and ever-present budget shortfalls, targeted communication does not have to be consuming and overwhelming. Fortunately, thanks to the advancement of technology, there are available tools that can be utilized to help schools and districts save time, money, and create efficiencies.

Mass notification services, once relegated to emergency communication use only, are now common and invaluable tools for educators committed to creating robust and interactive networks. Blackboard Connect, a mass notification service used by more than 1 in 3 K-12 schools nationwide, allows teachers and administrators to connect with parents and community leaders both globally and one-on-one. Information is shared daily throughout school districts across the country concerning student performance, district initiatives and more. The following case studies show how educators are using communication tools to improve parental engagement, communicate with community leaders, and enhance technology in the classroom—all significant drivers for facilitating global preparedness.

## Incorporate Targeted Proactive Notifications into Your Communications Plan

Students must be prepared to work in the global economy of tomorrow. In order to compete on a global level, students must develop a variety of higher-order skills. This challenge won't be easy to overcome, as educators must begin training students for jobs that will require tools that don't yet exist. Increased involvement and support from community stakeholders including businesses, local



*If the country is to remain competitive in the global economy, high school students must master 21st-century skills.*

Tony Wagner  
Co-Director of the Change  
Leadership Group  
Harvard Graduate School of Education



government and parents can help address the skills gap, but improved communications will be necessary to get whole communities involved.

Targeted, proactive communication is the key to ensuring every student has the skills necessary to compete in the global economy. Districts across the country are using communication to engage parents, encourage active involvement from the community leaders and incorporate better technology. Through routine and targeted messages, school leaders can actively involve parents and the greater community in producing strong, competent leaders of tomorrow.

Districts and schools can help prepare students for the jobs of tomorrow by using Blackboard Connect to communicate with parents and community members. Blackboard Connect helps districts create networks and facilitates the sharing of information, critical to ensuring students develop 21st century skills. It's a proven way to connect with your community, keeping them informed, involved, and prepared. If your district is interested in exploring the vast array of school to home mass communication options, contact Blackboard Connect to learn more.

## Case Study

*Attendance is key because it ties in directly to student achievement. If we can get our students to just come to school, they can pass the state assessments.*

Diane Turner  
Chief Communications Officer  
Federal Way Public Schools

## Improving Student Achievement

Federal Way Public Schools (FWPS) is located in eastern Washington, midway between Seattle and Tacoma. The district is the eighth largest in the state and serves more than 22,000 students. Approximately 46 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, and the district is one of the lowest funded in the state. Yet FWPS is identified as one of the top ten performers: students score well above the state average in assessments.

Before using a mass notification service, FWPS educators lacked a reliable, timely, efficient method for connecting with parents. “Parents received information through what we call ‘kid mail,’” said Diane Turner, the district’s chief communications officer. “We sent infrequent school newsletters, and a semimonthly district newsletter. Some schools might send the occasional email. All communications were sent in English. Our limitations were tremendous, and direct communications from the district itself were ineffective.”

Federal Way has employed the Blackboard Connect service since 2007 to send a wide variety of communications designed to engage and involve parents. “The timeliness and ease of the system allowed us to be much more efficient in all our communications,” said Turner. “Blackboard Connect immediately expanded our ability to make contact with and engage our parents.” The service also addressed the district’s need to reach parents for whom English is a second language. “There are 107 languages spoken in our district. Blackboard Connect allows us to connect with parents in their preferred language.”

Regular use of the Blackboard Connect service resulted in measurable district-wide improvements. By implementing daily attendance notification at both middle and secondary levels, the district experienced a 70 percent reduction in unexcused absences. The reduction was seen as critical to ensuring adequate student performance on standardized tests. Daily attendance notifications also increased parental engagement. “Parents now know when students are skipping class. As result, they are having more discussions with their children.”

## Engaging Parents

Located in the eastern coastal region of North Carolina, Beaufort County Schools (BCS) enrolls 7,000 students, of whom 60 percent qualify for free and reduced lunches. In the past few years, the area has experienced an influx of non-English speakers, and BCS has historically faced multidimensional challenges related both to economics and geography. District students are distributed over three attendance areas and 828 square miles, and 64 percent of students rely on district-funded transportation services. The district has one of the highest dropout rates in the state, and a significant percentage of parents work multiple jobs.

The district implemented AlertNow™, a service of Blackboard Connect, in 2008 and began using the service for a variety of messaging, including attendance notification, transportation updates, and emergency messages. For BCS, using a technology tool to communicate and stay in contact with parents has had a positive effect on parental involvement. “We are a low wealth area, and we have many parents who are working from one to three jobs. They want to be at the school, they want to be a part of things, but they’re simply working enough to keep the family going, so it’s not an option,” said Sarah Hodges, the district’s public information officer. “We’re getting feedback from working parents on how much it means to be able to stay connected.” Recently, a district principal received a thank you call from a parent of a child with known disciplinary problems. “The parent wanted to thank the principal for letting her know her child was absent. She basically said that she couldn’t do it all by herself and to know that the school was there to help her was very comforting.”



### Case Study

*Keeping parents involved is critical to student achievement. With AlertNow, we're able to engage parents in a consistent, timely, personalized manner. And our parents love it: we hear from them all the time about how much it means to them to be able to stay connected.*

Sarah Hodges  
Public Information Officer  
Beaufort County Schools

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