At Missouri’s Nixa Public Schools, a 10-year growth surge has created a community of tech-savvy, on-the-go families who demand better options for school-to-home communication than the usual paper flyer routine. Nixa realized that they needed a comprehensive communications and engagement strategy to meet the demands of their changing community, one that was easy to implement and adopt district wide. Choosing proven performance and reliability, Nixa selected a combination of services from Blackboard.

**CHALLENGE: Rising Expectation of Parents and Reaching Today’s “New” Family**

One of the greatest challenges the district has faced in recent years is a rising number of tech-savvy parents and a community that demands new forms of communication. “Today, parents need to be plugged in to know how they can help their kids to succeed,” says Zac Rantz, Chief Communications Officer for Nixa Public Schools, “If they know what’s going on, they can do something about it.”

The change in parent communication preference evolved over a ten-year span, during which Nixa experienced growth five times the national average and a student population increase of almost 50 percent. Along with the typical physical growing pains of providing facilities and teaching staff to accommodate this growth, the district’s administrators and teachers needed to adapt to new forms of communication to accommodate more families in the district: families comprised of more tech-savvy parents and students. “Today’s parents and students want communication that mirrors the rest of their lives,” says Rantz, “If we meet them where they already are, they will be more apt to stay involved and stay interested.”

In addition, Nixa experienced radical changes to the nature of family life. “We’ve really been focused on reaching all of our families—those traditional two-parent households and those with a ‘new’ family dynamic. At Nixa, several of our families contain split households and parents who work multiple jobs at odd hours, or are...
grandparents and alternative families,” says Rantz. “It’s been a challenge to get information out to them in various ways when there are so many preferences for how and when they want to be reached.” Although the district and its school sites had been accustomed to using multiple tools to communicate with parents, such as a web presence, e-mails, phone calls and flyers, Nixa needed an even better communication strategy, one that was all-encompassing with a single gateway to access the most important information for families.

SOLUTION: Parental Engagement and Communication Tools from Blackboard, featuring Connect, Engage and Mobile

Nixa adopted Blackboard’s suite of parental engagement and communication tools, including Blackboard Connect™ as its districtwide notification service, Blackboard Engage™ for website and classroom management needs, and a new custom mobile app from Blackboard that acts as a central point of communication for the community. In addition, the district was already using Blackboard Learn™ as their online learning platform for its 1,600 students at Nixa High School—another way they’ve responded to the needs of their students and parental expectations.

According to Rantz, these combined solutions have allowed Nixa Public Schools to reach its families and students across multiple channels in a consistent and comprehensive way. “When we engage our families on multiple levels, we give them an opportunity to actively support the success of every student. Parents can easily check their app, know when tests are coming up, and when progress reports are distributed. They have conversations with their child about their needs and have a better idea about how they can help them,” says Rantz. The same tools help to support a safe learning environment, especially with rapid notification during inclement weather and other emergency situations common to the region. “Parents know exactly where to go for information and what communication to expect from us,” says Rantz.

Nixa employs a straightforward best practice for successful communication and engagement. According to Rantz, “Our communications strategy is to be upfront with everybody. We want to be the first voice that they hear providing information, and to update them with constant communication.” Being proactive is an essential part of this strategy. “We will call media, versus them calling us,” Rantz says. “If we build their trust day to day with the small things, if and when something happens, that’s when you cash in the trust that you’ve built.”

To support this strategy, Nixa considered multiple services but ultimately selected Blackboard because of its comprehensive solution set and proven capabilities. According to Rantz, “We had already successfully made the transition with our notification system from Blackboard’s AlertNow service to Connect 5 and trusted the reliability level. We have history with Blackboard and it was best to stay with a company with a known success rate with systems we had already tested ourselves.” Adopting Engage as a webhosting solution and adding the mobile app were a natural progression for Nixa. “Our families are so engrained with technology and our administrators and teachers have come to expect that the latest tools will be made available to them,” says Rantz.
RESULTS: Improved Communication & Engagement, Superior Student Achievement

The Nixa community has embraced the district’s communication strategy with open arms. The Nixa Public Schools district app launched in November 2013 and had more than 4,000 active users download the app in the first 30 days since its debut, including parents, staff members and community supporters.

Parents and teachers alike appreciate Nixa’s district and school websites hosted through Blackboard Engage. About 85 percent of Nixa’s teachers actively utilize classroom pages as a central spot for calendars, classroom activities and blogs. “Offering the mobile view of our website earns the highest and most positive feedback,” says Rantz. “Parents are so excited that there is a mobile version of the website and I would say they get about 50 percent of their information this way, especially what’s most relevant to them—from assignments and grades to calendars and upcoming events. It’s another way Nixa is meeting parents where they are in the way they want to receive information.”

Notifications remain extremely important for both urgent and outreach communications in a diverse community, with over 500 building and district Connect messages sent out in 2013 alone. “We use every feature Connect offers,” says Rantz, “and regular principal reminders sent in multiple languages make every family feel like part of the school community.” Nixa has pioneered some of Connect’s more sophisticated features, such as mode prioritization and two-way messaging. “With some messages, we’ll start out by texting to 90 percent of our families, almost 8,000 of our parents who prefer text. We know who’s received the text, and only those who haven’t receive a subsequent e-mail. By the time we get to a third tier of communication via phone calls, there are literally less than 20 calls that need to be made. Mode prioritization helps us to avoid over-communicating, and principals and parents really love that.”

And how has all of this improved communication impacted student achievement? Nixa Public Schools ranks #1 for best test scores in communication arts and math among Springfield area school districts, based on the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) tests for both the 2011-12 and 2012-13 school years. Rantz points to effective use of Blackboard’s technology combined with stronger engagement from parents, and dedicated teachers and administrators armed with better communication tools, as factors in the district’s continued academic success.

“Communication is the backbone to success,” says Rantz, “Administrators and teachers find these solutions to be great tools in their toolbox for education resources. Parents love it—we’d have a riot on our hands if we tried to take any of these tools away. They stay engaged and can choose what mode they want to receive information, especially with the popularity of texting. Students are experiencing real, documented success in our schools and we couldn’t have done it without the Blackboard family.” •

Learn more about Blackboard Connect, Blackboard Engage and our K-12 Central mobile app at blackboard.com/K12 or by calling 800.424.9299.