

Are schools in denial about parental communications?

94% of schools rate their school communications as ‘good’ or better.

But are they just kidding themselves?

Schools are spending more and more time communicating with parents... but parents are feeling increasingly disengaged. What’s going wrong? Find out and read tips for building a better parental engagement strategy.

reach more parents by weduc

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Introduction

School communications is becoming increasingly complex; there are more ways to reach parents than ever; there's a myriad of software systems to choose from and new technology has emerged delivering more time, efficiency and engagement benefits.

However, the basic need for good parental engagement remains unchanged: the more engaged parents are in their children's learning the better children are likely to do.

This report explores the status of parental communications in schools; the trends and strategies schools are adopting to deal with current issues. It reveals some concerning trends which may not be apparent to schools and provides insights and tips on how to avoid pitfalls and build a successful parental engagement strategy.

Background

Up until modern communication technology became embedded in society, the main way schools conversed with parents was via the printed letter. When email and text (SMS) messaging became mainstream in the early 2000s new software services emerged which recognised the benefit this new technology could provide schools, replacing the printed letter with a simpler, more efficient, and reliable electronic alternative. Technology has continued to evolve and more recently 'in-app' messaging has become 'the norm'. Software companies quickly realised how this new technology could further enhance school/parent engagement and solve some of the inherent problems with emails and text messages.

In recent years social media has been increasingly used in school communications strategies, with many schools using two or more channels to engage parents and communities.

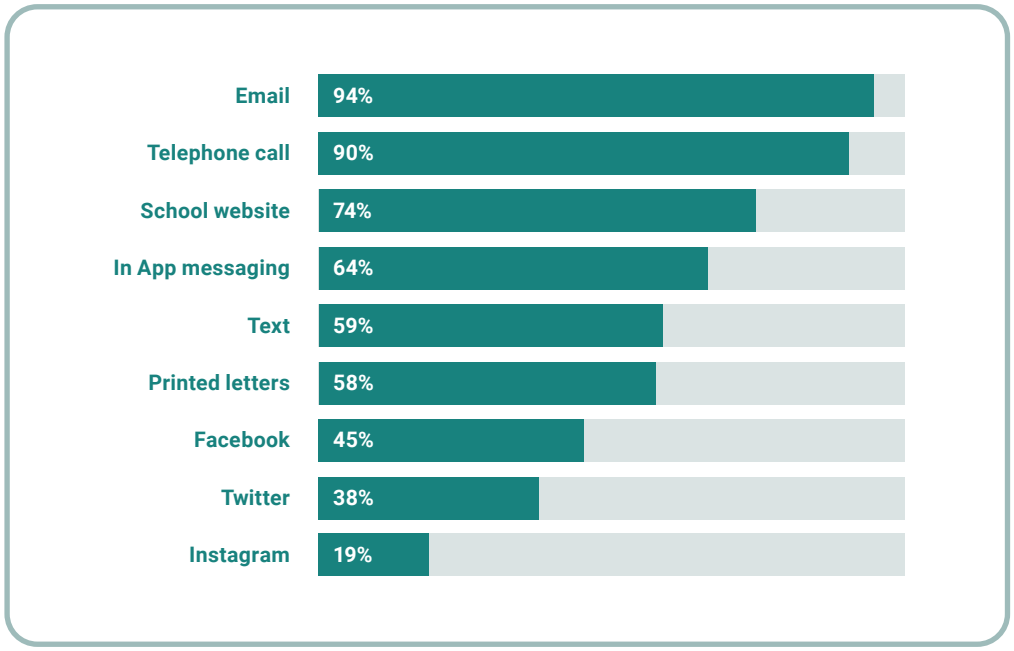
For many schools they are now in a period of transition; most have stopped or are phasing out paper letters; many who have used email and text messaging for some time are assessing app-based services. Others are reviewing their use of social media and some who initially switched to using MIS communications functionality are now reviewing its effectiveness.

Wherever your school is on its communications journey, this report has been compiled to help inform or even shortcut some decisions you may need to make.

School communication trends

Compared to 2023, our annual school communication survey in 2024 has revealed some interesting and sometimes concerning trends in school's use of systems and communications channels.

The chart below shows the different communications channels schools are using and the percent of schools using them



Use of email increased despite concerns schools have around messages getting lost in busy parent's inboxes and similar concerns determining if emails have been read.

Use of text messaging has increased even though schools view this channel as having the most limitations.

Printed letter use has increased. Whilst digital channels emerged to replace this costly and labour-intensive method – some schools are clearly reverting to it, possibly due to lack of confidence in their current system.

Use of social media channels has also risen. Despite concerns about no control or ability to moderate conversations and extra workloads involved. Some schools are perhaps also unaware of the potential pitfalls and concerns surrounding social media, with regards to photos and any GDPR and security issues.

Overall, these results point to some worrying trends in school's use of communication channels and helps to highlight the complex landscape schools are now having to navigate.

Communication chaos: when less is more

The parent's perspective

School communications is a two-way street. To be able to analyse school communications strategies it's important to first understand the parent's perspective. Our 2023 Parent Communications survey revealed insightful information.

86% of parents said they would like a high level of communication with their child's school – but 40% say they don't feel a high level of engagement...



40% of parents say they don't feel a high level of engagement with their child's education

When looking into why parents aren't feeling as engaged as they would like, it's clear that frequency of communication is playing a significant role.

85% of parents that feel engaged with their child's school believe the frequency of communication they receive is about right. But for those parents who aren't feeling engaged, only 34% say the same. This disparity clearly highlights a correlation between frequency of communication and engagement.

When looking into the message frequency of parents who experience a high level of engagement, they typically receive five communications per week. In comparison, parents that don't feel engaged but would like to be, typically receive just one. Equally the survey revealed that too many messages could also switch parents off, so a broadcast approach doesn't appear to work either. Parents who expressed a high level of engagement were comfortable receiving around five school messages a week.

Compounding the frequency issue is the number of irrelevant messages parents are receiving. Of those parents who feel disengaged, only 18% say the communication they receive is either always or mostly relevant. The remaining parents are left to scan through messages and work out which require reading in full, and which don't.

Of the parents that do feel engaged, 79% say the communication is always or mostly relevant, highlighting a clear correlation between relevant communication and engagement. With many parents already feeling uninformed and disconnected, this can create a scenario of a significant number of pupils not getting the support they need at home.

Key takeaways

- **Parents want to be more engaged with their children's education**
- **Be careful not to over (or under) whelm parents with messages**
- **Make sure messages you send parents are targeted and relevant to them**
- **If you use in-app communications, deliver all of your communications to your app to keep in one place for parents**

2024 survey analysis: how schools deliver parental communications

Effectiveness of school communications

We asked schools when they send messages to parents what percent typically read and respond:

- Only 13% of schools say they regularly reach over 90% of parents
- 32% of schools reach less than 70% of their parents
- 54% of schools typically reach between 70% and 90% of parents

Separately, schools were asked if they checked if parents read their messages and 43% said either 'they can't' or it was by 'gut feel'.

Today, most people own a smart phone, capable of downloading apps, adding email accounts and receiving text messages. In this now 'digital age' it raises the question why more schools are not reaching more of their parents?

It's not the parents that schools regularly reach that are the problem, it's the subsequent work involved in contacting, chasing and reminding those that schools can't reach.

What's going wrong – or not working as well as it could?



Increasing channels

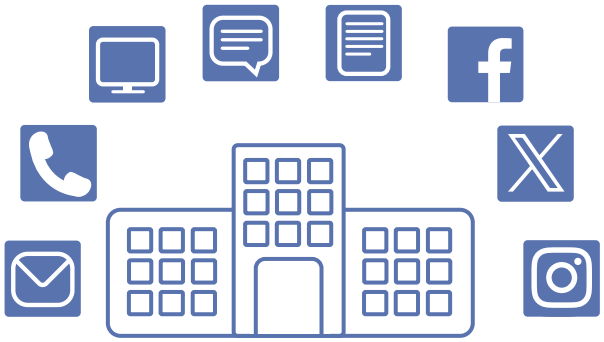
We asked schools how many different channels they use to communicate with parents.

There are a growing number of channels and communications software services available to schools – in fact our survey found over 40 different systems being used across all schools!

It's clearly a struggle for schools to work out the best solution so many seem now to opt for a 'let's do everything' approach – in the hope maybe that at least one will reach parents.

The table below shows how many different channels schools are managing

Email	94%
Telephone call	90%
School website	74%
In-app messaging	64%
Text	59%
Printed letters	58%
Facebook	45%
Twitter	38%
Instagram	19%



Inevitably, sending messages out across multiple channels increases workload and complexity for schools.

It also increases complexity for parents too. Reading duplicate messages in several places can be confusing and make it difficult to know where best to head to get information on their child's education. Whereas school communications apps put their information all in one place.

"Email and app alerts are for the same messages so we're bombarded throughout the day. It's constant but I don't want to miss anything."

Primary school parent

"All these apps are good, but with different schools using different apps, it is hard to keep up with them."

Primary school parent

"Too many different platforms to be used for trips, messages, payments and permission forms."

Business Manager, primary school

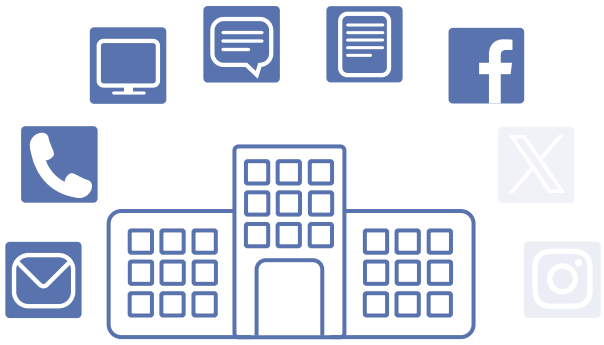
Main communications channels

We asked schools which was their main channel for contacting parents.

Email, and in-app messaging are the main channels schools use to communicate with parents with 93% using one of these methods.

The main communications channels

Email	42%
In-app messaging	40%
Text	11%
Telephone call	4%
School website	2%
Printed letters	1%
Facebook	1%
Twitter	0%
Instagram	0%



45% of schools using in-app messaging as their main channel said they had 'excellent' communications with parents

When looking at these channels from a parent's perspective, in-app messaging was clearly the parent's preferred choice with 97% saying they either 'always' or 'mostly' read school communications delivered this way.

Surprisingly, a small proportion of schools use their website as the main channel for communicating with parents, with no mechanism of targeting parents or assessing who has read messages - and some still sending printed letters home despite the cost and time involved.

"We send lots of communications and then have to spend a lot of time checking that parents have read them and re-communicating messages."

Teacher, primary school

Primary and secondary school comparison

43% of primary schools have progressed to using in-app messaging as their main channel for communicating with parents and of those 58% said this has only a ‘small’ or ‘some’ impact on admin time.

This contrasts with schools using other communication channels, where 76% say they consume ‘high’ or ‘significant’ levels of admin time.

Typically, secondary schools (75%) are using older email and text technology systems or other methods to communicate with parents.

With the result that 56% of secondary schools spend a ‘high’ or ‘significant’ proportion of their time communicating with parents.

Key takeaways

- **Despite the availability of technology just 13% of school regularly reach 90% of their parents**
- **Schools are using more channels to reach parents, and without the right technology to support them, this will increase complexity and staff workloads**
- **Schools using in-app messaging had ‘excellent’ communications with parents.**



“It is unclear whether parents are reading messages as we cannot track. This also means we cannot target parents to get them engaged.”

Marketing and Communications Manager, independent secondary school

Schools highlight the following channel limitations



Channel limitations

We asked schools if they thought there were any limitations with the main communications channel they use to communicate with parents.

Text messaging was the channel schools felt had the most limitations with the following aspects scoring highest:

- Can't tell if parents have read messages (48%)
- Parents can't reply to messages (35%)
- It's expensive for the school (32%)
- Can't send attachments (34%)

Schools using email was in second place with the following limitations:

- Messages can get lost in busy inboxes (40%)
- Can't tell if parents have read messages (66%)
- Parents can't reply to messages (54%)

57% of schools who cite in-app messaging as their main channel of communications say that there are no limitations to their comms.

As school communications technology has evolved from text to email and now to in-app messaging, each step has delivered improved benefits and removed limitations and restrictions of previous methods.

Key takeaways

- **Communication channels continue to evolve and improve, but not all schools have the right technology to take advantage of them**
- **Email and text messaging have the most limitations as a primary communications channel**
- **In-app messaging is the most effective communications channel for both schools and parents**

Mastering messaging

Balancing frequency

We asked schools how many messages they typically send to parents each week.

It's not easy for schools to find the optimum balance between too many and too little communications, but the impact is fundamental, resulting in parents feeling either sufficiently informed, disengaged or overwhelmed.

The table below shows the percent of schools sending the corresponding number of messages each week

1 message	2%
2 messages	5%
3 messages	10%
4 messages	8%
5 messages	16%
6 messages	6%
7 messages	3%
8 messages	5%
9 messages	0%
10 messages	6%
More than 10 messages	39%

Research has found that 5 messages to parents a week is the optimum

"We try to minimise the volume they receive, only one "whole school" communication is sent each week"

Business Manager, secondary school

"We do overload info on commendations, demerits, detentions, events etc and now parents miss key bits of info."

Assistant Headteacher, secondary school

The results from this question are surprising with 45% of schools saying they send 10 or more messages to parents each week.

It's important to view this from a parent's perspective; For example, if a parent has two or more children at school – or attending different schools – they could be overwhelmed with receiving over 20 school messages every week!

It's equally important to consider possible 'disengagement' taking place with 25% of schools saying they send less than 5 messages per week.

For those parents who aren't feeling engaged and want to be engaged, 66% felt the frequency of communication was either too high or too low.

Parents who expressed a high level of engagement were comfortable receiving around 5 school messages a week… but it seems many schools are exceeding this considerably and struggling to find a good balance.

Just 16% of schools are hitting the parent sweet spot of sending 5 messages per week. 51% of these schools say that their communication is very good with most of their parents responding or actioning communications.

Targeting and inclusivity

We asked schools the extent to which they target messages to parents.

Schools can help encourage parents to read messages by making sure they are always relevant. Sending messages en masse or "broadcasting", unless relevant, can result in parents being overwhelmed and missing important communications.

Message targeting makes sure every message sent to a parent is relevant to them; it can be used in a number of ways from targeting simple year groups to communicating with specific SEND and EAL families.

Our survey found that:

Only 23% of schools send highly targeted communications

And 37% of schools have no ability to target groups of parents

Of schools achieving 90-100% parent engagement, 68% sent either 'very' or 'mostly' targeted communications to parents. This is in direct contrast to schools only achieving 0-50% parent engagement with almost half of these schools doing limited or no targeting of their communications, sharing that their communications are only 'somewhat' targeted.

Furthermore, 31% of schools sending 10 or more messages a week said their communications were either 'not very' or only 'somewhat' targeted. This suggests these schools are sending messages en masse or "broadcasting" and therefore are not always relevant to parents.

A number of schools highlighted challenges around inclusivity, in particular communicating with EAL families.

Message targeting can be an effective way of communicating with EAL families where schools can create separate groups for different language families and use these to send pre-translated content.

For schools using in-app messaging this can be taken a stage further with systems offering dynamic language translation, which will automatically convert school sent English content into a parent's chosen language.

Key takeaways

- **Schools using careful message targeting achieve higher parent engagement**
- **Frequently sending messages en masse or "broadcasting" can result in parents missing communications**
- **Message targeting and automatic translations can help engaging EAL, SEND and other parent groups**

"We communicate well with them, but they do not do so well communicating back to us. Over half of our children do not have English as their primary language at home."

Business Manager, primary school

"We cannot get the balance right. We have complaints of not enough information and complaints of too much. We have to ensure we do cater to our large EAL community."

Office Manager, primary school

"We do communicate well with our parents however, that doesn't mean that our parents either see it or respond."

Office Admin, primary school

Social media in schools

We asked schools if they use social media to communicate with parents.

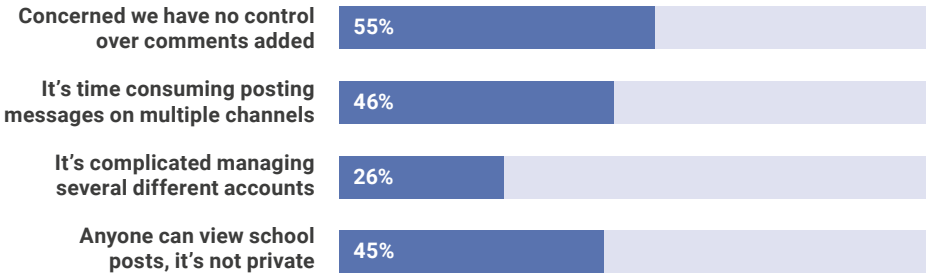
Our research shows schools are increasingly using social media, with 65% now saying they use it as a channel to communicate with parents.



65% of schools say they use social media as a channel to communicate with parents.

However, schools that don't use social media choose not to because of specific concerns around security and privacy as well as creating additional workload.

Reasons schools choose not to use social media



Social media might seem a quick, easy and potentially cost effective, solution to communicating with parents but as some schools highlight, there are very real, significant issues around GDPR, privacy and security which if not understood and managed properly can pose significant risk.

Due to the lack of privacy controls in social media, the 'whipping themselves into frenzy' example to the right may be all too familiar for many schools.

Whilst social media may be the modern day norm, it has limited functionality, no ability to target specific parent groups and schools cannot see who has read posts. This makes using social media as a main channel for parental engagement difficult and ineffective, without the right technology to support it.

"We think good, a group of parents think not. But since covid it is like parents have had all common sense leave the building and need constant reminders and reassurances. They also whip themselves up into a frenzy on social media and class WhatsApp."

Headteacher, primary school

Impact on workload

We asked schools how much time they spent communicating with parents.

More schools are using more channels to reach parents and inevitably this is increasing workload when it is not properly supported by their communications platform. The graph below shows the impact this is having on admin time.



45% of schools say parental communications consumes either a 'high' or 'significant' amount of admin time.

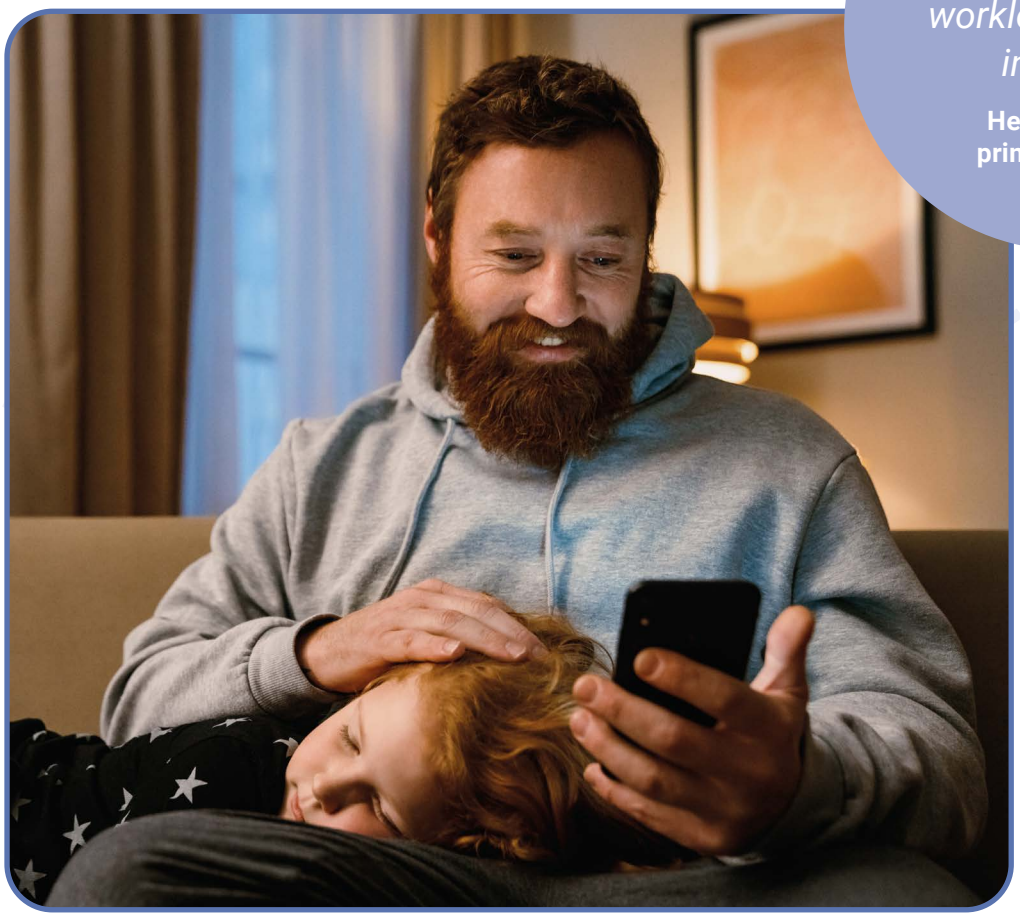
Of these:

- 24% are managing 9 different communications channels
- 60% are managing 5 or more different channels
- 24% of these schools are managing 3 social media channels
- 60% are still sending printed letters home to parents

The increase in the number of communications channels, coupled with the work required to chase and remind parents who are not engaging with school communications, could be key reasons why admin workload levels are rising.

"It often feels like a lot of additional workload without impact."

Headteacher, primary school



Parent and school satisfaction

We asked schools the extent to which they and their parents are satisfied with their communications solution:

- 27% of schools are less than satisfied with their communications solution
- 30% of parents are less than satisfied with their school's communication solution
- 63% of schools described their parental communications 'very good' or 'excellent'
- 37% thought their parental engagement strategy could be improved.

Our parent survey highlighted some concerns among parents:

"Currently no ability to reply to messages received"

"It's not clear or concise. Everything is from the schools perspective with no accounting for working parents"

"It would be good to get alerts for essential information"

Key takeaways

- **Schools are spending an increasing amount of time communicating with parents but not being as effective as they think**
- **Almost a third of schools and parents are dissatisfied with their communication solution**
- **Many schools think their parental engagement strategy is excellent, but the evidence suggests otherwise**

"We are very good at communicating with parents, they are not so good at communicating with us!"

Senior Executive Officer, primary school

Hit and miss

Could be better

Room for improvement

Unsatisfactory

Needs work

Improving but still basic

Needs improving

Work in progress

Lots of room for improvement

So, what does good look like?

The blueprint to getting it "just right"

Our research shows that schools are working hard to deliver good communications with parents but are struggling to engage them.

In 2023 we conducted a Parent Survey which highlighted a number of key factors parents said would help them with school communications.

From parents' perspective, communication should be:

- **Targeted** – 'Is it for me?'
- **Relevant** – 'Will it be useful to me?'
- **Timely** – 'Have I been given enough time to action?'
- **Considerate** – "Is there too much or too little?"

Below is a checklist designed to help schools review and shape their parental engagement strategy. Print this page to use as a guide!

- ◯ If possible, use a mobile app as your main communication channel
- ◯ Use system reports to check your engagement
- ◯ Use systems that will automatically translate to help with EAL families
- ◯ Review, and if necessary, rationalise the number of channels you use
- ◯ Decide which communications channels you are going to use for what purpose
- ◯ Be clear with your parents what information will be published where
- ◯ Aim to send around 5 messages a week to parents
- ◯ Limit social media use to school promotions and broadcasting emergency messaging
- ◯ Build parent groups and accurately target your messages
- ◯ Plan message sends to give parents sufficient time to respond
- ◯ Digitise your forms and avoid sending paper letters
- ◯ Cater to SEND families with visual communications, helpful reminders and software that enables two-way communication and all in one place

ReachMoreParents customers reap the benefits of a modern communication platform that helps them implement an effective communications strategy that increases their parental engagement.

If you would like to learn more about what ReachMoreParents can do to help your school's parental engagement visit reachmoreparents.com

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