

Technology - The Future of Family Engagement

- Lightbulb icon: Districts struggle to engage the majority of families, even using 12+ methods.
- Lightbulb icon: Private, social networks, systemic approaches making an impact in family engagement.

District Administration and LivingTree partnered in December 2016 to explore the issue of family engagement in schools by surveying district leaders around the country. Over 300 administrators responded to the survey describing the levels of engagement in their districts, the approach they take, tools they use to engage families, and what role social platforms can play in these efforts.

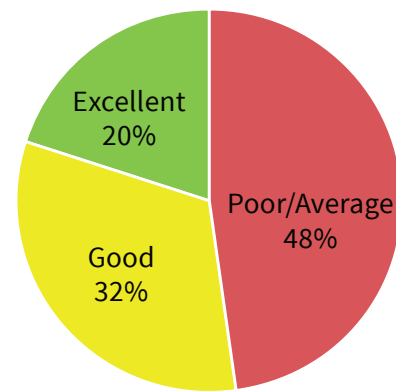
Family engagement is the number one driver of student success. Engaged families result in lower truancy rates, higher test scores and higher graduation rates. Having positive relationships with families reduces teacher stress and increases their sense of community and belonging. Unfortunately, family engagement is hard.

Only **1** in **5** schools report having more than 50% of families engaged.



When asked to describe the level of family engagement in their district overall, 48% of administrators said it was “Poor” or “Average”, with less than one quarter of their families being engaged. Another 32% described it as “Good,” with one quarter to one half of families engaged, while just 20% said “Excellent,” or more than half of families engaged.

Administrator Description of Family Engagement

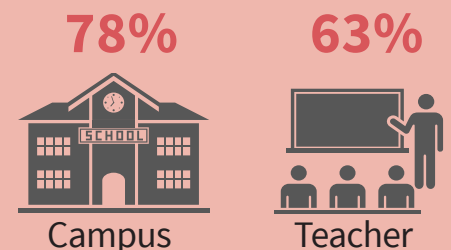


■ Excellent ■ Good ■ Poor/Average

Given the difficulty in engaging families, understanding who bears responsibility and how they’re communicating are the most important factors to achieving success. As districts pursue the benefits of family engagement and seek to address state and national mandates such as the Every Student Succeeds Act, defining who and how is critical.

Who is responsible for family engagement?

Even though **77%** of district leaders say they are pursuing a school or district wide approach, the reality is that this responsibility is carried out at the campus or classroom level, with **78%** of administrators citing principals and **63%** citing teachers as the leader responsible for engaging families. With campus and classroom leaders tasked with this responsibility, what is the impact on families?



The importance of a district wide or systemic approach

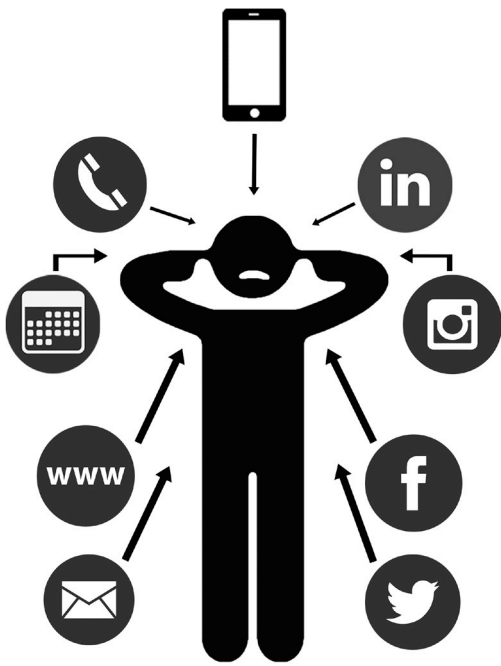
For families, a classroom-by-classroom or campus-by-campus approach is typically extremely chaotic and overwhelming. As the primary responsible party, each teacher is often using a different method, or worse, a parent is going to a different website for every teacher. Teachers are charged with setting up the website, group or tool, as well as keeping after parents to pay attention or join, wasting valuable time for both educators and families. Parents are being pursued by multiple teachers to pay attention to various tools, set up various accounts, etc. With a district wide or systemic approach, these burdens can be alleviated for both families and teachers.

“Often, an unengaged family is one who is at either end of a communication spectrum - either completely unreached, or conversely, overwhelmed with the amount of communication. **A district wide approach** to family engagement consistent at the class, grade, school, and district level can help with both reaching and simplifying conversation for and with all of these families,” says Eden Jones-Hinds, a principal in Houston ISD.



How are we engaging?

Even with a district wide approach intended, district leaders identified more than **12 different tools** they are using to engage families.



Of the twelve methods used, in-person events and phone calls were ranked first in effectiveness. However, when asked to identify their biggest challenges in fostering family engagement, the top answer was “Parents and families not having time for events,” followed by “Low event attendance” and “Difficulty reaching and maintaining contact with parents.”

“Building true relationships is an important part of school-family partnership. In-person events and phone calls are some of the most valuable family engagement opportunities schools provide,” says Joni Carswell, CEO of LivingTree. “But given the busy schedules of today’s families and advances in technology, **the future is social, mobile and available system wide**. With busy communities and FCC regulations on phone calls, the method used to connect with families is the most important decision in driving attendance at events and attention to information shared.”

Using inconsistent and an overwhelming number of methods to reach families, or using methods that force families to seek information such as public media or websites, can also act as barriers to ongoing conversation. So how do we reach and maintain contact in order to increase attendance and build relationships?

Social media can provide an opportunity to bridge the gap by keeping families engaged with their districts on mobile and with minimal time commitment. Private social media builds on this by replacing the current hodgepodge of tools and efforts. 100% of schools using private social media specifically designed for family engagement say it has improved family engagement.

75% of administrators say they are using public social media platforms to engage families, but **45%** say they have “privacy or security concerns,” while **21%** say these platforms “aren’t built for educators and families.”

100%

Of administrators say private social media has improved family engagement.

There’s a better way to engage with your families. To learn more about how LivingTree can help you simplify family engagement, stop using so many tools, and include everyone, visit www.livingtree.com. Join in the conversation and follow us on Twitter @RaiseThePride or Facebook @LivingTree.

