# Parent-Update

## http://www.parent-update.com

## (800) 906-9759

The Need for Innovation in School
Communication Systems

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*This white paper was developed in association with the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire College of Education and Human Sciences by Jason D. Peterson, under the supervision of Dr. Dwight C. Watson, Associate Dean of Teacher Education.*

## Executive Summary

In a time when communication technology is becoming increasingly convenient, affordable and useful in almost all areas of our culture, there are still some discrepancies in the distribution and use of these technologies. One institution that has been lagging behind is the public education system. The world of business is saturated in new technologies, healthcare facilities are required to have minimum technological standards, even universities and private schools must stay on top of new technologies to compete in their fields. But public schools, where the majority of American school-age students are enrolled, have no consumer base to fund technology, no universal minimum technological standards, and no financed competition. In such a field, where costs are high and funding is hard to come by, technological progress is just one of the many challenges public schools face, but one that must be met to ensure that the public education system can keep up with students, families, and the changing environment. This paper describes the deficiencies in current school communication technologies, and offers an affordable solution that will help put our public education system on the right path and has the versatility to meet the future needs of a rapidly changing society.

## Background

EDUCATION QUALITY AND PARENT INVOLVEMENT

"The research overwhelmingly demonstrates that parent involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement. Further, the research shows that the more intensively parents are involved in their children's learning, the more beneficial are the achievement effects. This holds true for all types of parent involvement in children's learning and for all types and ages of students."

— *Parent Involvement in Education (Kathleen Cotton)*

It's simple.  When parents get involved in their children's education, the children work harder and achieve more.  Parents who encourage and participate in the learning process are, in essence, extending the learning environment beyond the classroom and into the homes and the lives of their children.  They are also diminishing the effect of the home being a retreat from the classroom where students may often forget about, or even generate disdain for their schoolwork.  In keeping updated about the various elements of their children's education, parents have access to the information needed to promote satisfactory learning trends and study habits: "Parent involvement results in students attaining higher academic achievement, more positive attitudes about homework, and improved perceptions of their own competence" (Brannon 62).  When we speak of education, it is important to remember that this is the basic preparation for higher learning and life-long careers.  If the students are to succeed in the world, they should be given the best possible preparation, and since parent involvement is gaining recognition in educational studies as a successful method of improving student achievement levels, it is imperative that schools and parents also recognize this and develop ways of making parent involvement more convenient and effective.

DIFFICULTIES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

There are countless factors in today's society that make it difficult for parents to stay as involved in their children's education as they would like to be.  Parents may have

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scheduling conflicts that keep them from attending parent-teacher conferences. Teachers may not have the time to speak about issues over the phone.  Students may refuse to bring their grades home or speak with their parents about the things they need help with.  It is difficult for parents and teachers to alter their routines and commitments in such a drastic measure as to counter and resolve these kinds of issues (Van Velsor), and children cannot always be counted on to communicate all the necessary information to their parents (Stott).  Furthermore, the socioeconomic status of the parents becomes problematic because "parents with low SES and from different ethnic and cultural background than the mainstream culture, whose children would most benefit from parental involvement, are more likely to find it difficult to become and remain involved" (Berthelsen & Walker 35).  With this kind of limited access to information about their children's education, parents miss out on important opportunities to guide and encourage them, and respond to their needs.  It is in reply to these concerns that companies like ours utilize modern communication technologies to bridge the gap between school and home, struggle and success, parents and their children's education.


TECHNOLOGY AS KEY IN PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Technology enables parents to be updated about their children's progress in school without the hassle and schedule conflicts of face-to-face methods.  Parents can receive important information such as attendance records, grades, behavior reports, and upcoming events, in a language of their choosing, simply by dialing a phone number and providing a pass code.  They can call any time of day, any day of the week.  This method of information-on-demand removes the obstacles of misinterpretation (due to language barriers) and misinformation (given by students who may be afraid of consequences) from parents' understanding of their children's educational situation, clearing a path for increased parent involvement and healthy learning.

BRIEF HISTORY OF SCHOOL COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

As technology developed throughout the years, districts began implementing automated calling systems that would call a student's home number and leave a message if the student was absent from school.  Companies providing these out-bound calling systems competed by offering more features such as detention notifications, school closings, and incident reports.  Still, there was no way for a parent to call the school and get detailed information without speaking to a staff member, so the hours in which a parent could call were limited, and the information available risked impressionism on part of the staff member taking the call.

Only recently have districts begun implementing in-bound calling systems, where information is kept in an electronic database and can be accessed by parents via telephone.  Website-hosted databases have also appeared on the scene, but the problem with both of these methods so far is that the cost to implement these technologies in a school is too great for under-financed schools or schools located in communities with high poverty rates.  And since these schools enroll the highest number of students with low achievement rates, the people who need these technologies the most are the ones who are not getting access to them.

## Need

LIMITS ON LOW-INCOME/MINORITY ACCESS TO THE INTERNET

The majority of low-income and minority families do not have access to the internet at home. According to a recent survey, only 41 percent of Blacks and Hispanics use a computer at home compared to 77 percent of Whites (DeBell).  However, research is indicating that most schools with high populations of minority and low-income

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students do use out-bound calling systems. For these reasons, it is not yet beneficial to offer a web-based system to help the parents stay involved in their children's education, but seeing as how calling systems are already in place, an upgrade to in-bound systems is the next best thing.  Like with internet-based systems, in-bound systems provide a wider range of information to parents which increases the effectiveness of parent involvement, saving the schools both time and money: "schools would need to increase per-pupil spending by more than $1,000 in order to achieve the same results that are gained with parental involvement" (Viadero 4).

DRAWBACKS OF CURRENT PHONE-BASED SYSTEMS

According to a recent survey of schools with high enrollment rates for children of low-income and minority parents, most of the parents are not satisfied with the information available from the out-bound calling system at their children's school; many of them have reported problems with dropped calls and limited details ("School/Parent Communication").  Out-bound systems are also directed to fixed telephone numbers, which does not allow parents to receive the information until they are near the phone or can check their messages.  A more recent concern is the growing disappointment in current phone-based systems that only provide information in English.  The latest government poll indicates that 18% of families in the U.S. speak no English at home, while 13% speak only Spanish ("School Enrollment").  In order to motivate parents to continue to use phone-based systems to stay in touch with the education of their children, it is important that all of these concerns are addressed.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS SHOW FUTURE INCREASE IN NEED

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According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the school dropout rate for Whites in 2007 was 4% less than for Blacks, and a 24% less than for Hispanics.  Meanwhile, population projections for 2025 show significantly more growth among minorities than Whites.  In the Midwest alone, the Black population is expected to rise 34%, Hispanic 59%, while Whites are predicted to grow just 5%.  Furthermore, the expected national increase in school enrollment for Hispanics will rise 166% by 2050, while non-Hispanic enrollment will only increase by 4% (Fry).  Here, it becomes evident that the minority population is in the most danger of accruing low-achievement levels due to dropout rates, and yet they are by the far fastest growing population.  Because of this, it is clear that minorities are the most in need and will potentially benefit more from an increase in parent involvement and the new technologies that make it easier for parents to stay involved.

# Solution

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE FAMILY

Parent-Update is a phone-based, user-friendly, family-oriented information communication system.  As an "in-bound" calling system, it allows parents with limited or no internet access to call from any phone at any time to access a password-protected database that will provide them with updates about their children, including grades, performance reports, teacher notes, and other valuable information—much more than is currently available through out-bound systems, and with an interface that eliminates dropped calls.  For families that do not speak English, information is also available in Spanish, and the versatility of the programming allows for available future languages to be added and integrated with ease.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE SCHOOL

For the benefit of the schools, Parent-Update works with any Internet, client server, or internally developed school administration system, and will automatically generate messages from data captured by the school's existing system.  Not underestimating the value of parent involvement, participating schools are sure to see a rise in achievement levels, particularly (as studies suggest) for students of low-income and minority families.  As achievement rates go up in these areas, dropout rates will no doubt come down.  Likewise, a steady and timely line of communication is sure to improve the relationship between parents and the school.  The only question left is cost, and this is what makes Parent-Update truly unique.  Schools with small budgets are our target candidates because, with Parent-Update, the majority of the cost is paid for by the community.

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY

Parent-Update relies on partnerships with local businesses from the target school's community to lower the cost to the school.  By allotting space for brief advertisements in the system menus, the money paid by the businesses for the advertisements goes directly toward the cost of the product.  This benefits the schools by reducing costs, helps local businesses build their customer base, and gives families a new set of tools to help stay involved in their children's education. Parent-Update is an asset to the whole community.

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# Small Business Support Services - Overview

Small Business Support Services (SBSS) provides high functioning, low maintenance, reasonably priced Internet based software and application services to schools, churches and small businesses.

We have a unique ability to understand core issues associated with small businesses, churches and small and medium schools and school districts. We also have the ability to develop unique and innovative solutions.  These solutions are affordable and can be maintained with minimal overhead and resources.  We have access to, and business affiliations with many business management, educational content and IT experts.

SBSS was formed in 1986 to provide accounting and tax services and develop customized accounting systems for small businesses.  The company later branched into the development of customized software for clients in other industries.  We have developed customized Real Estate Management, Church Management, Funeral Directors Management, and even Newspaper Agency Management programs.  **SBSS develops customized software that is specifically designed to meet the exact needs of individual clients.**

The first system designed for general distribution was a school telephone-calling (InfoLine) program written in response to a request from several Chicago Public School System (CPS) principals who were unhappy with features in other calling systems.  Many Chicago Public Schools used this system for years.  Eventually CPS contracted with AT&T to provide calling services district wide.  Even then, many schools continue using InfoLine because of its value and flexibility.

Some of our current products for general distribution are **AdPage Plus**, a web based business directory program that displays business information in a multi-media format and **Call Manager Plus** used by Physical Therapists, Occupation Therapists, Chiropractors and other medical professionals whose patients regularly have multiple appointments, at different times, in a week.

Our most recent education products are *Info-Line Plus* and *Parent-Update* systems. These are both web based, turnkey solutions designed for a broad spectrum of schools both private and public.  These products enable communication with families of all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and languages. These products are designed to provide timely communication on attendance, discipline, homework assignments, and progress reports.

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