

The TransParent School Model: New Technology for Parent Involvement

A model that links telephones with computers is enabling teachers to communicate with parents daily, and both parties are delighted.

Teachers, administrators, and parents have long recognized the positive influence of good parental involvement. What parents want from the school is also well known. Comer (1988) has summarized parents' interests:

First, they want to know what is going on in school and how their child is doing. Second, they want to know how the "system" works and how they can be a part of it. Third, they want to know what they can do with their child at home to help him or her achieve in school (pp. 9-10).

Yet many parents are *not* knowledgeable about their child's school program, homework assignments, or how to help at home. For example, the 1987 Gallup Poll reported that 41 percent of public school parents say they are "not well informed" about the local school (Gallup and Clark 1987). This obvious disparity has long been resistant to change, but the application of new technologies can now open the lines of communication between schools and homes.



While George Kersey, principal of Carter Lawrence Middle School, looks on, Jerry Bauch, originator of the TransParent School Model, shows Jackie Baker how to store a brief daily message for parents of her 5th grade students.

Making the School TransParent

The TransParent School Model¹ can literally open the classroom to the home on a daily basis—and in very little time. The telephone becomes the channel for routine communication, and every parent can find out the answers to the three questions every day—all it takes is a phone call!

The TransParent School concept is having powerful effects on home/school communication in several pilot schools. The model, which I developed in the Betty Phillips Center for Parenthood Education at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University in 1987, uses answering machines or electronic mailboxes parents can call to hear a message from their child's teacher (Bauch 1988a).

Two technical systems are used. First, the school provides each teacher with an answering machine or electronic mailbox. At the end of the day, the teacher enters a 1-3 minute message that describes learning activities, homework, and how parents can support the child's study at home. Then parents can call at any time from anywhere and hear exactly what they need to know. (Gaining access to this information when a child is ill or absent also enables parents to help the child keep up with the rest of the class.)

Second, teachers use a computer-based system called Compu-Call² to store messages in a computer and direct the autodialer to place phone calls to all parents or specific groups of parents. The next morning, they can use the system to run a printout of the calls completed. Compu-Call also has an integrated attendance management program, which invites parents to become actively involved in helping to improve school attendance (rather than simply reporting absenteeism as earlier calling machines have done).

Pilot Schools and Results

The TransParent School Model was first piloted at the Academy for Academics and Arts in Huntsville, Alabama. After installing the model in November 1987, this K-8 magnet school had a 460 percent increase in parent/teacher interac-



Jackie Baker gets acquainted with the answering machine component of the TransParent School Model. The school installed 10 answering machines for teachers' use in early 1989.

tion the first month. Now the model routinely accounts for about twice as many contacts as all other communication methods.

In a second pilot, a more detailed evaluation was conducted. In January 1989, Carter Lawrence Middle School in Nashville began using 10 answering machines and the computer calling system to increase contact with families. Before the school implemented the model, parent-initiated contacts with a teacher averaged about 10 per day; the number of calls to hear the message on answering machines increased to a mean of 63 per day. Some days, a full third of the parents made the call. When parents became "frequent users," the homework completion rates for students, as reported by their teachers, showed a significant increase (Bissell 1989). Of the "frequent user" parents, 93 percent also noticed improvements in the attitudes and skills of their children.

At Carter Lawrence, about half of the parents who now use the system regularly report they had had no previous involvement with the school. And most heartening of all, low-income parents are well represented in the "frequent user" group. Our initial findings show that low-income parents use the services at the same rate as middle-income parents, supporting Rich's (1988) conclusion that all parents want the best

for their children but that some may not want to be involved in traditional school activities. In Huntsville, teachers reported that some of the parents they have never met are among the most frequent callers to the answering machines.

Although answering machines are an effective, easy-to-use means for storing teacher messages and delivering the information when parents call, there is a limit to the number of answering machines and individual phone lines that a school or school system can provide. Consequently, the Inman Middle School in Atlanta is experimenting with electronic mailboxes. Each teacher in the building has a mailbox that holds the daily message. Parents access the message by calling only one phone number; they can also leave messages or even find out what's for lunch. We found that home/school contact at Inman increased by more than 500 percent, and there were well over 1,000 calls from home to teacher mailboxes every week! BellSouth, which is conducting this pilot, hopes to increase the flexibility of the services while reducing overall costs. Two more models will be implemented in the Memphis City Schools during the 1989-90 school year, using BellSouth's Voice Messaging Services. New technical applications are also under development, and some schools are mounting fund-

raising projects to acquire the model. There are trials of electronic mail applications under way at other locations (West 1989).

A New Way of Communicating

Up to now, because most of our methods have been personnel intensive, to communicate regularly with parents has been time-consuming and expensive. Both teachers and parents are busy, and their interactions are limited by time, distance, and abundant demands. The use of the telephone, supported by computer technology (Bauch 1988b), though, can have a dramatic influence on home/school interaction. In the latest Gallup Poll of teacher attitudes (Bradley 1989), 34 percent of the teachers cited parents' lack of interest as their top area of concern. But we have been demonstrating that parents *are* interested

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when teachers provide vital information that is easy for parents to acquire.

School personnel who use the TransParent School Model are providing the information parents want on a daily basis. Among the gains they are seeing are increased homework completion, better student achievement,

improved attendance, and the development of a shared partnership between parents and teachers. Since these gains promise to lessen the risk of school failure, grade retention, and dropping out, opening communication lines between school and home can have far-reaching effects on overall school improvement. □

¹ "TransParent School" is a registered trademark; neither the name nor the model may be used without permission.

² "Compu-Call" is a registered trademark of Associated Computer Technologies, 3236 N.W. 27th Ave., Gainesville, FL 32605.

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