

**Widening the Portal: How Schools Can Help More Families
Access and Use the Parent Portal to Support Student Success**

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Widening the Portal: How Schools Can Help More Families Access and Use the Parent Portal to Support Student Success

Abstract: District leaders have invested widely in the creation of parent portals, but have paid less attention to ensuring that they are achieving their purpose in providing information that parents can use in supporting their children's academic success. This study, based on qualitative field note data from a larger four-year study of a continuous improvement initiative focused on improving family engagement during the transition from middle grades to high school, identifies both the challenges families face in using the online parent portal and the challenges school leaders face in: a) ensuring that the portal is a useful tool to families; and b) communicating information to families about using the portal effectively. This article suggests the need for district leaders, principals, teachers, and other school staff to reflect systematically on the design and purposes of a parent portal, and ways to make the portal a useful tool for families to monitor students' academic progress and help to improve students' grades. It also provides recommendations for how school leaders can apply a continuous improvement approach to increase the number of families that access the portal regularly.

Keywords: communication, parents, student academic outcomes, family engagement

This We Believe characteristics:

- The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.
- The school actively involves families in the education of their children.

Importance of Family-School Communication

Fostering equitable partnerships between families and the school is a key responsibility of every school leader (e.g., Epstein et al., 2019; Ishimaru, 2019a, 2019b; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). There is increasing evidence that school-based efforts to improve partnerships with families can yield large dividends in improved student outcomes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2017; Sheldon, 2003, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002, 2004, 2005; Sheldon, Epstein, & Galindo, 2010). Such partnerships are built on the foundation of good two-way communications, in which school staff encourage and respond positively to families' questions and concerns, and communicate important information effectively to families in multiple ways (e.g., Conus & Fahrni, 2019; Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe, 2018). In this article we discuss how district and school leaders can potentially increase the positive impact of one important communication vehicle – the parent portal.

Modes of communication between home and school have evolved dramatically as technological changes have influenced society (Aldunate & Nussbaum, 2013; Patrikakou, 2016; Thompson, Mazer, & Flood Grady, 2015; Zieger & Tan, 2012). School leaders are communicating with families via school websites, Twitter, and Facebook (Porterfield & Carnes, 2012). School and classroom apps for communicating with families abound (Lynch, 2017). In many schools, parents and teachers communicate by e-mail and text more than by traditional phone and face-to-face methods, though other schools continue widespread usage of robocall technology. Experimental studies have shown that low-cost interventions using text messaging as well as “snail mail” to facilitate communication with families about student progress can yield significant improvements in secondary student attendance and course performance (e.g.,

Bergman & Chen, 2017; Kraft & Rogers, 2015; Robinson, Lee, Dearing & Rogers, 2018; Rogers, et al., 2017; Rogers & Feller, 2018).

More passive forms of communication, such as web-based parent portals that allow families to monitor their students' grades throughout the year, also have the potential to provide actionable communication between schools and families that can guide family support for students (Altman & Meis, 2013; Miller, Brady, & Izumi, 2016; Weiss, Lopez, & Stark, 2011). Having timely information about student grades and missing assignments can help parents to provide the kinds of encouragement to their children that may make a difference between students passing and failing their classes (e.g., del Valle, 2011; Dries, 2014; Johnson, 2013; Koch, 2010; Selwyn et al., 2011).

Bergman (2016, 2019) has conducted the most extensive work using parent portal login data, documenting differences in portal use by ethnicity and income status which are likely related to access to the internet and computer technology. He noted increased usage at schools where information on the portal was updated more frequently. His experimental studies show a small positive impact of “nudges” using phone calls and letters to families to encourage use of the parent portal on the frequency of parent login to a portal. He also found a significant positive effect of the nudge to increase portal use on student grades (Bergman, 2019). Another study (Mac Iver et al., 2020) provides evidence that parent portal usage is associated with lower odds of ninth grade course failure, even when controlling for prior failing grades in the same year and other covariates associated with course failure.

Skeptics wonder if other family characteristics influence both portal usage and student grades, and call for longitudinal data to confirm causal connections. But evidence is accumulating to suggest that increasing parent usage of the portal could help to reduce course

failure rates that influence later opportunities for many students. This article addresses the question of how to help more families leverage the power of the portal tool to support their children's academic success.

Research Context

In this article we report on parent portal-related research results from a continuous improvement initiative in an education research-practice partnership of leaders from an urban school district and university-affiliated researchers (Mac Iver et al., 2018). The initiative focused on improving family engagement during the transition from middle to high school as one lever for improving ninth grade student attendance and course passing. Increasing access to and usage of the parent portal was one of the family engagement strategies encouraged during the initiative.

Our partner district in a large western city serves about 53,000 students, the majority (53%) of whom are from diverse racial backgrounds (14% Black, 13% Asian, 13% Hispanic/Latinx, 13% multi-racial). Three in ten students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. About one in five students are in families that speak languages other than English at home. The district parent portal displays attendance, assessment scores, and secondary student assignment grades, as well as administrative resources.

Methods

Research Questions

This article focuses on the following research questions within the larger study:

- 1) What challenges do families face in using the parent portal?
- 2) What challenges do school leaders face in ensuring that the portal is a useful tool for families and communicating information to families about using the portal effectively?

- 3) What steps can school leaders take to help more families gain access to the portal and use it effectively?

Data Sources and Analysis Procedures

Data for this study are from primarily from field notes collected over the four-year partnership project. Observation notes were collected at Partnership Executive Team meetings, professional development sessions with schools, meetings with school staff at their schools, and at schools' family engagement events. Observation notes were also collected at three meetings with family members focused specifically on the parent portal (conducted in two cases by East African community groups and in one case by a middle school staff member). Notes also were taken at meetings with district staff about their weekly interactions with participating schools' staff. School leaders provided records of their cycle of inquiry reflections about specific attempts to provide support to families around the parent portal.

Quantitative administrative record data were also available to provide context for the study. The district shared records of parental logins to the portal that could be linked to student demographic information.

Field notes were coded and organized to permit analysis of all references to the parent portal system. Following Braun and Clark (2006), we conducted thematic analysis of the data, moving from initial codes to identifying themes and patterns (e.g., sequential steps within identified processes).

Findings

How Big Is the Problem of Family Access to the District Parent Portal?

Analyses of district records of eighth and ninth grade parental logins to the portal indicated that a large proportion of parents had never logged into the system, and that there was

wide variation by ethnicity. (We did not have access to data on family economic status.) Fewer than half (46%) of all parents¹ ever logged into the portal the year before our initiative began. This grew to 59% by the fourth year of the project. Even though six in ten had logged in at least once during the academic year, a much smaller proportion of families logged in at least once a semester (44%) and even fewer at least once a quarter (31%). Non-White families were significantly less likely than White families to have logged into the system at least once during the academic year. In 2018-19, this gap can be seen in the fact that 82% of White students' families logged into the portal at least once, compared to 39% of the families of Asian students, 31% of Hispanic students, and 25% of Black students.

Overarching Components of Family Experience with the Parent Portal

Our analyses of qualitative field note data related to usage of the school district's online parent portal identified five major components of that experience. Families need to: 1) understand what the portal is and why it is useful; 2) get account login permission to obtain access; 3) be able to login to the portal regularly; 4) understand the information on the portal; and 5) take steps to use that information effectively to support their child's success in school. These components can be viewed as an overarching flowchart of the process of building family capacity for using the portal to support their children's academic success. They are illustrated graphically in Figure 1 and discussed in turn below.

Understanding What the Portal Is and Why It Is Useful

Data on portal usage sheds some light on the extent to which families understand its usefulness. In 2018-19 about 38% of district students (nearly 20,000) had no email address for a parent or guardian on record in the portal system, which is a first step in gaining access to the

¹ The figures reported here are for ninth grade families, but percentages for eighth grade families were similar.

system. Field notes from our meetings with school leaders included their perceptions that many families “don’t know about [the portal]” or “don’t know that they don’t have to depend on their children to get access.” One school’s cycle of inquiry reflection form about its student-led conferences in January recounted: “We had a couple of families come to the event who had never looked at their students’ grades and didn’t know their student was missing class.”

Virtually none² of the 38 families at the three family meetings observed had previously accessed the parent portal. Observation notes indicated that all families were eager to gain access to the portal once they saw what kind of information it included. This suggests that none of them had a clear understanding of how a parent portal could be useful. Notes from one meeting of East African parents explained: “One mother had seen her children look at their [portal] accounts but she didn’t know that she could have her own account. The other parents did not know that this information was accessible for them and they believe that it will help them support their children’s success in school.”

When district and school leaders try to make information about the parent portal available to families, the staff often assume that parents know how the resource can be useful, forgetting that some families may have no idea what a parent portal is. For example, the district’s website homepage has a box link called “Student Family Portals” that may not be understood by many families. There is more information under a “Family Resources” box link, but again, one has to read fine print and click through several pages to find a useful description.

At one high school information night for prospective families that we attended, we noticed that the “Guide to Information Available” handout simply mentioned that “Information on the [Name of District Portal] is available in the library.” The portal in that district had an

² One parent had recently learned about the portal at a previous training session. All other families needed help to get account login permission.

ambiguous name, and if one did not know what it was, one probably would not have sought further information. Even if one made the effort to find the school library (as we did), there was no sign about the portal. A persistent parent might have waited to speak to the staff member in the library to ask about how to get access to and use the portal, but most would not take these steps. School staff may not have considered that some families (and in particular, immigrant families) may have no idea of what a portal is and need a vivid description of how the tool can be useful to them and a demonstration of what it can do. They may need a sign that invites them to a session on “Helping Your Child to Be Successful,” an overview of the information on the portal, and the promise of a hands-on demonstration.

Getting Portal Account Login Permission

Meetings with school staff and families about the portal yielded evidence of multiple challenges families encounter. One school leader reflected on a training session for parents: “By walking families through the process, it was clear to see that families did not understand the directions the district sends out, and therefore needed the personalized attention.” This school leader also noted: “Families at first were a bit reserved by their lack of knowledge. However, once families saw that other parents were also confused, engagement increased. Parents were more willing to ask questions [and] ask for clarification.” Following guidance from the continuous improvement community, we organized findings about the challenges in getting account login permission into a flowchart format (see Figure 2) to identify and emphasize important junctures in the process.

In the partnering district, the first step in the process was for the family representative to have an email account. Observations at one meeting indicated that this was an issue for several families, and they needed to be helped through this preliminary process. The next step was to

ensure that the same email address was on record at each different school that children in the family attended. The observation data indicated that some families attend meetings without having correct information about their email address, and some need to ensure that they have a single, up-to-date email address on record at each child's school.

One school leader remarked at one of our workshops: "People don't check their email anymore – [they prefer] to text." Another school leader mentioned that such experiences had led her to create a demonstration email address and hypothetical student for demonstration purposes only, so as not to lose the opportunity to demonstrate the portal system to families at the school. The demonstration email address helped to alleviate problems with a delayed email response from the district portal system granting access to the system that school leaders were encountering when trying to help families. A next step in the process was to remind families to check their spam or junk email folder in case the district reply happened to go there.

Once they could access the response email from the district, families needed to enter the email address on record as the user name and create a password, ensuring that the password met system requirements. At this juncture, we noted that it would be helpful to instruct families to save that password in a Notes file on their cellphone so it would be available for future logins. At this point, the family now had access to the portal. We depict this process in a flowchart reproduced in Figure 2.

Ability to Access the Portal Regularly

Getting access to the portal is the first step. The goal is for parents to access it regularly to be able to monitor student progress in order to exercise the kind of support to help improve student outcomes. Data from observations at meetings of families and school staff identified several crucial components. Families needed a level of comfort with computers or smartphones

to access the internet and then enter the portal. And they needed time to include this practice in their weekly or monthly routines.

Field notes from one meeting of immigrant families indicated that one parent was able to see information from the portal on her phone. At this and other meetings, school leaders noted that some families did not have internet access, and that it would be important to have a space at the school where families could use a computer connected to the internet to access their portal accounts. Another school leader recounted a parent's confession: "I'm embarrassed to tell you I don't even know how to use a computer," noting that she suspected other parents had not attended a training session because they "didn't want to reveal that they couldn't work with computers."

If access to the internet is not readily available to families, it is much more difficult to make a routine of checking the portal. Even with internet access, it can be easy for this connection with schools to slip off parents' radar. As one high school staff member put it: "When someone reaches out to parents, they get on board with checking the [portal], but sometimes they need that push." Regular reminders from the school or district for families to check the portal are an important step in the process.

Understanding Information in the Portal

Accessing the portal for the first time and then on a regular basis are the first steps, but parents need to understand the information they find to be able to provide appropriate support to their children. Comments from school staff in field notes of meeting observations indicated several issues that affect parents' understanding. For example, students' grades were color-coded (i.e., green for adequate grades, yellow for Ds and red for Es), but the text is only in English, which makes it difficult for families whose first language is not English.

As one staff member pointed out, parents need some coaching because the data are not transparent. School staff “need to help parents understand how to read [students' grades]; red is danger, but doesn't mean all hope is lost.” The problem in understanding portal information is exacerbated by the “huge fluctuations” one can see from day to day or week to week as teachers update and add in new grades and students' average grades smooth out. Another problem is that not all teachers update their gradebooks regularly, and so the information available on the portal is not always current.

Taking Steps to Use Portal Information to Support Student Success

Comments from school staff during our meetings indicated that they recognize the need to provide families with some guidance for how to use information on the portal. Staff agreed on messaging to families that checking the portal once every week or two was sufficient, and that checking it too much could be counterproductive. They noted that families should be made aware of the fact that they could send an email automatically to a particular teacher by clicking on that teacher's name within the portal screen. Although we tried in professional development sessions with staff to raise the issue of how best to provide guidance to parents about appropriate monitoring of course assignment completion and ways to encourage good study habits, those discussions did not yield productive reflection or important action. Some schools did, however, distribute a short “How Parents Can Support Homework Completion” flier that our team provided during professional development.

School Level Challenges in Providing Family Support for Portal Use

We identified several themes from analyses of field notes of staff comments about the portal. One theme related to problems in ensuring the portal information was up-to-date and useful for families. One assistant principal lamented that it was “really hard to get teachers to

buy into online methods of displaying information, as it [the method] seems to change so often at the district level.” Updating gradebooks was not a contractual obligation and principals could not enforce expectations for it to be done at least bi-weekly.

Another theme related to inadequate staff knowledge about the logistics of the portal that affected their ability to teach families about it. Observations by one school staff member about the need for a “demonstration” parent email and student site seemed to be a revelation to many other staff, who had not previously encountered all the barriers some parents face in seeking to establish their login account for the first time.

A third theme was the difficulty schools had in connecting with families who needed help to access the portal system. Even when schools held special events to do this, they were not well attended. One partner school made a special effort to invite Spanish-speaking families to a special hands-on session to learn about the portal – but no one came. School leaders would benefit from guidance on how to effectively integrate information for families on the parent portal at other school events that have high attendance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our interactions with school and district leaders during this four-year partnership project helped us understand why the gaps in parent portal access were so wide, and what schools could do to connect more of their families to this important resource. We conclude this article with a series of recommendations from a continuous improvement framework (Bryk et al., 2015) that may help any school that faces similar challenges.

1) Analyze data on portal use to understand the situation in your school or district.

This step will involve working together with the district’s departments of Information Technology or Research (or both). The district’s investment in

creating a portal system should help to incentivize collegial participation in analyzing data about its use. Leaders in key departments may benefit from hearing about research findings on the relationship between increasing portal usage and improvement in student grades. It is particularly important to examine variation in rates of accessing the portal by ethnicity and socioeconomic status, across and within schools.

2) Analyze the ways that the district and schools are providing information about the portal to families.

School leaders can begin by compiling lists of the ways school staff are providing information about the portal to the families of their students (e.g., through written communications, events) and the timing of these communications. It can be illuminating to list these and discuss them with the faculty. It is also useful for school leaders to reflect on how they are using (or not using) resources provided by the district. At the district level it would be useful to convene a cross-departmental task group to analyze how information about the portal is provided through the website and other media, and how district staff are communicating with school staff about the portal.

3) Conduct a meeting with a group of families from your school or from several schools in the district who are not accessing the portal.

Such a meeting could serve as both a demonstration to help families get access to the portal, and a listening session to gather important information from families about their knowledge of and experiences with the portal, and the challenges they have faced. To successfully recruit families to attend, school staff need to

conduct personal outreach by phone or face-to-face conversations. Leaders also need to plan ahead to ensure that careful notes are taken during observation and listening to identify the issues that emerge.

4) If you identify a need to improve the percentage of families who are able to access the portal and use it effectively, conduct a short cycle of inquiry (Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle) at a single school as a first step in the continuous improvement process.

Armed with data about portal usage rates and variation across various groups within the school, as well as information about how the school has provided information and help with the portal to families in the past, school leaders can set an improvement goal and begin a cycle of inquiry with a committed team. They would begin by deciding on a specific change that has some likelihood of leading to improved results, and PLAN how to implement actions to produce the change and collect data needed to evaluate the results. For example, the team might decide that “Back-to-School Night” is a time when the largest number of families attend a school event, and that they could institute several new ways to ensure that more families find out about the portal, see a demonstration, and get help to access their account.

This approach—extending Back to School Night—would involve multiple means of outreach and communication about the opportunity beforehand, and multiple stations to encounter families and provide information and specific help on a computer at the event. It could also involve reaching out by phone through interpreters to families whose first language is other than English to make a personal invitation and let them know about the hands-on help with the portal. As

staff at one of our partner schools learned, it may be important to have a way to demonstrate the portal to families who do not have the required prerequisites (e.g., single registered email address) and a plan for following up with those families.

After careful planning, school leaders DO the intervention and ensure that adequate information is gathered so that the team may STUDY the results and draw conclusions about how useful the change effort was. This could involve working with the district research office to analyze school data on parent logins over a period including at least one month prior to the intervention and one month after the intervention for both the intervention school and similar comparison schools that did not have the same intervention. School leaders may also want to collect data on changes in quantity of communications with teachers, as well as any other evidence of how increased parental logins related to increased parental monitoring and improved student grades. After analyzing data and drawing conclusions, the team would decide on what next steps to ACT upon as they move forward and embark on a new cycle of inquiry.

5) Expand the continuous improvement process gradually to include other schools in a networked learning community.

As a team at one school engages in a learning process about the use of the parent portal, district leaders should find ways to share knowledge with teams at other schools. As teams at other schools begin trying similar change ideas, school teams across the district may form a networked learning community to share their experiences and findings with each other.

Research suggests that efforts to increase family usage of the parent portal can potentially lead to improved student outcomes (Bergman, 2016). Middle school leaders can contribute significantly to student success by helping more families to access and use the portal effectively, particularly as their students get ready to transition to high school when passing courses becomes essential for accruing credits needed for graduation. By learning from the experiences shared in this article and following the continuous improvement process that we recommended, school leaders can make significant progress in “widening the portal” for more of their students’ families. We invite readers to share their experiences with us (see contact information included below) so that we may build a networked learning community together focused on this important issue.

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Figure 1. Major Hurdles in Family Experience with the Parent Portal

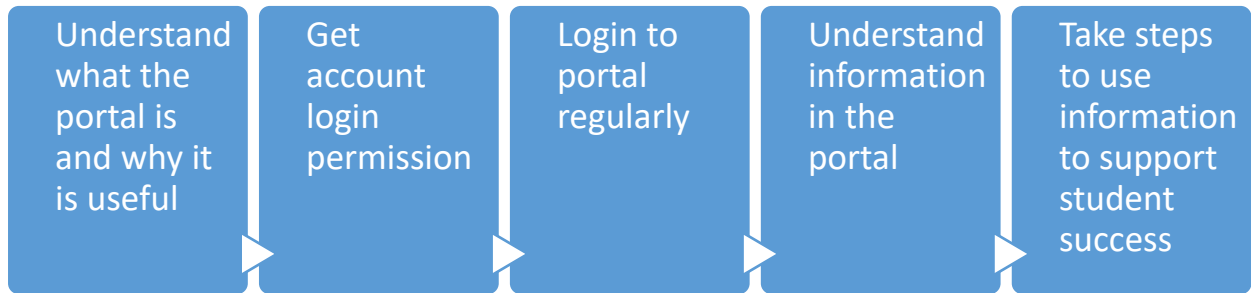
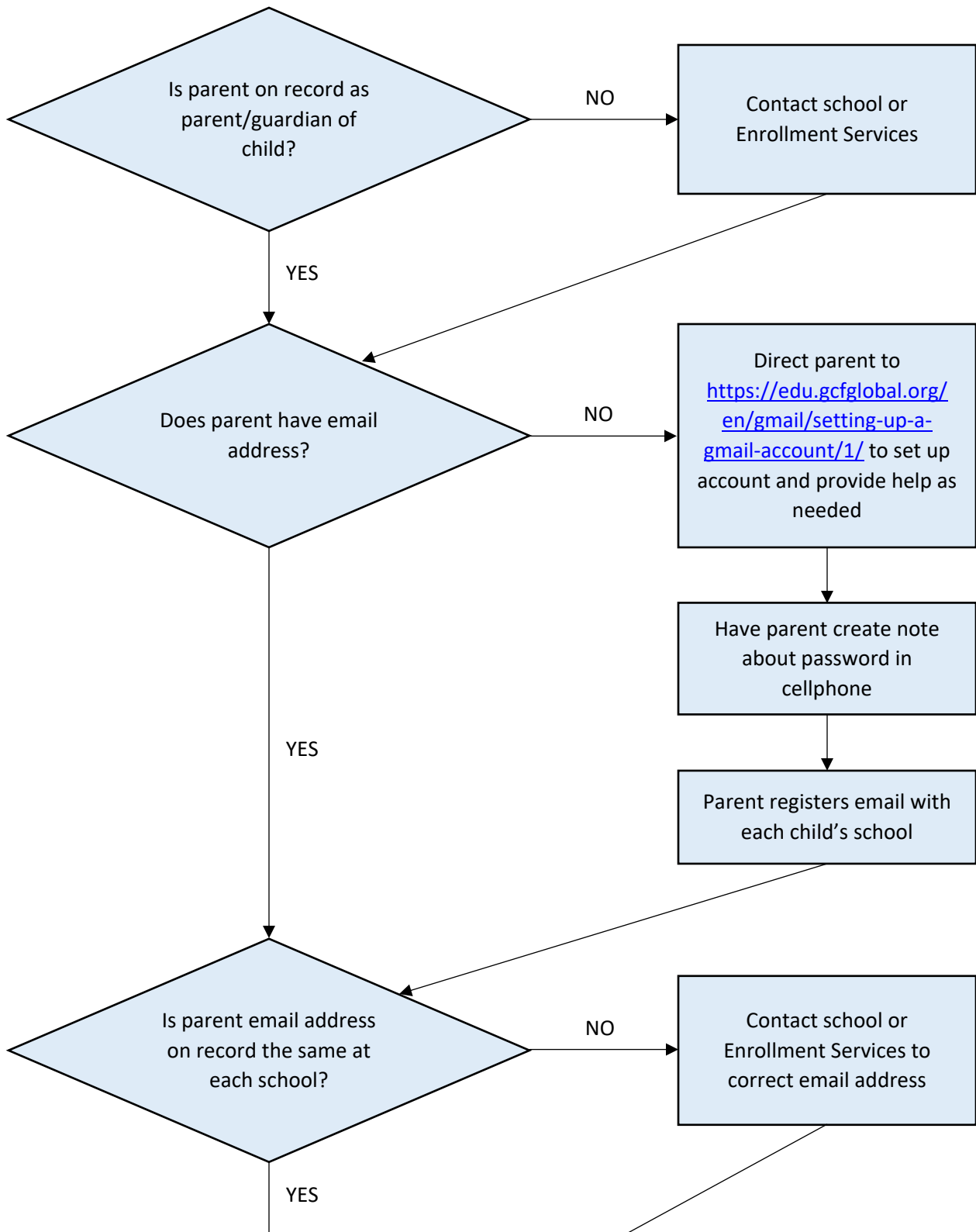
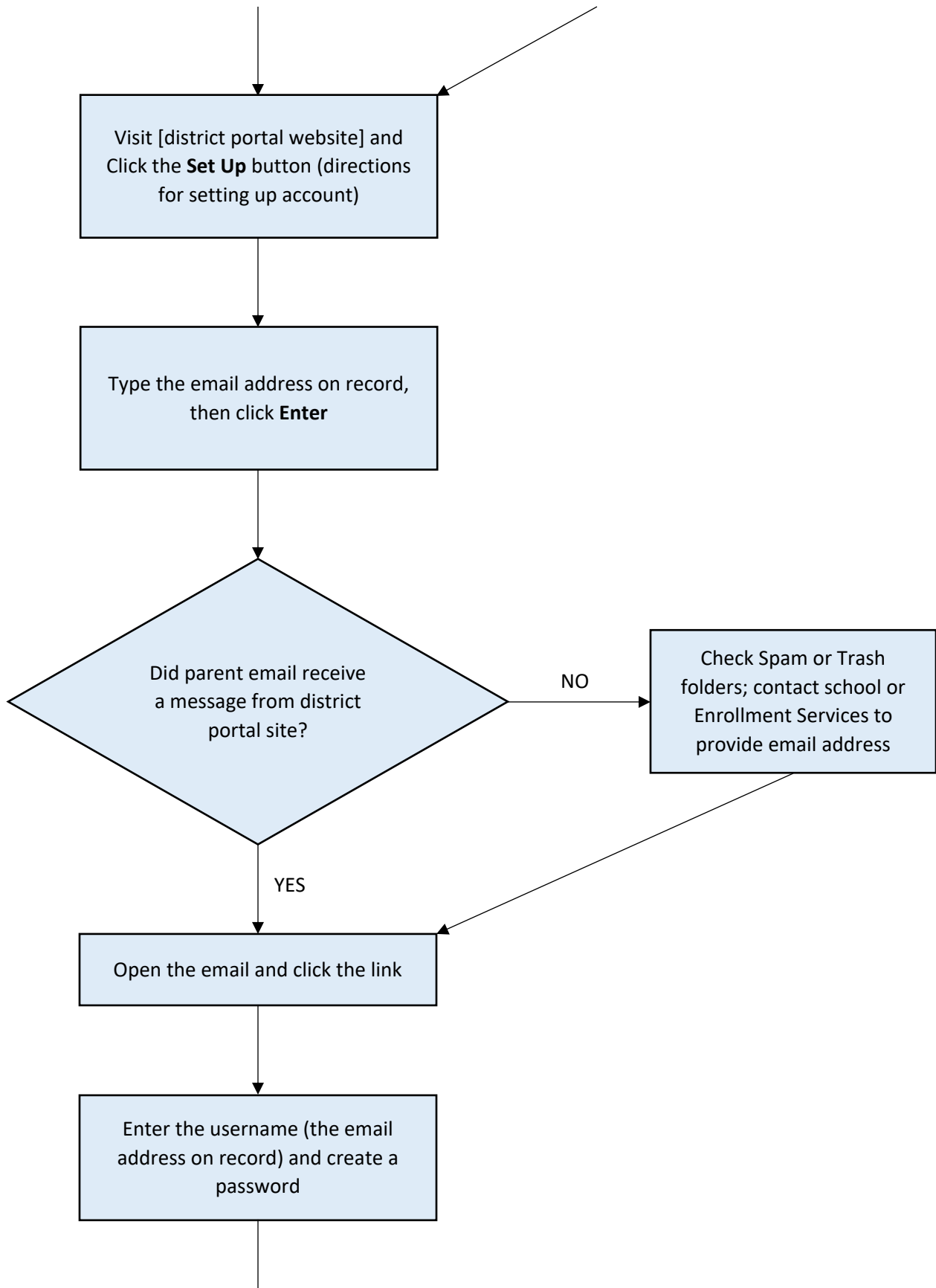
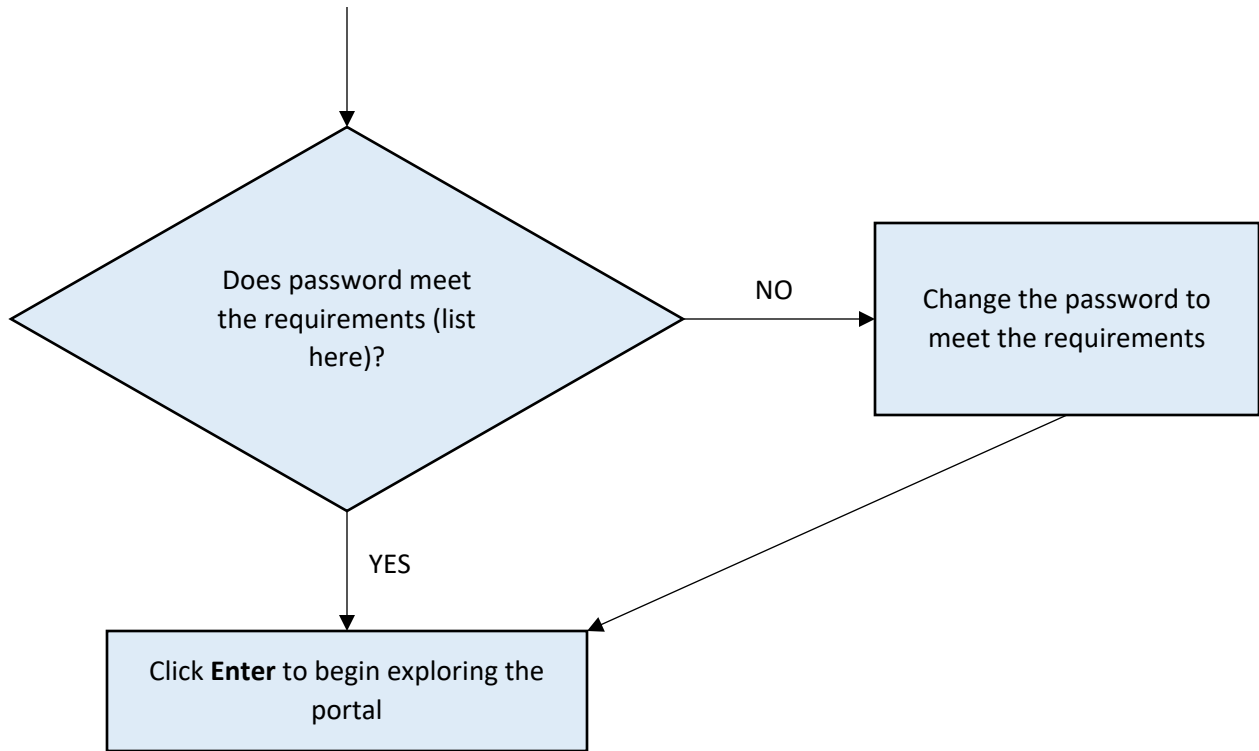


Figure 2. Parent Portal Account Set Up Process Flowchart







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