



## **Is Innovation Outpacing Insight: Why Schools Need Policy to Address Communication Practices with Parents**

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### **Abstract**

While the bond between teachers and students continues to remain at the center of any quality education, of late technology has played an expanding role in reshaping instruction, daily operations, facilities management, as well as communication within and outside of schools. As it would happen, much of the innovation education increasingly relies upon is actually driven by designers and distributors largely responding to market forces more so than educational pedagogy, research or policy. This research-based policy-centered article concerns itself with how well educational leaders have kept up with technological innovation, including how communication has or has not been addressed from a school governance standpoint. Specifically, it presents direct findings from a newly completed study in Arizona that focused on parent perceptions and the implications of digitally-based communication efforts between schools and home. This original research was limited to Arizona, though it revealed multiple areas where policy may easily overlook important elements of the bond between educators and parents in addition to legal requirements tied to federal funds. Ultimately this article advances important policy and practice considerations aimed at helping to ensure a quality working relationship with parents and guardians.

**Keywords:** school policy, Title One, ESSA, communication, technology, parents,

## **Introduction**

It has been almost 50 years since the final Apollo lunar mission captured the spirit and imagination of mankind by harnessing technology to deliver American astronauts to the moon and safely return them home. Since that time space travel has taken a back seat to other endeavors, but technology has continued to catalogue important advances in countless aspects of our daily lives. We may not be traveling in flying cars as forecasted by popular depictions during the 1960s, but self-driving cars appear to be becoming a reality. The jury is still out concerning wide-spread acceptance of these smart-cars (Nees, 2016), but on a whole American society has freely embraced a tremendous amount of innovation, and will likely continue to do so in the future.

The way Americans prepare meals, purchase goods online, and plug almost everything they own into an overnight charger highlight ways technological advances have shaped our lives in 2020. Most notable, perhaps, is the way technology has revolutionized communication, where portability, convenience, speed, and power have combined with a never-ending innovative supply of “apps” that not only allow us to communicate world-wide but have even also come to dominate the way we interact with the people physically nearest to us. Americans’ connection to their cell phones is rooted in a history of excitement and acceptance. In 1983, Time magazine named the computer the “Man of the Year,” and communication has not been the same since (Purdue University Online, 2018). Unlike acceptance challenges for self-driving cars raised by Nees (2016), there has been little recent evidence of questioning associated with digital communications advances. That said, perhaps it is time to start raising a few.

High quality communication, in any and all of its forms, has long been considered vital for effective leadership (Spinks & Wells, 1995), as well as productive and sustainable relationships with all stakeholders including parents and guardians. Increasingly, technological tools have been designed to get the “intended message” sent out from schools. In this one-way approach it becomes the responsibility of the parent or guardian to follow up with regard to those announcements or situations that concern them enough to prompt them to act. One of the many emerging issues within communications has to do with the migration from more traditional two-way communication such as phone calls or face-to-face conversations, to increased reliance on one-way communication.

There are actually federal regulations (The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2016) that identify a school’s responsibilities to effectively communicate directly and meaningfully with parents and guardians. These requirements are well documented and have long been available to all schools. Still, there may be reason to question how frequently many schools even think about the direction digital communication is heading in and the implications of increased one-way contacts. How well schools evaluate and attempt to improve their current communication approaches with parents is another question onto itself. Policy development is a critical component of school operations. Perhaps schools would do well to develop policy that clearly defines leadership responsibilities for addressing and ensuring effective communications.

In an environment where one-way communication trends continue to outpace more traditional means of interaction, policy and dissemination become of paramount importance. In places like Arizona where a tremendous number of schools are dependent on Title One dollars for a

significant portion of their budget, the stakes of securing sustainable collaboration with parents and guardians is only greater. This article addresses this situation by reviewing relevant literature, and then addressing local dynamics that factored into the recently completed case-study. After delineating the research methods which were employed, findings are shared and followed by discussion including implications for policy, practice and future research.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Effective collaboration is a critical component of the partnership between schools and the home setting. Communication has never been more important than it is now, with an increasingly complex society riddled with competing demands and escalating daily challenges impacting the lives of educators and families alike (Hughes, 2014). Whereas digital technology has made tremendous strides toward connecting the world with a 6-ounce smartphone, there are other communication implications that are likely being overlooked as result of an absence of any policy outlining expectations or assessments to ensure the needs of parents and schools are being met. The need for effective communication is already tied to Title One legislation. The original research this article is based on set out to identify, then illuminate the experiences, needs and perceptions of the parents who are served by schools and the digital tools that prevail today. Though there are limitations to the ability to generalize findings from any study to other settings, this was an important topic of study. It was initiated in an effort to help advocate for the development of focused policy that better establishes and monitors effective communication practices between our schools and the parents they serve.

### **Discussion of Literature**

With so much communication being channeled through digital mediums, it is somewhat surprising that there is so little information concerning overarching policy or guidelines, or at the very least acquisition decision-making practices within the literature. Awareness of this inattention prompted the original study into practice apparently without benefit of policy guidance. Due to the lack of literature on any of these driving forces per se, the review of relevant background information for this article will begin by addressing federal regulations, then work through policy considerations, as well as ways this topic plays out in practice. In as much as the research was policy specific from the outset, this pathway seems fitting. Finally, after touching on how communication practices are actually driven effectively as well as problematically, it concludes by questioning how schools truly know that their communication efforts are as effective as they should be.

### **Federal Regulations**

Provisions for parent, guardian and family engagement within the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) specifically set forth expectations that schools ensure effective communication and involvement of parents, and further, support the establishment of a viable collaborative partnership comprised of the school, parents, and the community. Finally, the law requires schools to provide parents and guardians with the means for monitoring academic progress and approaches that enable teachers to work with the family member as equal partners (The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2016)

Specifically, as it pertains to the low-income situations addressed by Title One, the same ESSA legislation outlines additional responsibilities for schools to jointly develop a working and

meaningful school-parent compact that calls for joint investment and development of an effective and sustainable partnership (The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2016). Though the specific language cited in ESSA may differ from preceding legislation, its intent and overall spirit of effort reaches back to 1965 and the original authorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Therein, considering the scope of Title One funding and the length of its mission, these are some highly significant expectations that have long impacted schools in one way or another. It would seem that the intent should be understood, honored and carried out.

### **Policy**

In combination, the original ESEA and succeeding revised legislation leading up to ESSA have been in place for the past 45 years. Many of the actual provisions schools must address, along with flexibilities they can pursue, are cited directly within the legislation (US Department of Education, 2015). Some would consider it to be highly redundant for schools to craft, approve and then implement policy that merely duplicated the legislation and its provisions word for word. That said, and as was addressed in the preceding section, there are specific provisions calling for a local development of communication and collaboration compact with families. Policy development may not be the norm for all of the regulations, but would seem to be especially important if this more critical provision should prove difficult to implement or were not receiving parental support.

With advances in technology and its widespread utilization, the entire community including parents now largely have opportunity to gain access to school district policy directly through the local school website or through other means. In Arizona online access for almost every district is provided through a “Policy Bridge” portal which is maintained by the Arizona School Board Association (n.d.) One of the reasons access exists the way it does is result of the strong role the ASBA plays in developing and distributing model policies (Hughes, 2018). Though there is no requirement that individual districts wholly adopt model language word for word, in Arizona there is typically relatively little deviation from the up-to-date models provided by the association.

Through the aforementioned portal anyone, including parents, has opportunity to access district policy. In essence three considerations stood out from examination of policy. First, there was no evidence of local nor model policy directly relating to the “communication provisions” set forth in ESSA. Second, with the exception of policy directly articulating the need to educate students in today’s digital environment, technology tended to be frequently cross-listed with other existing policies. This “add on” approach would suggest a lack of prominence in policy development for this area. Third, absent any identified connection to ESSA or preceding ESEA legislation, there are commonly existing policies that designate the superintendent of schools to establish practices for involving parents and guardians in a collaborative effort.

The existing policies just referenced are extremely general and limited. Again, making no general reference to federal legislation let alone specifically to ESSA or ESEA, the provisions in adopted policy simply designate “it shall be the role of the superintendent” to develop ways for parents and guardians to be included in the educational process in a meaningful way. Said policy lacks timelines, specific steps, or any type of evaluative or reporting component (Arizona School Board Association, n.d.). Therein, the direction for the already important relationship heightened

by ESSA requirements (The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2016) do not appear to drive policy at least in the majority of school districts in Arizona. Nor, in fact, is there even any cross-listing linking the topics to each other. This lack of policy does not prevent proactive practice, but it certainly does not encourage, support or sustain it either.

### **What Is Driving Practice?**

Whereas communication efforts appear not to have been guided by policy, they have long instead been heavily influenced by developments within the commercial marketplace of which education is merely a part of a larger whole. This “outsider” orientation has been thought, at least in part, to help explain why so many teachers and parents did not initially appear to embrace digital communication technologies as readily as imagined (Rogers & Wright 2008). It is also likely that there is some methodological bias that needs to be addressed concerning much of the research that has been attempted on digital communication. As they further reported, even in 2008, the vast majority of studies which in any way focused on this topic relied almost exclusively on internet-based survey approaches to reach potential participants. It is difficult to deny the possibility of underrepresenting the views of those who are digitally challenged in some way, when the instrument of data collection almost universally internet-based.

The bias that is inherent in said approach to collecting data was a consideration in the development of this study - both in terms of focus and design. Further, with the rapid pace of changing technologies, there is always need for additional work in terms of assessing and updating the impacts of the latest innovations being introduced to society. Put another way, it has proven to be difficult to really know how communication is progressing and whether consumer “need” is prompting innovation, or how much the marketplace is driving practice as well as acceptance instead. Again, while favored approaches seem to function well under test conditions, that does not mean the newest communication trends work everywhere, or for everyone.

Anderson (2017) as well as Heath, Maghrabi and Carr (2015) confirmed that there are in fact access issues, most notably for low-income schools and parents. Further, Anderson (2017) and DiJohn (2015) reported that these accessibility differences create divisions in society that are not being considered while the tools and approaches we rely upon are advanced by developers from outside of education. Instead, schools in recent years have tended to adopt tools and methods that are largely purposed at least initially for other applications within commercial settings where a very different relationship and set of expectations exists between consumers and service providers than is expected to be the case in educational circles.

As business and government combine their efforts to reshape education into more of a business model, perhaps it is no accident that schools have succumbed to marketplace influences, and found an attraction to similarly adopting one-way communication strategies. That said, one-way efforts including mass distributed announcements, or merely providing access through online portals likely fail to meet the expectations dictated by best practice let alone satisfy the intent of referenced sections of ESSA. These considerations may not stand out all onto themselves, but in combination with other issues raised here, seem to perhaps justify a call for greater attention to this topic.

## **Practice Good and Bad**

Filmore (2000) reported that technology-based translation tools were proving to be instrumental in overcoming language barriers even as far back as 20 years ago. Since that time, technology has certainly evolved, and familiarity with it has likely increased as well - though it is difficult to say whether or not comfort and satisfaction has kept pace. For years, though, there has been evidence within the literature that teachers prefer email for communication whereas parents often prefer phone conversations (Gestwicki, 2006; Ricke, 2015; Rogers & Wright, 2008). Those reported differences were linked solely to preferences, and did not suggest that one approach was effective or that the other was not.

The “good” in digital communication is so widely celebrated and even advertised, it is not so difficult to see. Still, there are some troubling issues that have appeared over the years that may or may not be resolved by market forces and new equipment or applications. According to findings from the United States Department of Education (US Department of Education, 2017) parents do not always have the same access to internet technologies. Some, particularly those in lower income situations, are not always willing or able to rely on digital technology to communicate with their children’s schools. Several years ago, Bagin (2011) reported similar findings to this, and at that time indicated that lower-income adults self-reported they were also less confident in their ability to use digital equipment.

Even if we were to assume that equipment has improved and confidence in it has climbed as well, Rideout and Katz (2016) reported that 30% of families across America still ran into data limits with regularity. Further, they reported that sharing devices was occurring with enough frequency that it was not possible to know who the school was communicating with at least 20% of the time when they accessed the designated parents’ phone number. Finally, let us not forget that prevailing online data collection procedures probably minimize numbers like those just reported. So, information along these lines leaves us with at least two questions. Is the marketplace going to take care of issues like these? And, how are we supposed to know our efforts are working in time to make the difference we deserve to expect with digital communication?

## **How Do We Know?**

This discussion of the literature is not intended to suggest that digital communication does not work. It is likely that the majority of consumers today are at least generally satisfied with it. Still, is it enough to just “trust” that communication is working for parents and guardians, or anyone else, until we hear otherwise? According to Thompson, Mazer and Flood Grady (2015) there does not appear to be a practical understanding of parent communication preferences in this new digital era. Already referenced policy typically did little more than say the superintendent would be responsible for developing approaches to engage parents in the education of their children. After accounting for local dynamics in the setting where the study was conducted, and describing the methodological approach which was employed, the balance of the article will report findings on school and parent perspectives and ultimately discuss the implications of the information being imparted here.



### **Focus of the Case Study**

As this article stems directly from original research, a review of the study methods and limitations are warranted. A case study based investigative approach such as the one documented here has tremendous value, particularly for under-examined topics that typically lack existing research and literature from which to draw. Every study has limitations. One of the limitations faced by this original research rests in the potential applicability of findings and insights generated at one location to other situations in other locations. Therein a brief description of the location of the research will be offered next. The setting for the study is an area located between two major metropolitan areas in Arizona. It is an area that is in transition because of its location and access to multiple forms of transportation with boundaries adjoining growing school districts on multiple sides.

The area is largely Caucasian but has a Hispanic representation of approximately 30 to 40 percent depending on which estimates are referenced. The district in this situation has worked hard to update infrastructure and respond proactively to growing needs through improved programming and equitable access. As is the case across much of the state, this district relies heavily on the state school board association for the development and delivery of district policy models. Finally, like most districts in the area, there is heavy reliance on the official webpage for providing information and access to assorted services such as making payment, enrollment as well as employment opportunities.

### **Research Methods**

This article examined the perceptions of parents as they reflected on the practicality and overall effectiveness of communication efforts between school and home in light of technological developments and legal as well as policy considerations already detailed. Acknowledging the fact that limitations always exist, the descriptive case study sought to contribute to the broader understanding of topic through use of a descriptive case study approach which investigated the following Research Questions:

RQ 1: What are parents preferred ways for communicating with school?

RQ 2: How do parent preferences differ based on different subject/topic areas?

RQ 3: How do parents perceive their preferences to be valued and prioritized by school practices?

RQ 4: How do opinions differ between ethnic and socioeconomic groups?

RQ 5: What efforts have schools made to recognize and respond to parent preferences and needs?

This methodological approach to conducting research was undertaken as Yin (2014) has indicated that it effectively investigates real-life situations and social relationships while also being able to consider a vast array of unanticipated factors (Creswell, 2013). Open sampling was utilized to take advantage of all interested parties in an effort to maximize participation. For the quantitative portion of the study, the researcher relied upon questions from a previously

published survey, the “Parent Communication Survey” instrument, with permission granted by originators Reenay R. Rogers, Ph.D. and Dr. Vivian H. Wright (Rogers & Wright, 2008).

### **Instrument**

The modified survey was pilot tested by 8 non-residents and run by an expert panel of 4 administrators and faculty advisors to help determine the final composition of the instrument. Finally, noting potential bias described within the literature, the survey was distributed on paper to attempt to reduce the bias of most recent studies that notably relied exclusively on web-based data collection methods. On one side of the document the questions were in English, and on the opposite side in Spanish, as many of the Title One parents speak Spanish as a primary language.

### **Validity**

Multiple steps were undertaken to eliminate areas of potential bias and threats to validity. Participants of all backgrounds and ethnic origins repeatedly referenced low income and second language concerns that impacted them or they were aware of. The data and interview responses did not highlight unique differences between English and Spanish speaking parties. As such the tables and findings section was not organized in such a way as to report out on data according to ethnic origin or primary language.

The subjects were residents of an Arizona school district that is closely located to major metropolitan areas. A total of 300 surveys were distributed to parents who identified as English speaking, and 180 were distributed to those who self-identified as Spanish speaking. This distribution approximated the local demographics of the district. A return of 220 surveys resulting in a return rate of 46% and was viewed as a workable sample size for this type of research. Of the 220 parents who responded, a total of 9 consented to participate in the qualitative portion of the study. Of the 9 who consented, 3 were non-English speaking and were interviewed with the assistance of an interpreter.

### **Analysis**

As this was a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, multiple steps were carried out to complete the data analysis. Descriptive data analysis techniques were applied to the survey information, whereas data received from interviews and surveys were recorded, coded, and classified into themes. The researcher then made comparisons among coding labels, analyzed themes, and used the data to make sense of the qualitative information and ultimately the quantitative findings as well. Finally, the researcher reduced the codes to themes, which were ultimately used to interpret the data and develop a clear description. For this paper, the research questions will be used to convey the findings, then themes will be the focus for the discussion.

### **Findings**

**(RQ 1) What are parents preferred ways for communicating with school?** While 1.4% of the participants involved with this study indicated having no direct internet access of any sort, the overriding reality conveyed by parents in response to surveys and later in focused interview was that there was usually “some way” to communicate digitally with the school. It is just that “said approach” might not be as convenient or effective as one might perhaps prefer. There are growing numbers of digital options available to parents and guardians just like everyone else in



our digital society, and survey results yielded some anticipated responses in addition to some matters that might be in need of additional attention.

Table 1  
*Parental Attitudes Toward Electronic Enabled Communication with the Teachers*

Access Type	<i>Preferred Communication</i>		<i>Actual Communication</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Email	162	73.3	156	70.6
Text	87	39.4	60	27.1
Social Media	16	7.2	17	7.7
Electronic Portal	90	40.9	86	39.1
None	12	5.5	25	11.4

Much as is the case across society on a whole, and as illustrated in Table 1, email provides the backbone for electronic communication between home and school (Rogers & Wright, 2008). In all 73.3 of parents and guardians indicated that email was their preferred option for electronic communication, and 70.6 reported it actually proved to be a productive option for communication. Electronic portals were the preference of only slightly more respondents than texting, but results indicate that the portals proved to be a larger part of actual ongoing communication than was the case for texting. It should come as no surprise that a small segment of the sample would express no preference for this line of questioning. In all 5.5% indicated this sentiment. Still, seeing that 11.4% reported “None” for actual reported communication would appear to suggest that over 10% of the parent/guardian body had some reportable level of challenge with electronic communication.

As society has grown accustomed to digital communication and come to favor texting far more than actually talking over the cellphone, (Gestwicki, 2006; Ricke, 2015; Rogers & Wright, 2008) it is reasonable to wonder just how important different approaches including one-way as opposed to two-way communication between home and school have become. Table 2 presents findings associated with this line of questioning, and selected two-way communication as an almost 4:1 priority over one-way interaction, but ultimately participants most strongly supported the idea that the preference really rests in the purpose of the intended contact being initiated.

Table 2  
*Parent Preference Regarding Two-Way Versus One-Way Communication*

Choice	<i>N</i>	%
I strongly prefer – one way	6	2.7
I somewhat prefer – one way	13	5.9
It depends on the purpose of the contact	119	54.3
I somewhat prefer – two way	18	8.2
I strongly prefer – two way	54	24.7

Follow-up survey questions and resulting data not shown in Table 2 supplied additional information and insights concerning preferences from home. When given an option between email interaction and phone conversation, 16.7% of all who responded indicated they did, in fact, prefer email to some degree. Almost one-third did not indicate agreement or disagreement thereby expressing no preference. In all, 22% or only slightly more than those favoring email indicated a preference for direct phone contact. This result is markedly lower than the information shared by past sources (Gestwicki, 2006; Ricke, 2015; Rogers & Wright, 2008).

Perhaps these results should be viewed more as an indication of our general acceptance of the options we are provided with, instead of being viewed as confirmation as to what works best. This distinction between acceptance (preference) and effectiveness is offered because in response to questions about effectiveness as opposed to preference, these same participants indicated that 45.7% strongly agree and 34.4% agree (80.1% combined) that communication is better achieved over the phone than by means of email.

Numbers do not tell the entire story, and as introduced earlier, a subgroup of participants volunteered for follow-up interviews. Feedback gleaned from the added inquiry revealed that while the phone as a digital tool was overwhelmingly the most regularly accessed option for making digital contact, there were real limitations associated with use of the phone as portable computer. Screen size made it difficult to work with online portals or progress through any system that required parents and guardians to “progress” through screens. Three non-English speaking volunteers also reported that there was a language barrier to address. While perhaps some applications could assist in overcoming this area of struggle, there was limited success experienced by participants. As was pointed out, though the availability of applications to contact English speaking parents continue to expand, there is really little perceived indication of similar progress being made for non-English speaking parents and guardians.

**(RQ 2) How do parent preferences differ based on different subject/topic areas?** This question emerged as the next step in the overall focus, as opposed to investigating whether preferences differed according to grade-level. Such age-related differences concerning practice seemed to have once been a realistic consideration. Perhaps at least in the days of sending a note home with a student. This consideration appeared to have less relevance in an examination of digital communication. As was forecasted by responses to RQ 1, different reasons for

communication appear to be linked to different preferences and perceptions. Table 3 presents data from a series of questions and focuses (academics, activities and discipline) which did not ask respondents to rate topics in a head-to-head fashion. For purposes of representing this information in a meaningful way, however, the presentation is offered in a comparative fashion with the belief that it provides a more holistic understanding response to RQ 2.

Table 3  
*Parental Communication Preferences By Topic*

Access Type	Academics		Activities		Discipline	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Email	60	27.1	97	43.9	11	5.0
Phone	109	49.3	8	3.6	201	91.0
Text	10	4.5	29	13.1	3	1.4
Portal	18	8.1	9	4.3	NA	NA
No Preference	19	8.6	73	33.3	1	.5

The data may not be all that surprising upon inspection in as much as it confirms the preferences described within the literature (Gestwicki, 2006; Ricke, 2015; Rogers & Wright, 2008). Still, it proves to be valuable data in that it offers insight and affirmation as opposed to reliance speculation, shared perception or old information. There was little preference concerning how best to contact home when the focus of topic for the ensuing contact had to do with ongoing events or activities. The only real preference that emerged was actually to send an email.

Matters having to do with student grades yielded a different reaction. Email was the second acceptable approach for contact, but phone contact was the clear preference among reporting parents and guardians. Finally, matters involving potential disciplinary implications yielded a very strong response. An overwhelming 91% of responding parents and guardians indicated they would prefer to be reached directly by phone were one of their children to be involved in a disciplinary situation. This strong response concerning a phone contact for discipline was not diminished in any way at younger grade levels according to parents who were interviewed, which confirms there would be little reason to examine this topic from a grade-level standpoint.

Further, as voiced by parents and guardians, it was expected that any contact about grades would come directly from the teacher, and not someone else. For both grade and disciplinary type topics, parents wanted to be able to learn specific information up front and also be able to make follow-up contacts to learn more. Therein the portal was not an overly popular choice for receiving information for either type of situation and represented an attempt to carry out the primary business of education through a one-way communication approach where they actually expressed difficulty finding workable ways to respond to the teacher.

**(RQ 3) How do parents perceive their preferences to be valued and prioritized by school practices?** This question was felt to be particularly important, but was beyond the scope of the original instrument the survey was based upon. It was therefore addressed in an open-ended

fashion through follow-up interview. In response, the majority of participants clearly voiced a belief that parents' preferences or feelings were not valued by school systems or taken into consideration at any level of discussion let alone through policy development. Further, they clearly relayed the belief it was their responsibility as caregivers and guardians to make any two-way contact in response to any issue that might emerge, regardless as to how that information was originally shared with them by their school.

A common if not "default" perspective which was shared was that almost everything could be resolved upon contacting the office directly. In some instances, language barriers were said to persist beyond such a contact being made. While none of the participants complained about having to take the initiative to initiate a line of communication, their descriptions consistently painted a picture of the school shifting responsibility to the parents in ways that legislation and guidelines clearly identify as being less than satisfactory. Finally, it was indicated that the process of participating in the study in general, and even more so in the interview specifically, helped several of the parents to become more focused on the shift in responsibility for follow through just referenced.

**(RQ 4) How do opinions differ between ethnic and socioeconomic groups?** Questions related to this aspect of the study generated multiple insights. Members of minority populations, and especially those facing language limitations often spoke of being aware of who they could reach out to in order to make contact. The attendance secretary, for instance, could speak Spanish according to one parent. Ultimately, this person became a point of contact when it was truly necessary. There were other examples offered where parents in general were compelled to navigate the assortment of contact options available to them. In some instances, parents or guardians started out in one place but ended up on social media like Facebook, because that is where they found they got an actual response. Though there was little indication that parents wanted to complain, it was noted in direct reference to this line of questioning that it was very clear schools were not attempting to prioritize their efforts according to parent feedback or preferences. Essentially, parents indicated they often had to be the ones to look for someone to be interested in what was troubling them.

**(RQ 5) What efforts have schools made to recognize and respond to parent preferences and needs?** Information relative to this question was collected both through quantitative as well as qualitative means. From a quantitative standpoint, parents and guardians responding through the survey indicated that two-way communication is largely available to them in some manner after some level of effort on either their part or the school's part. In all just under 64% of those responding either agreed or strongly agreed with this position. An additional 30.8% really offered no agreement or disagreement, meaning that the 4.6% who rated disagreement with their school's efforts represented a comparably small response.

Qualitative interview contributions from parents and guardians shed additional light on the question. Overall, it was perceived that teachers were the ones who were more geared toward maintaining two-way communication with home. When talking about schools more from the standpoint of "the office" parents expressed that they felt that the standard operating procedure was that the school notified parents that there was an issue that needed to be followed up on. Then it became the parent's responsibility to follow through with whatever the matter was and

see it through to resolution. Nobody within the group offered a point of view that perhaps in the busy world we live in, that was the most practical approach to take. Sentiments, instead, were more along the lines that the schools to some extent were shifting responsibilities on to them.

A final theme that emerged in response to this question had to do with the overall approach taken by schools to ensure that effective communication was taking place. From the perspective offered by parents and guardians, it would appear that there is no active policy or consistent approach being made to effectuate more effective communication and collaboration with parents. If there is such an effort taking place, parents clearly were not aware of it. Instead, their overall perception was that if need be, they could always complain to someone.

## **Discussion**

The combined quantitative and qualitative information obtained through this study was analyzed first within the structure of the 5 research questions, and was just reported in that light. In addition to the research question specific lenses already summarized, all of the information was further examined as part of one whole project. That effort resulted in the identification of three prevailing themes. These themes which include A. Communication, B. Intent, and C. Satisfaction, will be discussed next.

## **Communication**

Communication is the central theme of this study and has every reason to stand out first and foremost because of its vital impact on leadership. In the digital world we live in there is an ever-expanding supply of communication alternatives being developed, refined and marketed for world-wide consumption. It may be fair to say there is a less known but equally important list of problem spots to overcome. Especially when looking through the eyes and busy lives of parents and guardians who have a full-time job caring for their children, on top of their actual paid employment. In our mobile society people are on the go far more than they are sitting at a desk waiting to be contacted by their child's school. Some of the most impressive developments, such as webpage portals, are still too complex and challenging for the very best smartphones to access efficiently. Plus, let us not forget that a lot of parents do not have the latest and greatest hardware in their pocket or on their desk.

Perhaps the struggles that were identified in this study should be considered to represent a society-wide challenge that families just have to accept and learn to work through. Maybe the federal requirements listed early on need to be adjusted or reinterpreted to allow for results something short of what they already call for. The bottom line would seem to be that communication is taking place, and no test or series of survey questions will decide whether currently available approaches are successful enough. Technology will continue to develop and conditions will change. Perhaps though, there is sufficient need to do more than hope communication is working the way it needs to - ahead of receiving complaints from parents.

## **Intent**

Intent is an important concept, and as it emerged through this study, it could be argued that it has a dual nature built into it. On one hand, the general intentions of the school system (intent) clearly weighed into the way parents and guardians perceived this overall topic. To know that communication was going to be possible - some way, somehow - mattered to parents and

guardians. Perhaps at least in part as result of parents' faith in their schools, and the evident underlying trust that educators were working on their behalf to meet the safety and learning needs of all students. Parents view themselves as partners, so that intent or "attempt" coming from the school likely helps to establish some sort of buffer that makes it easier to accept some of the communication shortcomings that apparently keep appearing.

From a somewhat different point of view, and one that was a deliberate focus of this study, the "intent" of the message proceeding from school to home mattered a tremendous amount to parents. Public relations information and activities announcements that occupy prominent positions on district webpages were said to be a distraction by some parents. Many said they deliberately tune out that content, which at times seemed to make it difficult for them to locate the information and access points they were interested in. Ironically, these comprehensive front-page designs are often as costly as they are flashy. Some are even award winning. But they are not the priority to the parents who spoke through this research as two-thirds confirmed they rarely, if ever, accessed these features on the district webpage.

In only a few words, parents collectively indicated that they want less of the public relations information and more direct two-way access concerning the issues that matter most - their children and their safety, well-being and learning. When the "intent" of attempted communication has to do with one of those topics, parents and guardians have indicated that they are uniformly committed to ensuring it takes place despite any of the unintended challenges that might emerge. As it would happen, however, these types of contacts and the tools that are brought into play to make them take place, are not the flashy "award-winning" designer communication approaches that are constantly evolving and receiving the bulk of the attention.

### **Satisfaction**

Satisfaction represents the overall bottom line of this topic and this study. As has been reported already, everything comes down to access -when it is most important. This is not a topic that is well-addressed by recommendations such as having family member access the internet through the local library. Parents feel that the ability to be in touch with their child's teacher when it involves, behavior, grades or really also safety, is their top priority. Data suggested and interviews confirmed that parents recognize there are established pathways for communication proceed. They also realize there are challenges. In all, roughly three-quarters of responding parents and guardians indicated that a phone call was the approach of choice for important communication that needed to take place, whether it was convenient for anyone (themselves included) at the time in question.

Referring back to the idea of a partnership, parents involved in the interview presented a point of view that collaboration was important, but perhaps not something that was thought about a tremendous amount. Some parents indicated that they at times were at a loss to know what they were supposed to do to make a difference when contacted by the school in the middle of the day. Feelings like those would suggest that a prevailing practice of "as needed" communication would benefit from the development of a better understanding of what the home-school partnership is really about. Or at least what it could be about. Finally, some parents offered that there is perhaps too much effort being put into making outreach quick and convenient. It was not uncommon for them to perceive their interests and needs of all parents and guardians as being



secondary in the schools' definition of success. By all appearances, that reaction did not seem to be all that satisfying.

## **Conclusions**

Though there are typically limitations inherent in any research, it appears evident that technology will continue to evolve. As such there will be a continued need to review decision-making practices tied to innovation. Though there is no direct call within Title One legislation to evaluate the communication impacts resulting from digital technology, it is difficult to argue that parents should automatically “trust” that important communication will always just work the way they hope. This article reports out on original research. Both the article and the research it was based on, were originally founded upon the perceived need and resulting vision to better address communication effectiveness through policy. In all, the findings from this study indicate the current digital communication system “works,” but there is evident room for improvement.

Specifically, preferred and most effective approaches to communication appear, at times, to fall by the wayside in favor of convenience. Further, almost 5% of the parents that responded indicated a belief that their best option was to complain as necessary. A number like 5% does not seem to be all that significant in a table with numerous variables and other results displayed within it. In a school with 500 parents, however, that would represent 25 deeply frustrated parents. It is unlikely that any school leader would want to be made aware that 25 parents or guardians are of a mind that their feelings do not matter to the point that the only option they have is to complain or give up.

From a legal standpoint, as well as a data-driven one, there is strong indication that there is room to do better with this topic. Instead of being on the receiving end of unexpected criticism, school systems would do far better to be advocates for the most effective communication whenever possible rather than be perceived as the champions of convenience. Policy that is more specific than saying “the superintendent will be responsible” for a list of 10 to 20 items would seem to be preferable to continuing to overlook communication challenges.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

- Schools and school systems would do well to determine if they are subject to and ultimately in compliance with federal regulations concerning communication and collaboration with parents as described in Title One legislation.
- Acknowledging that many schools may prefer not to duplicate explicit federal or state laws with local policy, there are multiple reasons why communication between home and school exceeds the threshold of normal practice. Parental support, student learning, and finally both student and school safety are all factors that cannot afford to be overlooked. Recent shootings and other assaults on school safety have brought these considerations to the forefront. With nation-wide pleas for improved communication, it is troubling that schools would elect to consider this topic to be one of the 10 to 20 non-specific items on a superintendent's “to do” list, instead of making effective home-school communication a policy priority?

- After writing policy to address this topic, schools need to make it authentic and meaningful by engaging parents, guardians and other consumers in a meaningful dialogue about how to best improve practice in this area.
- Many school software and technology vendors have user groups. Districts need to become actively involved in these and help shape the services and products that are being developed in the future.
- Some states have school communication associations. Many provide consulting services that stress improvement of customer service and more effective two-way communication. Schools in need would do well to seek these services out and employ them where beneficial.
- As this study was limited to a specific area within Arizona, there are limits to its applicability. Additional research is warranted to strengthen the ability to generalize findings and to address added perspectives. Future research concerning this topic should be considered from the school's standpoint. Legislation describes the need to address communication. Parental response supports such need. Better understanding the interpretations and intended response of school systems would stand to add significant insight to this topic as a whole.
- This topic would appear to be a worthy subject for longitudinal study. Just as there was reason to expect personal adaptation to recent innovations, there would be equally justified cause to explore reactions to future advances.

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