How to Improve Family Engagement with Text Messaging

STRIVE PREP



EXPLORE THE COLLECTION

This practice enhances family engagement by providing families with more regular access to information about their children while also generating valuable data on family engagement for educators and leaders to address. For more specific information on how to leverage data as part of a multi-tiered system of support, see ***Navigating Data for Multi-Tiered Systems of Support***.

Snapshot

WHAT IS THE PRACTICE?

The use of biweekly mass text-message communications to families, in both Spanish and English, to notify families about their students' academic progress and priority activities. Families can respond directly to a school staff member via text message if they have questions or concerns about their student.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

- Traditional methods of communication with families (e.g., progress reports, teacher letters, flyers) do not always reach families or students reliably or in a timely manner.
- Some families may struggle to attend events or meetings at school, which have historically been key ways that schools engage families and communicate essential information with families.
- Researchers found that daily communication between teachers and families immediately improved homework completion rates, on-task behavior, and class participation, and participants reported stronger teacher-student relationships, broader parental involvement, and increased student motivation.[1]
- Students whose families are more knowledgeable and involved in their education have been consistently shown to have better academic outcomes.[2]



"It's been great to know grades as they're happening, not just get a progress report at the end of six weeks."

— PARENT, STRIVE PREP SMART

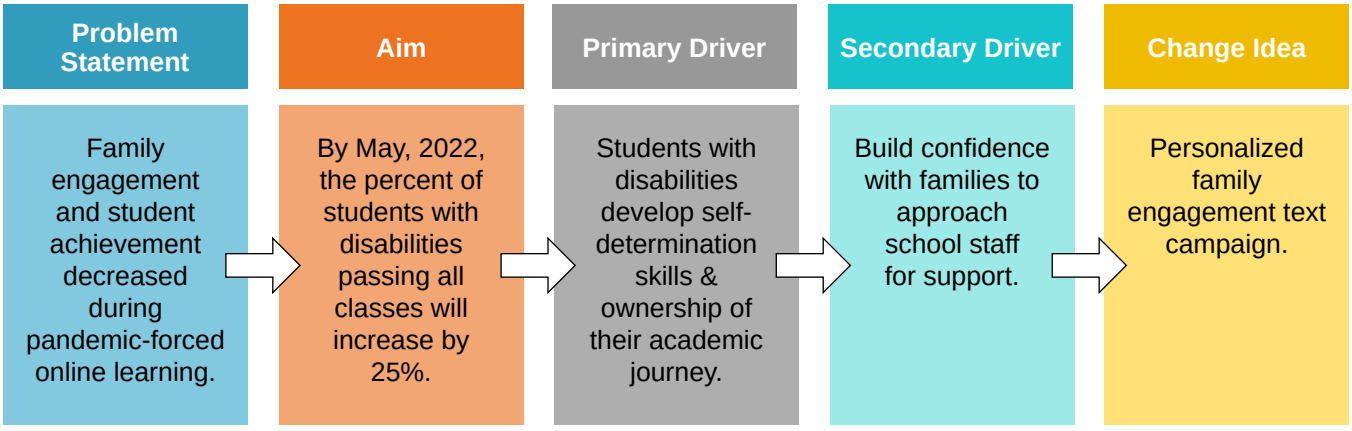
The Challenge

Engaging Families after COVID-19

As students began returning to in-person learning from the COVID-19 pandemic, two of STRIVE Prep's network leaders, Jen Bisha and Jose Loera, realized that there was a need to intentionally re-engage families to support student achievement. Their data revealed schools were having less frequent interactions with families than in prior school years, and they believed increasing family engagement was a factor they could meaningfully improve to increase student course passage rates. After careful reflection, they agreed that the solution should consider several key factors:

- Families were not logging into the network's parent portal that showed them their students' grades and assignments.
- Sixty percent of students with disabilities were failing at least one class.
- Families needed communication available in both English and Spanish.
- Families indicated that text messaging was their preferred method of communication.

Jen and Jose decided that text message communication was the ideal family engagement strategy. They chose to use ThruText, an online text messaging system for sending mass communications. This tool would allow the STRIVE Prep team to communicate student-specific information, such as failing grades and missing assignments, and establish a routine cadence for messaging to families. To ensure that all families had access to this critical information, the system would send messages in English and Spanish biweekly. ThruText would also prompt families to check students' grades on the parent portal and encourage them to engage in back-and-forth communication with staff. They hoped this strategy would get every family involved and aligned with the school so families could talk to their students about their education. These conversations would allow families and students to build helpful habits for communicating with each other about academic progress and what students need.



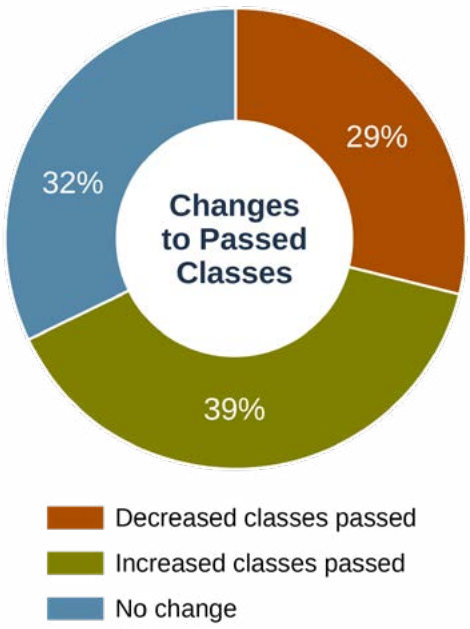
STRIVE Prep's strategic thinking, represented in a driver diagram flowchart visual, connecting their problem statement and aim to the text messaging strategy to engage families

The Practice

Starting Regular Text Messaging Conversations about Grades

Prioritizing the Needs of Students with Disabilities

At the beginning of fall 2021, Jen and Jose decided to implement the text messaging strategy only for students with disabilities who were failing at least one class. As they launched this strategy, they quickly realized that even students who were passing all classes needed to build habits with their families around using the parent portal and communicating their needs at school. The team quickly expanded the text messaging practice to send messages to all families of students with disabilities. As a result, STRIVE Prep saw substantial improvements, with 39% of students with disabilities increasing the number of classes they were passing by the end of the fall semester.



Jen and Jose learned a few important lessons from this initial implementation of text messaging with families of students with disabilities. For the first text message, the team sent an introductory video explaining to families the information they would receive over the semester, how they could act on that information, and strategies to support their students. Unfortunately, not enough families watched the video when notified with just a text message. As an alternative strategy, the STRIVE Prep team posted the introduction video on each school's Facebook page and followed up with a text message asking families, "Will you take 10 minutes to read this update on your student's progress?" This strategy resulted in twice as many engagements with the video.



A STRIVE Prep Smart math teacher works with a student.

How STRIVE Prep Implemented the Practice

Over time, STRIVE Prep learned important lessons on how to best implement their text message intervention. They created simple and targeted messages, a carefully planned calendar of texts, and a routine for sending text messages every other week. Families were able to anticipate when they would receive text messages and could easily respond to the school and their students about students' grades.

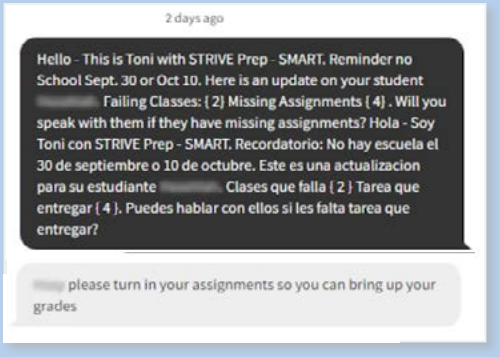
Anatomy of an Effective Text Message

- Simplicity is key.
- Keep messages very simple and focused on a specific purpose.
- Parts to include:
  1. Introduction
  2. Student-specific information (e.g., number of failing classes)
  3. Upcoming important dates and events (e.g., holidays, final exams, or school-specific activities)
  4. A question to engage families

The table below shows examples of STRIVE Prep's prepared text messages for three weeks:

Date	English	Spanish
Sept. 15	Will you watch this video today about school-wide expectations? https://vimeo.com/745187120/d54f410771f	¿Verás este video do 10 minutos hoy sobre las expectativas en toda la escuela? https://vimeo.com/745187120/d54f410771f
Sept. 22	Hello - this is [INSERT SENDER's NAME] with STRIVE PREP - SMART. Reminder: No school Sept. 30 or Oct. 10. Here is an update for your student %FirstName%. Failing classes: (INSERT). Missing assignments: (INSERT). Will you speak to them about turning in these missing assignments?	Hola - Este es [insertar el nombre del remitente] con Strive Prep - Smart. Recordatorio: No hay escuela el 30 de septiembre u 10 de octubre. Este es una actualización para su estudiante %FirstName%. Clases de falla: (insertar). Asignaciones faltantes: (insertar). ¿Los hablarás sobre entregar estas tareas faltantes?
Oct. 13	Hello - this is [INSERT SENDER's NAME] with STRIVE PREP - SMART. Here is an update for your student %FirstName%. Failing classes: (INSERT). Missing assignments: (INSERT). Will you be attending family/teacher conferences on Oct. 20th?	Hola - Este es [insertar el nombre del remitente] con Strive Prep - Smart. Aquí hay una actualización para su estudiante %FirstName%. Clases de falla: (insertar). Asignaciones faltantes: (insertar). ¿Asistirá a conferencias familias/maestros el 20 de octubre?

Families and students then receive messages they can reply to, like this:



Expanding Parental Engagement to Benefit All Students

As they expanded the text messaging strategy to all students in the STRIVE Prep network, Jen and Jose created a **semester-long plan** of all text messages that would go out to families, taking into account holidays and other important dates to reduce the burden of sending text messages biweekly.

Importantly, they also decided to hire three "family ambassadors," family members of students at a STRIVE Prep school who would send and monitor text messages on a part-time basis. These family ambassadors would be integral to the text messaging process, particularly in communicating with families.

Each school principal created a **video introduction to ThruText** to share with families. The first text message families received included the introductory video and expectations for future text messages every other Thursday. Parents could opt out of the text messaging service, but no parents chose to do so.

Once this introduction to the text messaging service happened and the process was fully active, Jose routinely updated student information in ThruText every Thursday using a spreadsheet of grade data pulled from the student information system.

How Schools Get Ready for Text Messaging

Schools	Families
• A platform for automated text messaging • Cell phone numbers of students and families • Expectations for when and how families, students, and staff can interact with the messaging system • A calendar that accounts for important events and milestones • Questions for messages that avoid yes or no responses • Introductory text message about the purpose of the text message process, what it is, and what it means • A video that explains expectations for students and available resources • An expectation that school staff update grades weekly before messages are sent out • Alternate mode of communication for follow-up (Facebook, newsletter, etc.)	• A mobile device that can download and use the parent portal • Individual login credentials

Family ambassadors could then send biweekly text messages to inform families about students' progress. Families could reply to the messages when they had questions or needed additional information, and family ambassadors would respond. Family ambassadors were also responsible for compiling responses from text messages to share with school staff.

On the alternating weeks when messages were not sent, Jose looked at data from ThruText to see how many text messages were read, how many links were visited, and how many families responded. Students' advisors, school leaders, and teachers had the opportunity to use what was learned from the responses and to identify how they could implement the text messaging strategy more effectively in the future.

TIPS FOR SELECTING A TEXT MESSAGING PLATFORM

As STRIVE Prep's team considered various platforms they might adopt for this pilot, they needed to balance budget considerations between platform cost and time requirements for processing data. In the end, they chose ThruText because it was a less expensive platform than others they considered. Yet, this decision required considerable data management on the part of the STRIVE Prep team members, especially Jose, because it did not integrate with their student information systems.

When determining which platform is best for a family text messaging system, consider the following:

- Cost of the platform
- Integration of the platform with existing student information systems
- Skill level of team members to run reports and merge content between systems
- Capacity of team members to track engagement and response data
- Training requirements for staff members and families to navigate the system

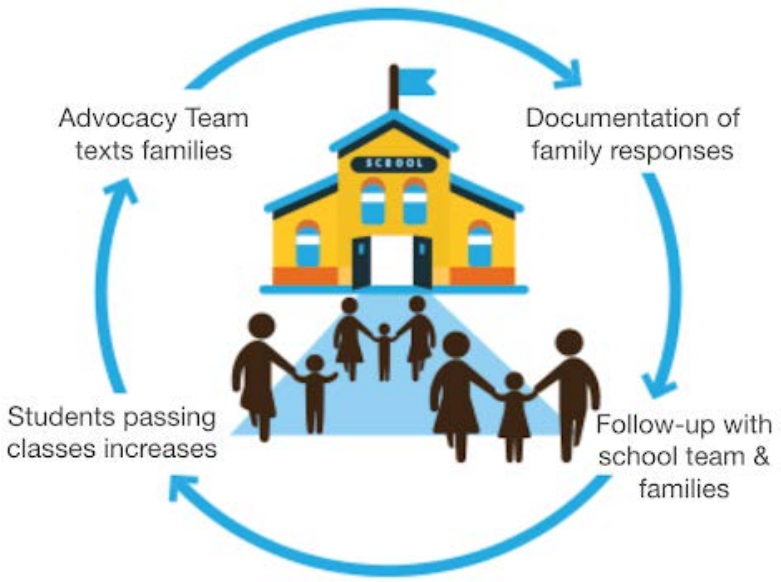
Barriers to Solve

Even after the text messaging strategy was fully implemented, some barriers remained for the team to solve. One challenge was the limited access family ambassadors had to students' information beyond ThruText. Jen and Jose made sure that family ambassadors had the information that needed to be input into text messages, but without full access to the data systems, family ambassadors could not update information from families into the student information system nor retrieve details they needed about students to respond to follow up text messages from families. In the end, the limited access family ambassadors had to student data meant most data responsibilities lay with Jose. This both limited the impact the family ambassadors could have on family engagement with the text messaging system and put time burdens on Jose to complete data input and address follow-up requests on specific students.

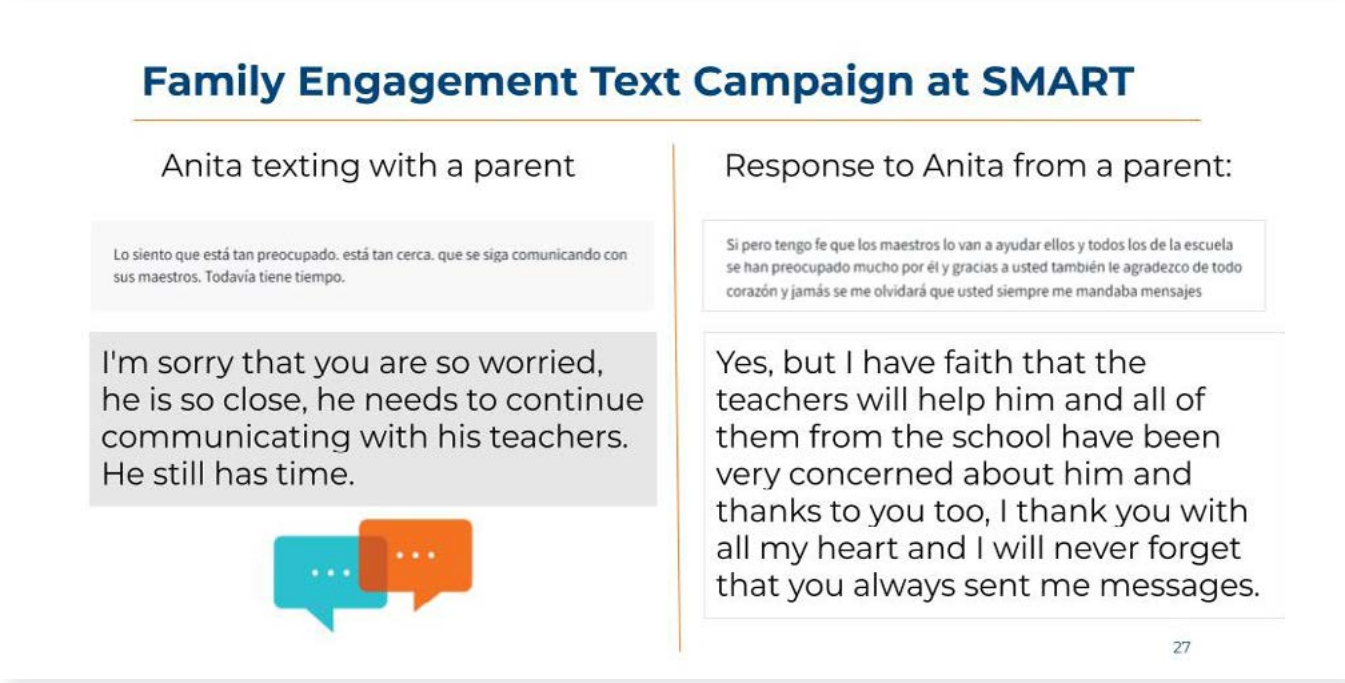
The team also ran into a logistical issue where they could only match one student per phone number, making it impossible to send text messages for two or more siblings at a STRIVE Prep school without applying special assignment rules. For example, in cases where there were two students in the household and two phone numbers for parents or guardians, the team could assign one student to each of the numbers; this did not work, however, if there were more than two students attending the school from the same household. Where the number of students from a single household exceeded the

number of available phone numbers, they established decision-making criteria to prioritize students in the household for text messaging communication, often prioritizing the student with the greatest need for family engagement based on special education eligibility, academic performance, or age.

While Jose regularly analyzed and shared data from biweekly text messages, STRIVE Prep school leaders and educators were unable to routinely review the data on family engagement and follow-up messages. By not reviewing the data on engagement and families' responses, the team did not always understand the home-life factors impacting student progress, valuable information that could have helped them respond appropriately in the classroom. Furthermore, they weren't able to investigate which students did not have family engagement and required further intervention or a different approach. As a result, a key stage in the theory of change that the school was trying to test (shown in the figure at right) was missing, creating a significant barrier to the effectiveness of the program.



STRIVE Prep's theory of change for family text messaging



The Impact

Using Text Messaging as a Way to Improve Family Engagement in Student Grades

Despite some of the challenges related to implementing STRIVE Prep's text message strategy, families and students benefited from this method of family engagement. When STRIVE Prep surveyed families about how receiving text messages impacted them:

- **100%** of families said they talked to their student as a result of a text message,
- **74%** of families said they checked their student's grades as a result of the text messaging, and
- **78%** of families said they felt comfortable talking to their students about their grades.

These results demonstrate that text messaging accomplished the desired effect of helping families communicate with their students about their grades and develop habits around checking students' grades.

One family expressed how much easier texting was than other forms of communication schools often used: "Text messages are very helpful. It helped me a lot because I don't use email that much." The text message strategy had the added benefit of ensuring that families received text messages in multiple languages so that engagement was not limited based on English fluency. STRIVE Prep also succeeded in accomplishing their goal of reconnecting the schools with families through a regular communication strategy. One family expressed their gratitude: "Thank you for always being aware of our children and helping them in their school progress."





Survey responses sent via ThruText to families about the text messaging strategy

FURTHER LEARNING

"Why Aren't Text Messaging Interventions Designed to Boost College Success Working at Scale?"

BEN CASTLEMAN

"What Good Can a Phone Do? How Text Messaging Programs Have Been Used to Improve Education and Healthcare"

JOHN HORSLEY

"It's Too Annoying: Who Drops Out of Educational Text Messaging Programs and Why"

HANS FRICKE, DEMETRA KALOGRIDES, AND SUSANNA LOEB

"Some Evidence-Based Practical Tips for Designing Text-Based Parenting Programs"

LELYS DINARTE-DIAZ

To learn more about how you can implement data-driven practices as part of a multi-tiered system of support, see *Navigating Data for Multi-Tiered Systems of Support*.

STRIVE Prep *is a part of the* ***Marshall Street Networked Improvement Community,*** *a three-year intentional community of 10 public charter school networks nationwide aiming to make dramatic gains for Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty. Collectively, the 10 networks identified over 20 best practices that improve learning outcomes and school culture for students positioned furthest from opportunity. Learn more here.*

Appendix

Notes

1 Kraft and Dougherty, “The Effect of Teacher-Family Communication”

2 Seitsinger, “Examining the effect of family engagement”

Bibliography

Kraft, Matthew A. and Shaun M. Dougherty. “The Effect of Teacher-Family Communication on Student Engagement: Evidence From a Randomized Field Experiment.” *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* 6, no.3 (2013): 199–222. https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2012.743636

Seitsinger, Anne M. “Examining the effect of family engagement on middle and high school students’ academic achievement and adjustment.” *The Wiley Handbook of Family, School and Community Relationships in Education*, edited by Steven B. Sheldon and Tammy A. Turner-Vorbeck, 163–182. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2019.