CHOOSING THE RIGHT TECHNOLOGY TO ENCOURAGE PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

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Learning as I Go: Experiences, Reflections, Lessons Learned

Schools know that the more involved parents and carers are in their children's learning, the more effective that learning will be. The benefits are numerous, with positive effects on students' behavior, motivation, attendance, and achievement – and a parent's engagement with their first child's learning also brings benefits for siblings.

Tech provides the way in

EdTech opens the door as far as parental engagement is concerned and, in many ways, creating a digital connection with all parents and carers (the hard-to-reach group included) can be easier than trying to encourage face-to-face interaction at school or from the classroom.

With the complete change to the education landscape over the last 18 months, parents of elementary-age children have had to take on a much more active role in supporting learning at home. It hasn't been easy. Nor has it been for educators, who had to adapt with lightning speed to delivering lessons, activities, and resources online, as well as remaining in the classroom to teach the children who were still in attendance. However, a valuable lesson they have learned in terms of technology is that 'less is more' – and becoming familiar with just a couple of EdTech tools and then using them to their full capability is much more productive than using multiple solutions for different activities.

Keeping it simple

This idea of keeping it simple extends to parents supporting learning at home, too. If parents are juggling all the balls of trying to work remotely, supervise more than one child's schoolwork, cook, clean, look after family members, and so on, making access to online resources for learning needs to be easy as possible or it simply will not happen. Elementary teachers have understood this well and have therefore used EdTech in its simplest forms during periods of remote learning, for example, by sharing resources directly from their school website or uploading videos of stories and activities to YouTube for parents and children to watch together.

For families struggling to get themselves and/or each child online during normal school hours, technology means that the learning resources supplied by the class teacher can be used and accessed at different times. Providing this flexibility lifts the burden of having to be online for school at a set time (impossible for those sharing a device anyway) and allows the parents and children to better engage with activities perhaps later in the day, the evening, or at the weekend when there is less pressure and more time to explore them together. Having these as prompts to talk about what is being learned is valuable for parents. It allows them to engage with and support their child as they learn – and involves them to a greater degree than if their child were simply in school.

Join the conversation where it takes place

Social media is a valuable tool for schools, not just because of its widespread use but also because it can help to give its users a voice that they may not feel they have the right to use in person. With millions of people using it every day, it is technology that parents are both familiar and comfortable with.

Schools can capitalize on this by choosing dedicated EdTech apps with a communication element that prompts and supports conversations; ones that parents will find intuitive to use because they are modeled on familiar technology. Even starting with short exchanges when a child has achieved something good can help to create a sense of pride for them and the parent – a positive experience for everyone that forms the basis for further communication.

Parent-Teacher conference

The time teachers most want to talk with parents is at parent-teacher conferences and, of course, during the duration of the pandemic, face-to-face meetings have not been possible.

Moving forward

What have we learned about encouraging parental engagement during this time that we can take forward?

Having found success with easy-to-access resources for parents and students from school websites and YouTube, schools will hopefully bring these into play for snow days and revision sessions and the like, so that teaching and learning can continue uninterrupted and any potential loss of learning is minimized.

When schools are choosing new EdTech to implement, such as social-media-style apps for observing skills in the classroom, I think they will be more mindful of considering the parental part of the equation and how easy they will be for parents to use to support and contribute to their child's learning journey.

And let's not forget social media itself as a tool to support connection and conversation. Until now, some schools have hesitated to embrace it fully, perhaps put off by its immediacy. But both WhatsApp and Facebook are heavily accessed by parents, so, with careful use and good digital safety policies in place, this is a logical way to reach out.

At the heart of encouraging digital parental engagement is enabling them to do so easily. And now, after supporting their own children's education themselves, many parents have a new-found respect for the job that educators do and this, in itself, will prompt a higher level of communication, at least for a while, giving schools the chance to develop those valuable connections and build on them for the future.

Tech tips

Tips for successful use of technology for parents:

- Make it easy for them to become involved and invested in their child's education by choosing simple, intuitive technology solutions to communicate and share achievements.

- Minimize digital barriers by requiring them to only use one or two carefully chosen EdTech apps for communication, alongside regular social media.

- Maximize your school's social media use and go to where the parents are. Parents use it all the time and understand it well. Even if you don't hear back from everyone in a Facebook class group, they will likely read the messages and remain informed.

- Use a variety of messaging media. It's easy to upload text notices to your website, however, video messages can speak directly to every parent and may also be easier for those with English as a second language to understand.

About the author:

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