

Federal Way Public Schools

When Federal Way Public Schools administrators needed to improve communication between parents and schools, they turned to the Blackboard Connect service to deliver consistent, targeted messages, including attendance, grade threshold, and positive feedback notifications. According to the district's chief communications officer, Diane Turner, "The timeliness and ease of the system allowed us to be much more efficient in all our communications. Blackboard Connect immediately expanded our ability to make contact with and engage our parents."

CHALLENGE: Improve attendance, achievement and safety with the increase of parental involvement

Federal Way Public Schools (FWPS) is located in western Washington, midway between Seattle and Tacoma. The district is the eighth largest in the state and serves more than 22,000 students. Approximately 46% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, and the district is one of the lowest funded in the state. Yet FWPS is identified as one of the top ten performers: students score well above the state average in assessments.

Before implementing the Blackboard Connect service, FWPS educators lacked a reliable, timely, efficient method for connecting with parents. "Parents received information through what we call 'kid mail,'" said Diane Turner, the district's chief communications officer. "We sent infrequent school newsletters, and a semimonthly district newsletter. Some schools might send the occasional email. All communications were sent in English. Our limitations were tremendous, and direct communications from the district itself were ineffective."

QUICK FACTS

- Population: 22,000
- Located in western Washington between Seattle and Tacoma
- Used the Blackboard Connect platform to increase Parental Involvement



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SOLUTION: Blackboard Connect

Regular use of the Blackboard Connect service resulted in measurable district-wide improvements. By implementing daily attendance notification at both middle and secondary levels, the district experienced a 70 percent reduction in unexcused absences. The reduction was seen as critical to ensuring adequate student performance on standardized tests. "Attendance is key because it ties in directly to student achievement," said Turner. "If we can get our students to just come to school, they can pass the state assessments." The notifications also increased parental engagement. "Parents now know when students are skipping class. As result, they are having more discussions with their children."

There have been tangible benefits for the schools, as well. "By using Blackboard Connect to institute daily absence notification, we've increased the accountability of our teachers," said Turner. The notifications have also provided critical documentation for use in truancy hearings. According to Karen Saunders, the district's Blackboard Connect coordinator, "Before a hearing, we're able to pull up the data and demonstrate that parents were notified of absences, as well as what the results of those notifications were. It completely eliminates the 'he said, she said' or 'I didn't get the call' part of the conversation."

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Diane Turner
Chief Communications Officer
Federal Way Public Schools

RESULT: Increased attendance leads to a boost in student achievement

To address student achievement, the district uses the Blackboard Connect service to deliver grade threshold notifications. "Our superintendent asked us to use Blackboard Connect to contact parents when students were in danger of falling below a C, because what we were hearing from parents was 'we didn't know' or 'why didn't someone call me?'" said Turner. Messages are sent every two weeks to ensure parents have sufficient time to act before the next reporting period. "Our principals are thrilled with the program. We are getting much more attention to grades from parents, and the communication between parents and teachers—and teachers and students—has increased." In addition, the program has improved staff accountability in assigning grades. "We also discovered that teachers have been much more timely in getting grades in the grade book, and the grades are much less subjective. They're based on something more tangible and concrete, like a test or paper, not 'he was a good citizen.'"

The district recently introduced Blackboard Connect for Teachers (BCT) to a number of our school administrators and teachers. They are excited to pilot Connect for Teachers to facilitate student-specific notifications. The service allows teachers to quickly and easily notify parents of student behavior and performance changes with more than 100 pre-recorded comments. "We have lots of ways of telling parents that their students aren't doing well. We wanted to balance the more negative grade threshold feedback, so we will begin using Blackboard Connect for Teachers in September 2010 to send encouraging messages home to parents," said Turner. "The BCT service engages parents in a positive way in the education of their children. By connecting with them, we're forming a partnership and building trust."