

Bedichek Middle School



AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

When teachers at Bedichek Middle School needed to connect with both English- and Spanish-speaking parents, they turned to Blackboard's classroom communication solution, Connect for Teachers (formerly Teleparent Engage Teacher) to deliver daily personalized positive and corrective messages. According to Principal Dan Diehl, "The system helps us break down the language barrier between teacher and parent. It allows parents who are not English speakers to be more involved in their child's education on a day-to-day basis."

CHALLENGE

Located in Austin, Texas, Bedichek Middle School is one of 19 middle schools in the Austin Independent School District (AISD), a large urban district serving 85,000 students. Bedichek has an enrollment of 1,000 students; of which, 85 percent are Hispanic, and the remaining 15 percent are divided between white and African American. The recent economic downturn has had a significant impact on the community: the percentage of students on free and reduced lunch has risen from 75 percent to 85 percent in four years.

Communicating regularly with parents is always a challenge for time- and resource-strapped educators. For teachers at Bedichek, connecting with parents was further complicated by widespread language barriers. According to Principal Dan Diehl, "Approximately 35 percent of Bedichek students live in homes where Spanish is the primary language. To foster parental engagement, we needed a resource that would allow us to quickly and easily communicate with parents in their preferred language."

SOLUTION

Prior to his principalship at Bedichek, Diehl was principal at TeWinkle Middle School in Costa Mesa, California. At TeWinkle, Diehl relied on the same communication solution to build relationships with parents for whom English was a second language. "On the TeWinkle campus, few personnel were bilingual, and

QUICK FACTS

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- ▶ Enrollment: 1,000 students
- ▶ Approximately 35 percent of Bedichek students live in homes where Spanish is the primary language.
- ▶ Relies on Blackboard's classroom communication solution to communicate with parents in parents' preferred languages.

we didn't have a lot of resources. Messages used to be translated manually," said Diehl. "Now, teachers could simply choose a message in English and know the message would be delivered to the parents in Spanish. It was a real win for the teachers—and for me as a principal—to be able to provide that service."

When Diehl moved to the Austin Independent School District, however, he discovered the district didn't have a similar capability. While the district did have a notification system in place, the existing system didn't provide an integrated classroom communication tool. Diehl felt so strongly about the power of the Blackboard solution to connect with parents that he used his school's own budget to purchase the system. "

RESULTS

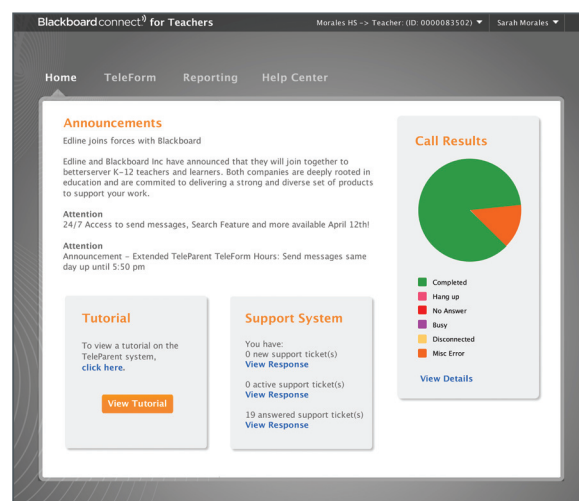
For Bedichek, the technology now known as Blackboard Connect for Teachers™ has been a key component in fostering parent engagement in the face of significant language barriers. Teachers can just as easily communicate with Spanish-speaking parents as English-speaking ones, as the system's 1,000 messages are pre-recorded in 23 languages and automatically delivered in a family's preferred language. Because messages are translated by humans—not machines—messages are guaranteed to be accurate, a critical factor in facilitating clear communication. According to Diehl, "We break down the language barrier between teacher and parent. It allows parents who are not English speakers to be more involved in their child's education on a day-to-day basis."

Bedichek teachers find that the system makes communicating with parents on a daily basis more efficient. "I use the system to inform parents about tutoring, make-up work, upcoming tests, and attendance issues," says Kathy Keel, sixth grade science teacher, "My students now ask me if I can send a "reminder" home." Better communication with parents has also translated to more available time for classroom prep and grading.

To foster an open dialogue with parents, teachers send positive messages in addition to corrective ones. "When we trained teachers on how to use the system, we encouraged them to think about using it like a bank account. Before you can make a withdrawal, you have to make deposits," said Diehl. "Parents need to hear positive messages. If parents begin to expect negative messages, they'll stop answering the phone."

“Not a week goes by that a parent doesn't stop me and say 'thank you' for the messages. They want to know what's going on, and we help them stay connected with the school.”

Dan Diehl
Principal
Bedichek Middle School



Bedichek teachers appreciate the streamlined interface that's easy to learn and even easier to use.

Parent reaction to the boost in classroom communications has been overwhelmingly positive, with parents appreciating both the positive feedback and the daily updates on their child's performance. "Not a week goes by that a parent doesn't stop me and say 'thank you' for the messages. They want to know what's going on, and we help them stay connected with the school," said Diehl. "Every year when we look at the budget, we ask the parents and the PTA if they want us to renew our contract and now, with Blackboard Connect for Teachers, the answer will continue to be 'yes.' The parents tell me that, because we're using this system, they actually have more communication with teachers at Bedichek Middle School than with teachers at the elementary schools."