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How Schools Can Save Themselves (and Families) Time and Effort Through More Effective Technology Use

Office of Ed Tech · Follow

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Earlier this summer, President Biden and Vice President Harris launched "Time Is Money," a new governmentwide effort to crack down on unnecessary headaches or hassles that take time from people's days and degrade their quality of life.

Unfortunately, parent communication with schools can be one of those headaches or hassles. Between communicating with teachers, viewing school policies, accessing homework, completing forms and permission slips, and more, multiple school processes, platforms, and paperwork can sometimes be a burden for families that already have a lot on their plates. This can lead to frustration, confusion, wasted time, and diminished engagement for already-overwhelmed families.

Recognizing this can negatively impact how parents engage with their child's education, the Biden-Harris Administration included streamlining parent communication with schools as one of the goals included in a recent White House Fact Sheet centering on eliminating "headaches and hassles" that impact quality of life.

To help meet this goal, the Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology (OET) conducted listening sessions with parents and school leaders across the country to hear reflections and gather insights on their understanding of digital use and access disparities within schools. Three significant challenges to making educational technology systems more efficient and transparent for parents and caregivers quickly emerged:

- A lack of interoperability between platforms

- Varying levels of digital literacy for parents and caregivers, and

- Limited connectivity to access school-based digital tools or services

The challenges many families face with educational technology can be significant and multifaceted, hindering effective family engagement and adding unnecessary stress to their lives. The complexity of managing multiple platforms across different schools, combined with inadequate training and support for parents, places a heavy burden on families, particularly those with limited digital literacy. Additionally, the digital access divide, especially in rural communities, continues to prevent many families from fully participating in their children's education. Fortunately, there are a number of steps states and school districts can take to address these challenges and reduce the burden on parents.

Recommendation 1: Improve Interoperability Between Multiple Platforms

States and districts looking to build efficiencies and reduce the strain on parents and caregivers can:

- **Audit existing platforms in use and limit use to those platforms adopted and supported by the district.** By auditing which tools are officially or unofficially being used within a district's technology ecosystem, leaders can get a sense of the number of tools being used for functions such as communication, grade reporting, or assignment delivery. Once the audit is complete, district leaders can evaluate tools currently supported by the district and implement a communication and change management plan to help reduce the number of platforms with which parents and caregivers are asked to interact as well as help educators transition to supported resources. St. Vrain Valley Schools in Colorado has created its Codex database to help families and educators better understand which platforms are authorized within the district and what data are shared with those platforms.

- **Prioritize interoperability as a component of procurement.** Along with cybersecurity and data privacy, interoperability standards represent an added level of safety and efficiency for school systems. By including interoperability with established systems as a key priority for a district's student information and learning management systems, leaders can better ensure the information parents and caregivers are seeking will be channeled to fewer platforms. Some districts have also begun awarding points within requests for proposals (RFPs) for those platforms showing they have earned targeted third-party validations, such as those listed within EdSurge's Product Index.

Recommendation 2: Support Families' Digital Literacy

In listening sessions, parents and caregivers described juggling numerous logins, notifications, and updates, distracting from their ability to engage meaningfully with their child's learning. Families report having insufficient access to training modules or live support, forcing them to spend their own resources on finding personalized solutions, further deepening the digital use divide described in the 2024 National Educational Technology Plan. Without adequate support, parents and caregivers lack the digital literacy necessary to fully engage with a district's technology ecosystem, limiting their ability to stay informed and participate in their children's education. To ensure all parents and caregivers have the digital supports and skills they need, states and districts can:

- **Provide recurring and on-demand digital literacy training for parents and caregivers.** Whether in-person, virtual, or both, regular offerings on how to access and get the most out of common tools in a district's technology ecosystem can lower barriers to use for parents and caregivers. For districts with limited resources to extend programming beyond their current support of educators and students, partnerships with other community-based organizations, municipal governments, and cultural organizations can increase capacity and help facilitate new learning opportunities for families within the community.

- **Build a help desk for everyone.** Where possible, including open and consistent access to technology support to parents and caregivers in the same way it is provided to educators can ensure just-in-time support when families are attempting to utilize district technology at home. While full help desk access may be cost- or time-prohibitive, districts can ensure tech support guidance includes language specific to home use. Such resources should be sensitive to language and accessibility needs as well.

- **Invite parents and caregivers into the process.** While some might need assistance in building basic digital literacy skills, other parents and caregivers may offer missing perspectives on how a district can bring added efficiencies to its technology ecosystem. Inviting regular parent and caregiver input through committee membership, surveys, and listening sessions can ensure a district better understands specific digital literacy needs within a community.

Recommendation 3: Ensure Digital Equity

The digital access divide continues to be a critical barrier to effective family engagement, particularly for families in rural communities who struggle with reliable broadband access. Despite the potential for technology to transform education, many families lack the necessary infrastructure, such as high-speed internet and digital devices, to engage in online learning platforms. Rural families remain disproportionately disconnected from these resources. This lack of access not only hampers students' ability to engage in technology-enabled learning but also prevents parents from participating in efficient two-way communications with schools. States and districts working to close this home access divide can:

- **Support expanded connectivity.** Recognizing the fundamental importance of connectivity, many districts across the country have developed partnerships with municipal governments to build free wireless access points such as LTE towers strategically placed in geographic locations where they know connectivity rates are low. Where this is not possible, districts and public institutions are providing wireless hotspots for home use to ensure families and students have the connectivity and access they need, often with federal support. Outside of the home, some districts work with local businesses to identify where

free wireless connectivity is available and provide those businesses with decals or signs to signal the availability of connectivity to families. This OET brief includes 6 strategies for deploying school district wireless networks as a sustainable solution to connect students at home.

- **Create pathways for home devices.** In addition to allowing students to take their school-issued technology home, districts can work with local public libraries to highlight where laptops or tablets may be available for checkout. When negotiating the purchase of new devices, districts can work to negotiate family pricing or discounts for home devices. When devices are ready to be refreshed for in-district use but have not yet reached their end of life, districts can offer these devices to families at no cost or at deep discounts. This option should be paired with digital literacy learning opportunities for parents or caregivers to improve families' ability to attend to the needs of aging technologies.

Several additional examples exist that demonstrate how states and districts can make it easier for parents and their children. For example, to better understand the problem of multiple platforms for parental communication, Peninsula School District in Washington State is using this school year to gather data on the various platforms and number of communications parents and caregivers are receiving. The district will use these data in the next year to formulate a plan for change management to reduce the number of channels of communication parents and caregivers are asked to use in communication with the district and its teachers. When leaders in San Antonio Independent School District realized many of their students were being raised or cared for by grandparents with very different levels of digital comfort and literacy, the district began in-person monthly trainings to ensure all students have the home technology support they need. The leaders in Oregon's Beaverton School District have engaged with technology

vendors to explicitly communicate their needs for everything from reaching across linguistically-diverse populations to setting expectations of interoperability for new technology purchases. These districts' approaches can serve as model solutions for others beginning this work or looking to improve upon what they have already done.

Additional Resources

- Those looking for a place to start this work can reference the National Digital Inclusion Alliance's Digital Navigator Program for model processes and considerations.

- Empathy interviews are one approach for building an understanding of parent and caregiver experiences and pain points. The Empathy Interviews Guide from Community Design Partners provides a set of learning resources, reflection questions, and practice examples for exploring the purpose, protocols, and logistics of conducting empathy interviews.

- OET's "Advancing Digital Equity for All: Community-Based Recommendations for Developing Effective Digital Equity Plans to Close the Digital Divide and Enable Technology-Empowered Learning" outlines necessary components for building greater digital equity and highlights powerful examples of communities doing this important work.

- For more examples of districts improving digital equity (including strategies to effectively partner with community-based organizations), visit OET's digital equity story collection.

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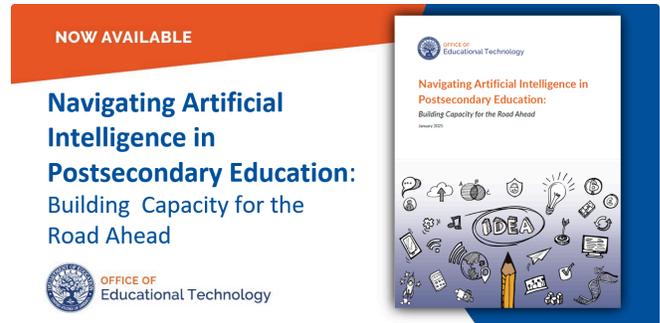Respond

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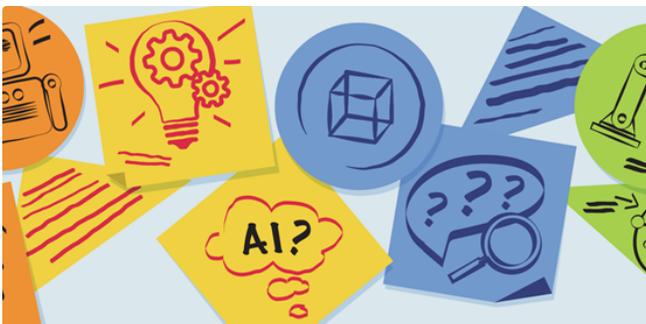
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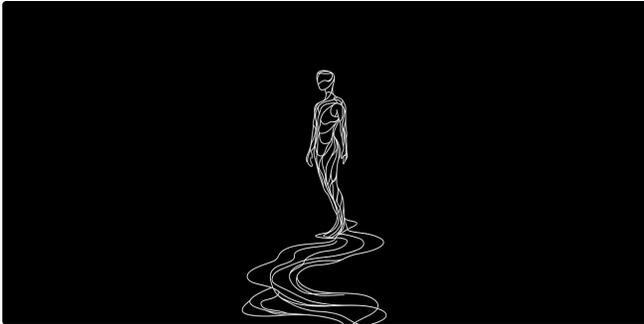### How to Find a Mentor
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