

Challenge & Solution

Wyandanch Union Free School District, where 95% of families live below the poverty line, was using Blackboard Connect and postal mail with limited response, paying four translators to convert every message for its 60% Hispanic community. The district adopted ParentSquare through a BOCES consortium grant, gaining EdLaw 2-d compliance, automatic translation, and Secure Document Delivery.

Results

- Secure Document Delivery replaced postal mailings for bus passes, report cards, and progress reports, with read tracking for each
- Automatic translation eliminated the cost and delay of four on-demand translators for every district communication
- Smart Alerts let staff send time-sensitive notifications in seconds, replacing a process that previously took over an hour

Connecting families who were out of reach

As the poorest school district in one of the wealthiest suburbs in the U.S., Wyandanch Union Free School District in Long Island, NY faces some challenges. Ninety-five percent of its families live below the poverty line, the entire district is eligible for free lunch through the community eligibility provision and two of its schools have been identified for improvement.

Seeing an opportunity to strengthen its parental and community ties, the district made reciprocal community and family engagement a top priority. Achieving this goal required a unified school-home communication platform that was safe, secure, and engaging.

Christine Jordan, Assistant to the Superintendent for Administration and Instructional Accountability, said the district was previously using Blackboard Connect to send messages to families, but that it wasn't getting much response to that outreach.

The district's middle and high schools weren't using a communication platform at all, which basically forced teachers, students, and parents to share their cell phone numbers in order to communicate. "This shouldn't be happening; if there ever was a question of something inappropriate taking place," said Jordan, "we can't go in and read private messages on someone's cell phone."

Wyandanch UFSD's intermediate schools were using another product, but that solution wasn't in compliance with the state's student and privacy law. In effect since 2014, the New York State Education Law 2-d (also known as EdLaw 2-d) focuses on the privacy and security of personally identifiable information (PII) of students, classroom teachers and principals. It says New York education agencies must publish a parent's bill of rights for data privacy and security, and that bill of rights must be included with every contract with a third-party contractor that receives PII.

Closing the big disconnect

When a colleague mentioned the ParentSquare school-home platform as a possible option for the district, Jordan wanted to know more. That colleague worked for a district with a similar demographic makeup to Wyandanch UFSD, which serves a student body that's 60 percent Hispanic. "A lot of our families are Spanish speaking," she explained. "And while those students can communicate in school, we're a highly monolingual staff. There's a big disconnect with the families."

If the district wanted to send out a message using Blackboard, it would create that message in English and then pay four different translators a stipend to translate it on demand. Then, a district translator would have to do the reverse when a report or message came back to the district in Spanish. "It was a whole process," said Jordan.

After meeting with ParentSquare to discuss the possibilities of Wyandanch UFSD adopting the platform with a BOCES consortium grant, Jordan decided to move forward with the implementation in February 2021. This meant that BOCES did the Education Law 2-d compliance work for her, effectively endorsing ParentSquare as a platform that complied with the state privacy standard.

"ParentSquare is fully EdLaw 2-d compliant; we're giving them almost all of our data (aside from grades and test results," said Jordan. "I'm beholden as a district privacy officer to make

sure that we have an agreement between my district and the company saying we are compliant with EdLaw 2-d.”

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Serving a large number of transient families, the district was also spending a lot of time stuffing and addressing envelopes, adding postage, and mailing out correspondence, only to have roughly one quarter of those letters returned.

Today, Jordan can send bus passes, report cards, progress reports and other correspondence right through ParentSquare’s Secure Documents feature—a method that also helps ensure that parents actually receive the documents. This is useful for middle and high school teachers, and for Jordan, who has a dashboard that tells her who opened what, and when.

“I can see that they have the app on their phone, and that they viewed it,” said Jordan. “We now know which parents we are and aren’t reaching, versus waiting for 25 percent of our mailed correspondence to come back to us days or weeks later.”

Changing the narrative

As a district that’s in need of improvement, Wyandanch UFSD now has a powerful technology tool that helps it broadcast its accomplishments (i.e., a high school valedictorian who has earned 33 college credits) and investments (brand new furniture for its classrooms) out to parents and stakeholders in the community.

This sharing of “wins” is helping Wyandanch UFSD change the narrative and show that it’s possible to improve if students, staff, and families are involved and working toward common goals. “ParentSquare is helping us close that gap in a way that some of our other communication platforms weren’t,” said Jordan, who recently began using the platform’s Smart Alerts feature.

“Yesterday we had to cancel the boys’ soccer intramural and it took 30 seconds to send out that alert on ParentSquare,” Jordan said. In another example, she used the platform to send out a roll call for a primary school that was closed due to Covid. Jordan was able to do that within a few minutes using the ParentSquare mobile app.

“I wasn’t onsite, so it would have taken me an hour and a half to manage with our old system,” said Jordan. “We wear a lot of hats in our district and having a tool that can save you time and just let you move on to the next thing is priceless.”

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