Technoparenting: Creating Webpages That Improve Home/School Communications

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Technoparenting: Creating Webpages That Improve Home/School Communications
(Synopsis)
How can both parents and schools benefit from well-designed, purposeful class webpages? This session will highlight the purposes of class webpages, describe online gradebooks, give tips for helping reluctant teachers begin to create pages, and suggest strategies for getting all teachers in a building on the web.

MANKATO AREA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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District Pages Select Here

Kennedy

Sarah Sample
Sixth Grade
Classroom
Teacher

507-555-1234
ssampl1@isd77.k12.mn.us
2600 E. Main Street, Mankato, MN 56001

Welcome to My School Homepage

I hope that the links and information you find on this page are useful to you as a parent and community member. Check back often to see what is happening in our classroom and to find links that will expand the educational experience of your child.

Class Happenings

This month, we will be working on research projects involving immigration. Does your family have any personal stories about when, how and why your ancestors came to this country?

In science, we will be working on how to predict the weather. Did you know that Dakota Meadows Middle School has its own weather station? Discuss the daily weather forecast with your child at the breakfast table.

My Links: Dakota Meadows Weather Page | Class links to Web Resources on Immigration | Grading Policy | Field Trip Permission Slip

Updated: 02/05/2001
http://www.isd77.k12.mn.us/~ssampl1/

Teacher Webpages That Build Parent Partnerships

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A story

Indulge me for a moment by reading a personal tale of parental frustration.
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> *When my son Brady was in the fifth-grade, he came home with a report card that was, shall we say, less than impressive. This bright, hard working boy was getting D's in social studies, science, and health. The first parent-teacher conference of the year was held ten weeks after school began, and it wasn't until then that I learned of the problems he was having.*
>
> *At the conference, I asked his teacher a favor. "Please let me know what Brady needs to know in these areas, when the test dates are, and when the projects are due. I will help make sure he knows what he needs to know!"*
>
> *A bit flustered, the teacher said she would get back to me.*
>
> *I never saw the list of competencies or test dates, but I also noticed Brady never received less than a B in her class again. While at the time I viewed this as victory for proactive parenting, I have since worried that the skills and knowledge Brady should have gained during that year fell by the wayside.*

Brady's teacher missed a tremendous opportunity by not enlisting my help and the help of the other children's parents in her class. Over one-fourth of the year was gone before I knew my son was having problems. Even had I known he was struggling, I did not know enough about the curricular content or teacher's expectations to know how to help.

Increasing parental involvement

Genuine, regular, real-time collaboration with parents can make a positive difference in a child's learning experience. Parents of children with work completion problems can become allies in helping these children manage their time and turn in quality work. Answers to questions about class rules, policies, and supplies should be readily available.

The problem is that collaboration like this takes great communication and planning – and that takes time.

Happily, teacher created webpages available on the Internet can help simplify those communication and planning efforts. Sure, most if not all of information an actively involved parent might like to have could be made available through printed materials sent home with students and through earlier, more regularly scheduled face-to-face conferences. But as we all know, print material sometimes doesn't make it home or out of the backpack. Conferences are difficult to schedule and are real time eaters. The web can help overcome these problems. (For parents without home Internet access, such webpages can be readily printed by the teacher and distributed by traditional means.)

Purposes of class webpages

A well-designed class webpage can serve a variety of purposes. These purposes include:
- Providing a general description of the classroom or course. (Table One)
- Providing a general outline and timeline of the units covered. (Table Two)
- Providing specific information about individual units or projects. (Table Three)
- Providing real-time information about the progress of individual students. (Table Four)

Details of the kinds of information that might be provided on a class webpage are in the tables below.

That's a lot of information that I as a parent would love to have. Just think, Junior comes home, plops on the sofa with remote in hand. "How's the homework situation?" you ask. "Under control. Got it done in study hall," replies Junior. You double-check by logging on to the class webpage, enter your personal username and password, and find that Junior has missing daily assignments and did not do well in the last test. The assessment checklist for a big project that is due soon is there too. Ah, something to talk about at suppertime.

As a parent, I can also look to see if my child has any areas in which he or she needs special help. I can work with the school to see that tutoring or a special class might be offered. My goal as a parent is the same as the school's: *to make certain my child succeeds to the very best of his or her ability*.

Providing easy implementation

But that is also a lot of information for a teacher to not only get online, but to keep current. Those of us with webpages know that keeping them current, accurate and organized is an ongoing chore. But there are strategies that can be used to reduce the work and anxiety associated with maintaining a website. These strategies include:

1. **Using forms to create webpages instead of creating them with a webpage editor.**
   While the use of editors such as *FrontPage* have made the creation of webpages much easier, creating and maintaining a website using web-based forms is possible without needing to know any html authoring. A "fill-in-the-blank" approach that automates organizational links and into which information already word-processed can be pasted eases both site creation and updating. It also leads to a uniform school-wide look and consistent placement of information that will ease parental access.

   While a variety of commercial websites (www.eplay.com, www.highwired.com, www.achieve.com) offer such forms and storage for teacher pages, our district is contracting with a company to help us develop a customized web interface and forms. These pages will include integrated access to an online grading program. The pages will also import information like attendance from our student management system. Remember also that "free" services are usually supported by commercial messages and parents might view these messages as product endorsement by the school.

   Much of the information that should be available from individual class sites can be provided by links to district sources of curricular information. Does every third grade teacher need to enter information about the reading curriculum when it is standard within a district? Do all world history classes in a district have common objectives and projects? Can the page link to descriptions of the state requirements that are met within the class? Creating and linking to such generic sites can ease the burden of the classroom teacher.

2. **Phasing in the project.**
   In the Mankato school district we will be taking a multi-year approach to the creation of class sites. The plan looks like this:

Year	Activities
Year One 2000-2001	Work with developer to design web forms. Pilot online grade book at volunteer site. Three to four hour training session on online gradebook. Pilot online grade book with volunteer teachers. Begin planning online site for holding curriculum and assessments. Begin planning online site for describing elementary curriculum.
Year Two: 2001-2002	All teachers will have a class page that includes items 1, 2, and 3 from Table One. Three to four hour workshop for all teachers on using the forms. Teachers wishing to provide more information should be encouraged to do so. Implement website for curriculum and assessments. Implement website for describing elementary curriculum.
Year Three: 2002-2003	All teachers will have a class page that includes items 1, 2, and 3 from Table One. All teachers will be using online gradebook. Three to four hour training session on online gradebook for all teachers. Teachers wishing to provide more information should be encouraged to do so.
Years Four and beyond	All teachers will have a class page that includes items 1, 2, and 3 from Table One. All teachers will be using online gradebook. Buildings will add other items from table per building plan. Teachers wishing to provide more information should be encouraged to do so.

   For the first year, we are asking all teachers to have a page that simply lists contact information (items 1, 2 and 3 in Table One). We will also be piloting the online grade book at a volunteer site. Our current electronic gradebook will be replaced as we get new staff using it or current staff members asking to switch to it. We anticipate that the ease with which grades can be entered from home will be an incentive to move to the online gradebook.

   We will also encourage increasing the amount of information on class webpages goals for buildings in the district. My sense is that the information contained on developed pages will be useful enough to parents that they will also encourage teachers to make it available online.

3. **Waiting until the teacher is comfortable with the program before making the gradebook available online.**
   Sharing the kinds of information contained in their gradebooks with parents will be a new and possibly disturbing idea for some teachers. We anticipate teachers using the gradebook for at least a semester before giving parents access to it.

A major concern of many educators is the security and privacy of the information being made available. Both teachers and parents need to know that parents will have access to only their child's information and that security and password confidentiality needs to be taken seriously. We will ask parents to come to school to pick up their usernames and passwords in person.

4. **Providing support.**
   We all know that nothing helps a project succeed like great support, and nothing kills it faster than a lack of training and working equipment. We will work to provide our teachers with powerful, reliable desktop computers and networks. Training will be scheduled during the school day or during inservice times. Our school media specialists have additional training on both the web-based forms and general webpage creation so they can provide in-building support to teachers when needed.

Conclusion

As a parent, I currently have the choice of sending my son to the local public school in my neighborhood, to a public school across town, to any public school in a variety of nearby communities, to a variety of private and parochial schools, or to a local charter school. I can choose to home school my son, enroll him in a virtual school, or get him early admittance to a post-secondary institution. I can as readily choose the kind of school I want for Brady as I now choose his church, dental clinic, or clothing store.

As a savvy consumer, on what will I base my choice of school? Convenience, of course. But I will also want to be sure the teachers in my son's school communicate well, are organized, and see me as a valuable partner in his education. As important as a good education is to his future, I can in good conscience do nothing less. Schools can take an active role in making parent-consumers aware of the quality of their teachers and programs by having useful, professional class webpages.

Permission to use these materials freely given for use within schools

Table One: General class description		
Information	**Schedule for updating**	**Possibilities**
Teacher name and contact information	Annual	Name, school phone number and extension, and email address. Home phone if desired. Best times to contact. A personal note of welcome that includes encouragement for parents to contact teacher if there is a question or concern.
Class rules and expectations	Annual	Policies on classroom behavior, homework and extra-credit assignments. Carefully articulated and agreed upon by parents and students as reasonable, this information can reduce misunderstandings during the year.
Link to school calendar	Check annually	Building-created calendar based on district calendar. Should show beginning and end dates of school, holidays and breaks, days in which students are not in school for other reasons, and events and activities (athletic events, open houses, field trips, science fair, testing dates, etc.)
Supply list	Annual	Paper, pencils, calculators, etc. School policy on how students without financial means can obtain these items.
Field trip information	As necessary	Descriptions and printable permission form. Costs and call for chaperones when necessary.
Class news with photos and descriptions of current class activities	Monthly/weekly	What's going on? Current projects and interests of students. Special events. Careful with this area – if not regularly updated it will make the class pages look old and tired. Make sure parental permissions are on file if student photos are used. No last names of students should be published.
Requests and guidelines for parent volunteering	Annual	While the district or building may generate these, teachers with special volunteer needs may want to let parents know.
Drop folders for student work.	Annual	If students have access to this page, a write-only drop folder for turning in work electronically has a logical place on the class page.
Class electronic mailing list	Annual with updates as necessary	An easy way for a teacher to communicate quickly with all parents who have an email address, and if desired, for parents to communicate with each other.
A counter that records the number of visits to the page.	Reset annually.	Of value to both teacher and parents if they wish to see if the site is being used and useful.

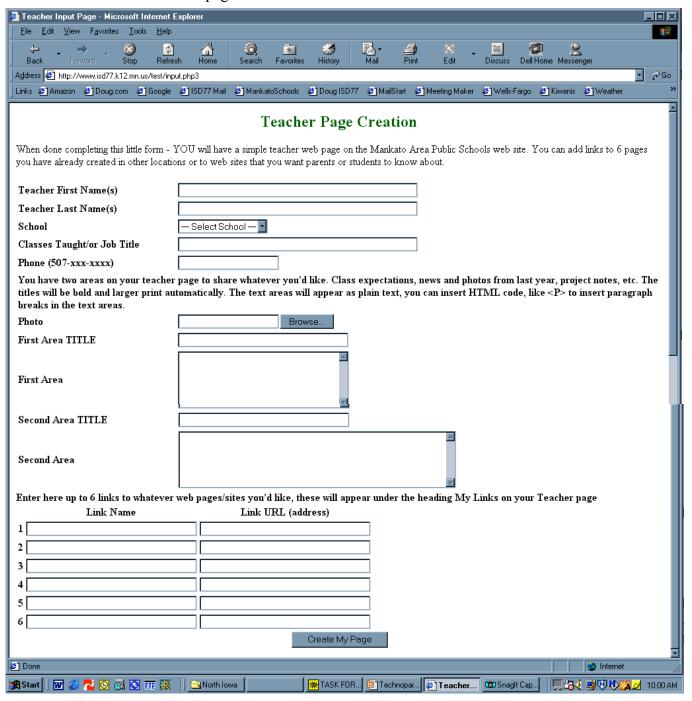| Table Two: Unit outlines and timetables		
Information	**Schedule for updating**	**Possibilities**
List of units taught in each subject area (elementary) or in each class (secondary)	As dictated by curricular changes.	A general outline of the major areas the students in the class will be studying.
State requirements met by class or units	Annual update or as needed	If part of a state mandated curriculum, this reference should be made. Indication of any testing the state requires to show mastery.
Projected dates of units beginning and ending.	Annual	Advise parents that these are approximate. "We will be starting our unit on rocks and mineral just after spring break."
Major goals for each unit.	As dictated by curricular changes.	Simple declarative statements of what the student should know and be able to do. "By the end of this unit, I expect your child to be able to identify the major landmasses on earth and be able to locate the major countries in Europe, Asia and Africa."
Samples of final projects from previous years.	Annual	Helps give parents examples of exemplary projects as a quality indicator for their own children's work.

Table Three: Information about specific units and projects		
Information	**Schedule for updating**	**Possibilities**
Learner outcomes for units	Annual with adjustments as needed.	A detailed list of skills and information that students need to have mastered.
Major activities	Annual with adjustments as needed.	Projects, readings, tests, experiments, papers, etc.. Best if linked to assessments (below).
Homework assignments and due dates.	Weekly	Disclaimer needs to be added for parents that due dates are subject to change. (They might be later, but never earlier.) This could serve in lieu of a lesson plan book.
Vocabulary words, spelling lists, number facts, formulas, etc..	Annual with adjustments as needed.	Lists that call for memorization with which parents can help students practice.
Assessments/ evaluations for unit and projects	Annual with adjustments as needed.	Checklists and rubrics for major projects can be useful to parents to help the student self-assess work.
Online practice tests.	Annual with adjustments as needed.	Practice tests that come with standardized tests or teacher generated tests. This can be created so they can be taken online or printed out. Amazing how much better students do with practice.
Active links to online resources and webpages	Annual	Online lecture notes and links to readings and teacher-selected resources on the web.
Suggested enrichment activities with which parents can help.	Annual	Supplemental reading lists, enrichment activities for G/T students or others who are highly motivated, or "fun" family activities that tie into the content of the unit.

Table Four: Student progress reporting		
Information	**Schedule for updating**	**Possibilities**
Online gradebook	Weekly	Parent (and student) access to scores on daily work, quizzes, tests and projects. Teacher comments on student performance. Data entered by teacher via the web from any machine in any location.
Final grades for quarter, semester and year (or equivalent marking period)	Each grading period	Part of online gradebook.
GPA and class ranking.	Automated through student information system.	Of interest to some parents and students. This does not need to be hand entered by the teacher, but should be imported from the school's student information system.
Standardized test results	Automated through student information system.	Of interest to some parents and students. Should be linked to information on how to interpret the scores. Imported from the school's student information system.
Attendance records	Automated through student information system.	Good check for parents of students who may have attendance problems. Imported from the school's student information system.

Screen shot of Basic Teacher Homepage

1. School logo (link to district homepage)
2. Pop-up guide to other pages
3. Home building and link to building page
4. Name and contact information
5. E-mail updatable "sticky note"
6. General information
7. Classroom expectations
8. Links to teacher created pages
9. Date of last update and page URL

Screenshot of Basic Teacher Homepage Form

Teacher Page Creation

When done completing this little form - YOU will have a simple teacher web page on the Mankato Area Public Schools web site. You can add links to 6 pages you have already created in other locations or to web sites that you want parents or students to know about.

Teacher First Name(s)

Teacher Last Name(s)

School — Select School —

Classes Taught/or Job Title

Phone (507-xxx-xxxx)

You have two areas on your teacher page to share whatever you'd like. Class expectations, news and photos from last year, project notes, etc. The titles will be bold and larger print automatically. The text areas will appear as plain text, you can insert HTML code, like <P> to insert paragraph breaks in the text areas.

Photo   Browse...

First Area TITLE

First Area

Second Area TITLE

Second Area

Enter here up to 6 links to whatever web pages/sites you'd like, these will appear under the heading My Links on your Teacher page

Link Name   **Link URL (address)**

1

2

3

4

5

6

Create My Page

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Profile of Learning Links page

Draft in progress at < http://www.isd77.k12.mn.us/district/curriculum/pristand/pristanlinks.htm>

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Web Overhauls Life in the Classroom 07/27/00

By NICOLE ZIEGLER DIZON Associated Press Writer

CHICAGO (AP) _ Carol Sievers used to have to quiz her four kids very day after school: What did you do today? Do you have any omework? What supplies do you need?

Now she turns to the Internet for the answers.

A mouse click brings up assignments for each class. Another displays photos of students in action in the classroom. Another lets her e-mail her kids a quick ``I love you.''

The Internet is fast changing the way parents, teachers and students communicate. Parents can download permission slips or check their kids' grades on the Web, while teachers can e-mail hard-to-reach parents about their children's progress. Kids online can chat with classmates.

``Before I leave work, I log on and I check what their homework assignments are because they don't always remember to tell me things, like all kids,'' Sievers said. ``I can see what they're doing during the day now, and I don't feel like I'm missing as much.''

The market for tools that combine education with the Internet is expected to grow quickly over the next few years. A study in May by Merrill Lynch & Co. found that the e-learning market for grades K-12 was an estimated $1.3 billion in 1999 and is expected to hit $6.9 billion by 2003.

Several companies are trying to make it easy to stay connected.

Edventions Inc. sets up servers in schools that manage student data records and provide e-mail accounts to students, teachers, administrators and parents. Customized Web sites for each school include homework assignments, online lessons and newsletters.

``We've missed something as a society if kids don't see the Internet as a source of learning,'' said Lois Scott, the company president.

Daniel Watts, co-founder of eChalk, a Web-based communications system that offers similar tools for schools, said his company started with the idea that there had to be a way for computers to help teachers, parents and students stay in touch _ and learn in the process.

Watts, a former New York public school teacher, said gleaming computers were put in classrooms only to sit unused, the teachers afraid or unable to use them.

E-learning companies try to bridge that gap with user-friendly software or Web sites that walk teachers through the creation of lesson plans and teach them how to make their own home pages.

Edventions and eChalk are both advertising-free and generate revenue from setup or subscription fees.

Several other companies that offer school Internet connections display ads on their pages. Some track where children, parents and teachers are going on the Web for marketing purposes.

Pati Mazzeffi, a teacher and technology coordinator at St. Andrew School in Chicago, said some teachers were skeptical of using the Internet at school for fear that children's personal information would be tracked or they may stumble onto pornography sites.

St. Andrew ended up using Edventions' intranet system, which links only to approved Web sites and is unavailable to outside users. She said she has seen a change in the interaction between parents, teachers and students since the system began in January.

One teacher started e-mailing a student who kept forgetting his supplies so he would be prepared the next day, Mazzeffi said. Parents who rarely spoke to their children's teachers now e-mail on a regular basis.

Students, meanwhile, enjoy the regulated chat rooms, which Mazzeffi likened to a ``legal way'' of passing notes.

``I just use it to chat with my other friends ... mostly about homework,'' said Jon Sievers, a 13-year-old St. Andrew alumni.

Both Watts and Scott conceded that not all students have Internet access outside of school. But they said schools often keep computer labs open before or after school, and students also can log in at libraries or friends' homes.

Even for schools that aren't hooked up to the Web through a customized system, the fact that most teachers now have e-mail has parents cheering.

Patti Loeffler, a mother of two in Crested Butte, Colo., said she e-mailed her fourth grader's teacher for help on a tough homework assignment while the family was vacationing in the West Indies.

``Within a couple hours, I had my answer,'' Loeffler said. ``It's great.''

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On the Net:

Edventions: http://www.edventions.com

eChalk: http://www.echalk.com