

## Truancy Is a Sensitive Issue - Options for school-home communication

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Experience tells us that when student absences are left unexplained or not followed up, they have the potential to escalate. This is a time when good communication with parents is critical.

This article aims to assist school leaders determine which communication option best supports their school's approach to parent-school communication relating to student absence and lateness.

### Ask Yourself These Questions

When considering solutions to communicating truancy to a student's caregivers, think about these 10 issues:

1. How can the school communicate with parents in the shortest possible timeframe to provide the highest level of duty of care for students, while effectively meeting the legal and IT security requirements outlined by the Department of Education?
2. How can you ensure parents will be informed daily without requiring staff to remember or find the time to undertake additional duties?
3. What risk mitigation strategies are provided in the solution to ensure data security and the privacy of confidential family contact records?
4. Which strategies provide the most efficient use of staff resources, such as improved workflow practices?
5. What forms of communication reach most parents and do parents prefer?
6. How can you avoid potentially damaging mistakes, due usually to lack of good processes during implementation and/or continuing support?
7. How do you measure effectiveness and address critical management issues such as roll marking and phone data accuracy?
8. Is the solution future proofed, or will it continually need to be updated?
9. Does the solution require extensive IT infrastructure support costs?
10. What approach provides best value for the school's investment?

### Some Options

The following is an excerpt. The complete Buyers' Guide can be obtained from MGM Wireless.

### Mobile Short Message System (SMS)

This analysis is based on messageyou™Schools which integrates with student management systems.

Possible Advantages	Possible Disadvantages
messageyou™Schools has interoperability with all school student information management and electronic roll marking systems, avoiding time-consuming manual data management.	A phone call, letter or personal meeting communications may still be needed in situations that require sensitive or complex resolutions.
Once set, messageyou™Schools automatically sends messages to parents or adult students regardless of staff time constraints or sickness.	There are software licence, maintenance and message costs.

Absence or late messages are sent directly to a personal mobile phone at a time determined by the school, providing confidentiality and immediate delivery (generally on the morning of the absence or lateness).	Requires parents to learn how to retrieve and send text messages (although parents do have the option of replying by phone or note).
A high percentage of parents in Australia (95%+) now have mobile phones, which increases access and reduces the need for multiple communication strategies.	A small percentage of parents may not approve of such messages (though this has not been an issue so far).
Messages can be sent at any time on the same day of absence or lateness, enabling flexibility of data entry into the student management system by either teachers or school support staff.	
Caregivers can text message to the messageyou™Schools number to let the school know in advance of the reason for a student's absence. This reduces time spent trying to make phone contact and avoids the need for outgoing SMS messages from the school.	
No confidential data goes past the school IT firewall.	
Enables a full audit trail of outgoing and incoming messages.	
Schools can easily send customised manually constructed messages to individuals or groups for a range of other purposes using the messageyou™Schools interface.	

## Telephone Contact

The school makes personal phone calls to parents, who either reply directly or leave a message on a school answering machine.

Possible Advantages	Possible Disadvantages
Individual phone calls can enable an extension of the conversation to other aspects of the student's schooling.	Contacting a parent often requires multiple call-backs.
When parents can be contacted, the reason for absence can be obtained at that time.	Phoning may rely on teachers or senior administrators to find time in their busy schedules.
Parents do not require any training to use a telephone.	Messages are left on an answering machine or with a non custodial care-giver, reducing the confidentiality of the communication.
Allows parents to proactively contact the school.	Can be intrusive for parents in work situations.
	Ties up or requires additional school phone lines if there is high phone traffic at peak times.
	Extension of phone conversations can rob time from a busy teacher or school leader.
	High cost of mobile calls compared with local landlines, as increasing numbers of parents provide mobiles as their main contact number.

## Computer Generated Telephone Contact

The school generates a computerised voice message sent to a parent's landline phone.

Possible Advantages	Possible Disadvantages
Automatically repeats unanswered calls.	Requires manual data extraction and export to a service provider, by school staff on a daily basis.
Parents can send a voice message back to the school if they follow the prompts.	The parents are contacted in the evening at a time most disruptive to many family activities.
Lower call costs to landline phones.	The automated voice message provides no option for the parent to respond at a time more suited to them.
No installation of software in school IT infrastructure.	Voice messages reduce confidentiality and increase the risk of not reaching the appropriate person. In many families it may well be the truanting student who answers the family phone, leaving parents none

	the wiser.
	If parents reply in languages other than English, schools will require interpretive services.
	Not appropriate for work contact numbers (e.g. shift workers).
	Messages delivered in the evening are too late to ensure safety of students on the day of absence.
	If family or student details or the content of messages are provided to vendors or locations outside the school, data security is significantly at risk.
	School must continually update phone details and maintain multiple databases determining which parents will receive voice/text or email.

## Web Services

While this service is not currently employed in many schools, the technology is available in some jurisdictions.

The school provides details regarding student attendance and lateness on a school website, requiring parents to log on to extract the information and then email a reply.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Does not incur telephone or SMS call costs	Requires more parents to have internet access than is currently the case in most schools.
Enables parent to see the total pattern of attendance / absence and a range of other student information (e.g. assessment details).	Requires parent skills to authenticate and manage passwords, to access secure school or hosted websites – i.e. need an ongoing parent education strategy.
Audit trail of parent responses where emailed.	Significant equipment and set up costs, particularly to ensure secure web access (many schools do not have adequate firewalls to enable outside access and would need to use a web hosted solution – i.e. incurs ongoing hosting costs).
	Relies on parents taking the initiative to visit the website on a regular basis. This restricts the type of data to that which does not require immediate notification or action.
	Requires the school to have a process of extracting attendance data from the student management system and either manually or otherwise export this data into the relevant web page on a daily basis.
	Given the administration tasks needed to update data, does not easily provide the capacity to notify and receive responses from parents on a same day basis.
	Depending on the level of parent internet access, this strategy would need to be supported by other communication processes to capture what could be a high number of parents who do not have internet access (i.e. dual systems).
	Difficult to ensure web access is specific only to the appropriate parent or caregiver.
	Does not obviate the need for phone or letter or personal meeting communications in situations which require sensitive or complex resolutions

It is recommended that school leaders wishing to take advantage of the SMS opportunity, compare product characteristics, implementation processes, company profile characteristics and cost opportunities by seeking further details from reputable solution providers who have the product available now.