

Parents: Winning their Hearts and Minds – Implementing Text Messaging Successfully.

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The success of using text messaging as a tool to reduce unexplained absence is also a unique opportunity to build a cooperative partnership between parents and schools. If school leaders want to break through and make a difference to attendance levels, they need parents to tell them when and why their children are not at school. This means winning the hearts and minds of parents, not just telling them how the new text messaging system will work.

Without consultation and consideration of the parents' perspective, Parents may feel that they are unequal partners who are being dictated to by the school. Experience suggests that in many cases they're right. It is generally the school that has set the agenda and timing for communicating with parents. Traditional written communication from schools can be difficult for some parents to understand, while personal contact within a school environment can be alien to parents for cultural reasons or because of their own negative experiences at school.

Many schools understand these issues. Some have introduced home visits, use parent advocates and home liaison officers, while others channel communication through trusted mentors or leaders within the community. Some schools have set up coffee or parent spaces – perhaps located separately from the school, and have also developed plain English and single-issue pamphlets.

If these strategies have been successful, they should also be used during the introduction of new forms of communication such as text messaging. Where such strategies have not been established, schools should be encouraged to consider – in partnership with their school council or P&C – those alternative approaches which are most appropriate for their school community.

Text messaging offers the school an opportunity to get parents on-side by offering something that is attractive to them, not just to the school. The focus of the school's strategy to maintain a high level of support for the use of text messaging needs to be shared using those existing communication strategies which have been most successful in reaching ALL of the parent population – not just the literate middle class, families.

The core purpose of daily communication between the school and parents in relation to attendance needs to be perceived as:

- A joint parent/school priority
- Strengthening the partnership between the school and the parent
- An issue of safety and duty of care for parents and the school
- A means of empowering the parent to intervene and work with the school to prevent a student's non attendance escalating into at-risk behaviour.
- Supportive of the common desire of most parents for their children to be successful and happy, even when there may be disagreement about how this should be achieved.

As part of the mechanism for achieving these goals, SMS text messaging provides the following advantages for parents;

1. It's fast. Sending a text message takes less time than a phone call, particularly as parents will often try to reach the switchboard at busy times, when they might find themselves waiting on hold.
2. It's cheap. The cost of a text message is comparable to that of a local call, but if parents do not have access to a landline and are forced to make the call from their mobile, that cost may deter them, particularly if they have a pre-paid mobile phone plan.
3. It's convenient. The message can be sent when the parent thinks of it or has the time, not put off until later and forgotten. Text messages can be sent and received discretely by parents while they are at work, or on the bus or train, without having to look up a phone number, as the received text message provides a reply function.
4. The parent doesn't have to talk to anyone in the school – unless they want to.
5. If they are informed about how schools handle text messages, parent will know that their pre-emptive or responsive text message helps the school respond more quickly and will be forwarded to the correct person (not lost on a Post-it note or scrap of paper in a busy front office).
6. Most parents have a mobile phone on their person wherever they are, which means they will receive a message personally and therefore confidentially (unlike messages left on an unsecured home or work phone).
7. The communication does not require the level of literacy needed to construct or write a letter.
8. Text messages avoid the potential problems of voice contact, such as poor oral English skills, heavy accents and misinterpretation.

Of course there are benefits for the school as well, but it is important to stress to parents how the system will benefit *them*. Communication is a two-way process, and when the school communicates back to parents it is important that this is done in an appealing way.

SMS text messages should be used thoughtfully, and not overused. They should be restricted to a call to action or alert or reminder regarding issues about which parents want to or must be informed. Appropriate use of text messages means schools will continue to contact parents personally and use other communication strategies when it is best to do so.