How one district moved beyond email to communicate with parents and students

**STANDARDS-BASED GRADING BACKLASH**
A Transition Guide for Superintendents

**SPOTLIGHT STORY**
Is Email Dying?
School-to-home communications will always be a top priority for districts. While I’m sure that email has served you well for many years, let’s be honest—it’s not exactly on the cutting edge anymore.

Our spotlight district in this issue, MSD of Wayne Township in Indianapolis, knows better than most how to use technology to increase engagement with students and parents. Pete Just, CTO at the district, recently invited us for a visit so we could see how the teachers and staff there have moved beyond email to improve efficiency and eliminate any doubt of whether or not their announcements are being seen.

Much like anything new, the success of changing your communication methods will depend largely on the buy-in from your staff. How did MSD of Wayne Township address that key challenge? Turn to page 8 and see for yourself.

If you like what you see in this issue, be sure to visit us online. Subscribing to our blog and joining the conversation on social media is a great way to stay on top of all the latest trends in education technology.

Happy reading.

Cliff King, Skyward CEO
Standards-based grading is gaining momentum, but many administrators are facing strong resistance. What can be done to ensure an easier, more impactful transition?

**THE STANDARDS-BASED BACKLASH:**
A Transition Guide for Superintendents

Standards-based grading (SBG) is gaining momentum across the country. The body of research in favor of it is growing, technology solutions supporting it are becoming more readily available, and educators finally have access to high-quality academic standards. Despite this momentum, many administrators are facing intense backlash when attempting to move to a standards-based model. There are even a number of districts that started the transition to standards-based grading and decided to reverse course because the response from their community was so negative. Why does there seem to be a brick wall between innovative leaders and the future of education?

Whether real or perceived, the cons of standards-based grading have the potential to stymie even the most well-intentioned implementation plan. More often than not, these points of contention arise due to less-than-transparent plans and a lack of comfort with or knowledge about the new grading system among those who have direct contact with the public – not to the actual learning that’s happening. The standards-based backlash is not inevitable. There is a path forward for superintendents.

**MAKE YOUR GAME PLAN**
Information on the what and why of standards-based grading is becoming plentiful – what’s a bit more elusive is the how. The quickest path to a fledgling standards-based grading system is to dive in without a strategy. First, you have to understand the challenges you’ll likely face, from public perception to day-to-day operations, and have your game plan ready.

1. **USE BACKWARD DESIGN**
   Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe’s Backward Design framework can help you plan a more effective implementation. It starts with identifying the desired results – when it comes to standards-based grading, what do you want teachers to know and be able to do? What about parents, students, and community members? Once you’ve identified the “need to know” understandings, you’ll be better able to work backward to select materials, plan learning opportunities, and create a more realistic timeline.

2. **BUILD A TOOLKIT**
   Though the transition to SBG will look different for every district, you can still anticipate questions and provide your team with a one-stop resource. A curated collection of high-quality content can help you explain, inform, and persuade stakeholders of SBG’s benefits and decrease the likelihood that they will see it as a passing fad or just another initiative.

A standards-based toolkit is a great place to start building. You can add promotional videos, informational articles, instructional guides, FAQs, district policy documents, and links to the standards. Consider including case studies or testimonials from nearby districts that have successfully made the move. Treat your toolkit as a live document by adding resources as you go, and make it available to everyone by posting it to your website, publishing it on your SIS dashboard, and promoting it through social media.
3. MODEL PERSEVERANCE
No matter how you feel about the many uses of the word “grit,” you’re going to need it in your transition to SBG. At the core of standards-based grading is the idea that students should persevere until they achieve competency, even if that means trying many methods on the road to mastery. What message would it send if you decide to stop the transition because of negative feedback or a few bumps in the road? It’s important to address the doubts and criticisms of your community, but think twice and consider all alternative solutions before you decide to reverse course.

TRAIN YOUR TEACHERS
Whether a teacher has been in the field for three years or 30, the shift to standards-based grading will either challenge or reinforce his or her most deeply held beliefs about education. Where do you stand? Are you fully invested in the process? Consider joining the #sbgchat or #sbgchat conversation on social media.

2. LOW-STAKES LEARNING
An Illinois State University study on teacher perception of standards-based grading is a necessity, and cutting corners is the quickest way to end up with a staff that’s not fully invested in the process. If you want to talk about this with the folk you are already immersed, consider joining the #sbgchat or #sbgchat conversation on social media.

3. COVER YOUR BASES
With teachers’ plates piled high these days, it falls on you and your leadership team to prepare them, educate them, and support them in this endeavor. Something as simple as a Likert scale can help you gauge your teachers’ perceptions of SBG and know where to adjust to a new way of thinking.

IMPROVE PARENT PERCEPTION
Parents have long relied on the same set of truisms when discussing grades:

She got straight As.
He’s a B student.
Cs get degrees.

It’s no wonder they might have some qualms about accepting a system that requires not only a new set of terminology, but a whole new outlook on learning, too. Help them let go of “the way it’s always been” by building a close working relationship, a better report card, and a clear path for their students’ success.

2. A BETTER REPORT CARD
Even with the multitude of high-tech communication options available nowadays, the report card still often serves as the starting point for the relationship between home and school.

While choosing or designing a report card, it helps to keep two simple questions in mind: “What is the grade?” and “What does it mean?” If the answer to either of these questions is unclear, find out what’s preventing comprehension. Do you need a simpler layout? Better explanations? A more reader-friendly design? Don’t underestimate the role the report card can play in making or breaking parents’ attitudes toward SBG.

3. A MORE CERTAIN FUTURE
Ultimately, parents are most interested in knowing how standards-based grading will affect their children’s futures. They want to be reassured that their kids will be on equal ground with students who receive traditional letter grades, and that they’ll be just as well, or better, prepared.

A study done by the Illinois State Board of Education’s 2014 Student Advisory Council found that 100 percent of public universities and 82 percent of private universities in Illinois were supportive of standards-based grading. Support varies across the country and you’ll have to check out the trends in your region but, in general, the tides are turning in favor of standards-based grading.

There’s no sugarcoating it – running into a brick wall can be painful. But by standing firm in your knowledge of best practices, gathering a team of advocates, and arming yourself with essential tools, you can break through any barrier and move beyond traditional grading practices to a new model of learning, one that will benefit all students.

Achieving success with any new technology requires three key elements: a willingness to change, buy-in from staff, and a well-designed plan. Fortunately, the Metropolitan School District of Wayne Township in Indianapolis, Indiana, had all of those in place when they implemented Skyward’s mobile app during the 2015-16 school year.

The district moved to Skyward’s Student Management Suite in 2015 after using a different SIS for the previous 12 years. While their legacy system was still functional and the staff was comfortable with it, the leaders at Wayne Township knew they needed something better to improve communication with students and parents. “The SIS we had before Skyward was pretty one dimensional and it didn’t really have any communication tools associated with it,” said Pete Just, chief technology officer at Wayne Township. “The product hadn’t kept pace with technology and it was becoming increasingly difficult for us to communicate anything beyond basic grades and attendance.”
ALL ABOARD!
Just said that when the district moved to Skyward, the teachers immediately jumped onboard to take advantage of the opportunities that were available through the software’s Family Access portal. In addition, having the ability to reach parents on their mobile devices proved to be a real game-changer for staff and families alike.

“Our district has a pretty large percentage of its population living in poverty, so many don’t have computers or connectivity at home,” said Just. “Most of our families have mobile technology such as smartphones, but they really didn’t have access to our data because it wasn’t easily viewed on those devices. Skyward’s mobile app gives us the ability to equally serve all of our families because of the deep level of communication that’s now available between our staff and our parents.”

The benefits of using Skyward’s mobile app to share information across the district were felt right away. According to Just, communication with students has also grown by leaps and bounds, even though many students don’t have data plans at home.

“Almost all of the kids carry a smartphone today, so they simply hop on our wireless to keep track of their grades,” said Just. “And since everything is available in real time, there’s no more waiting until the next day for grades to be posted for students to see them. Now, as soon as a teacher makes a change, that change is available instantaneously, which is a major benefit.”

Using the mobile app has also provided a new level of transparency which has improved the district’s relationships with students and parents. Raising teachers’ awareness of the importance of students’ grades to families was an unexpected benefit the district would have never uncovered had they stayed with their old system.

LOOKING BEYOND EMAIL
Moving to the new system has opened the district’s eyes to exploring alternatives to email as the go-to vehicle for communicating information to both staff and families. According to Just, the superintendent at the MSD of Wayne Township is an avid Twitter user and often tweets throughout the day. That type of communication has become routine for the staff and they feel that it’s a more effective way to share what’s happening throughout the district – and more efficient than emails and paper notes sent home with students.

Just points out that the district also uses Facebook for sharing success stories, photos and awards and says many of the parents and nearly all of the secondary students follow the school and district using their mobile devices. Introducing the Skyward mobile app and social media has resulted in fewer emails for staff and families to sift through and less chance for something important to slip through the cracks.

While the district doesn’t foresee a future without email, they have started to view it as more of an official form of communication – similar to how memos and faxes were used in the past.

“Our use of email is definitely diminishing because, let’s face it, everyone gets way too many emails and it becomes very difficult to weed through it all,” said Just. “There’s also the issue of spam and malware creating concerns in terms of eroding trust and making newer forms of communication more attractive to everyone.”

PLANNING AND PROMOTING ARE ESSENTIAL
When asked about the challenges that arose when the district moved away from their outdated methods, Just immediately mentioned the importance of planning and promotion to ensure a successful implementation.

The district began cleaning up its data and notifying staff of what was coming a full year before putting the plan in motion. They communicated to parents and staff via newsletters, website, and tweets – starting with broad, general messages and getting more specific in the spring as the transition grew closer.

“Throughout the entire process, we shared key milestones with everyone and then three weeks before school started, we mailed a letter to every parent letting them know how to log on,” said Just. “We also included a small refrigerator magnet with the web address as a constant reminder for parents. Once the school year started, we did a lot of ongoing communication through traditional and social media to keep Skyward top of mind with students and parents.”

Like all educators, the staff at MSD of Wayne Township understands the importance of having positive interactions between the school and home. Thanks to Skyward and a forward-thinking staff, the district has transformed the way it shares information and has no intention of ever going back to the old way of doing things.

“Smartphones and tablets have changed the way we get information,” said Just. “If you’re not taking advantage of that, then you’re totally missing the boat.”

STORY BY
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To read more district success stories, visit www.skyward.com/blogs.
Is Email Dying?

Remember when email was a novelty?

It wasn’t all that long ago that the world first opened up to a communication model that no longer revolved around telephones. Now, 20-30 years after most of us opened our first email account, we’ve reached another crossroads in the way people interact with each other.

Communication barriers are costing organizations as much as $26,000 per employee each year, to say nothing of the 28 percent productivity hit we suffer just from managing email.

But if email is on the way out, what’s going to take its place? The answer appears to be manifold, and for once that’s not a bad thing. After all, not every communication is created equal. Want to stay ahead of the curve? Start thinking about how you can make these alternatives work for you:

PUSH NOTIFICATIONS

We use technology for so much, from completing routine work tasks to entertaining ourselves to staying perpetually connected through social media and more… But with so many different platforms, who wants to spend time logging in just to see if something new has happened since the last time we opened a particular program?

Push notifications help us overcome this obstacle by sending updates from our favorite applications right to our phones. Now we know at a glance whether we need to look at something right away or save it for later, and we don’t even have to take the unwieldy step of unlocking our screen.

As our world becomes ever more app-centric, the amount of lag time between when an event occurs and when you know about it is shrinking at exponential rates. Imagine how many hours you might save over the course of a year if you always knew exactly what items demanded your attention and where.

One of the underrated benefits of push notifications is the opportunity they afford you to cut huge chunks out of your email clutter. Visit the email preference pages in your most frequently used programs and disable all but the most important. More often than not, there’s little benefit in being informed of the same event more than once.

INSTANT MESSAGING

Instant messaging was texting before texting was a thing. Even if you missed the early adopter period back in the ‘90s, you were most likely aware of the impact it had on the digital landscape. For many, instant messaging was the first introduction to an online community that has grown to dominate our culture.

As has been the case with so many groundbreaking advancements, kids drove this one. Teenagers made plans, spent hours scrutinizing the most innocuous changes to their friends’ profiles, and even fell in love – all from the sanctity of their parents’ houses. At the time, there was very little overlap with the professional world.

But now? As email continues to lose its efficacy, organizations are looking for an alternative. Think about it – how many times throughout the day do you need to ask someone a quick question only to end up waiting on a reply for hours? Sure, you can pick up the phone, but if it rings through to voicemail or you get a busy tone, that’s more time wasted and you’re right back where you started.

Instant messaging is the here and now of workplace communication, and it’s only just begun to take hold in the public sector. The types of organizations we work with – school districts and municipalities – tend to err on the conservative side, and concerns about distractions are always prevalent. But it feels inevitable that the push for speed and collaboration will eventually win out.

By John Jennings
“Reach them where they are” is a familiar rallying cry in the push for improved communication, and we’re finally trending in the right direction. For many years, we have relied on email for information and updates regarding the technology we use, both in our personal lives and for work. But wouldn’t it make more sense for that content to appear right in front of us when we actually need it?

When new features are available to you in one of your favorite systems, would you rather read about them in an email attachment and try to remember everything on your own, or be alerted to them as you are working on something relevant? The best experience stems from the least amount of effort, and native content is quickly becoming an expectation.

Native content is not exclusive to updated features, either. It’s also a great way to reach a wider audience than you might through other mediums. How many times has someone told you, “Oh, sorry, I must have missed that email”? With native content, you have the ability to put announcements, requests, and culture-building news items directly in front of your stakeholders in a place where you know they can’t miss it.

Whether it’s your SIS or your ERP, there’s bound to be at least one central platform that you know your staff will have to use during the course of an average day. Imagine how convenient it would be to stick your messages right on their dashboard so it’s the first thing they see when they log in. Good luck to anybody who tries to come up with a good excuse for not seeing your communication then.

WHAT HAPPENS TO EMAIL NOW?

A funny thing starts to happen when you embrace alternative communication methods: You find your inbox looking cleaner than it’s ever been, emails that would otherwise have been lost in the shuffle become much harder to miss, and you can start to focus more of your attention on the threads you’re involved in because there are fewer of them to keep track of.

Imagine how much more enjoyable your vacations would be if you didn’t have to think about how much of a disaster your inbox would be when you got back.

Like any project, the move to a more modern communication approach is one that needs to be managed closely in the early stages. It can be too tempting for us to fall back into our old habits, making the same mistakes with our new tools as we have with email. The importance of coaching and development cannot be overlooked.

Email’s not going anywhere for now, but it’s time to stop relying on it as the be-all and end-all of digital communication. Our productivity and our budgets – to say nothing of our sanity – are just too valuable.

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