

Going The Extra Step For Parental Involvement: Connecting Family And School With The Power Of Teacher Websites

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ABSTRACT

Current literature supports the idea of teacher created websites for parental involvement; however, it does not provide adequate guidelines for determining formal content of a teacher website. While potential benefits are often suggested, specific guidelines appear infrequently. This study sought to address some of the shortcomings in the literature on teacher websites by conducting an online survey of both teachers and parents of elementary schools regarding their beliefs about what is essential and ideal content for teacher websites.

Keywords: Teacher Website, Classroom Website

INTRODUCTION

Most educators are keenly aware of the positive impact of parental involvement on student achievement. Research studies show that involving parents and families is one of the most important ways to improve schools and help students succeed. When teachers make parental involvement part of their regular teaching practice, parents increase their interactions with their children at home, feel more positive about their abilities to help their children in the elementary grades, and rate the teachers as better teachers overall; and students improve their attitudes and achievement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Schools are more effective when parents are involved. Ames (1995) found that parents' overall evaluation of the teacher, their sense of comfort with the school, and their reported involvement in school activities was higher when parents received frequent and effective communications from teachers. When parents participate in their children's education, the result is an increase in student achievement and an improvement of students' attitudes. Increased attendance, fewer discipline problems, and higher aspirations also have been correlated with an increase in parent involvement (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Various researchers seem to agree that parents are supportive and engaged in their child's schooling when two-way communication with teachers is established (Bauch, 1989; Taylor, 1999). If parents understand what's going on in the classroom and what's expected of them and the students, they will be more able to help their child at home and will feel more comfortable with the teacher and the teaching methods employed (Ludwig, 1999). However, many traditional strategies for promoting parental involvement rely heavily on parents' ability to visit their child's school. Most workshops and other events are held in the school, and if parents cannot attend the sessions at the particular time and date, there is not much parents and schools can do. Today, many families have no time to schedule a meeting with their child's teachers or to attend school events. Face-to-face communication becomes rare. On the other hand, communicating with parents is a time-consuming task for teachers. Huset (2001) states that "The majority of parents in my district expect consistent contact from teachers and I can understand their need for reassurance; however, with 186 students, this task can be overwhelming".

As more and more parents have access to e-mail and the internet, schools and teachers are increasingly finding that using technology communication tools can play a vital link in increasing parental involvement. Also, internet-connected families are looking for more personal and interactive connections with schools. More than 60 percent of families want to be able to communicate online with teachers and more than 50 percent want to do the same with the local school board. Nearly 60 percent of the families say that they want to view their children's schoolwork online (Grun-wald Associates, 2000).

Schools and teachers are slowly beginning to respond to these demands. Teachers who develop classroom websites demonstrate a commitment to preparing students for participation in a growing technologically-literate world (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003). According to the Homestead Classroom Web Site Study (2002), 42% of teachers already have a Web site, while 71% believe that most will have a Web site to assist with their teaching within five years. Among the teachers that currently have a Web site, communication with students was stated as the most popular use (73%), followed by communication with parents (51%). As the Internet approaches the distinction as society's most used resource, teachers will increasingly come to rely on their classroom sites to meet many of their instructional needs. One might even argue that the design and presentation of classroom websites constitutes its own genre of curriculum development, writing and instructional design (Halcomb, Castek & Johson, 2007).

Also a number of companies have emerged to accelerate and extend these communication channels. For example, PowerSchool and Chancery Software's K12 Planet allow the school to make such student information as grades and attendance available to parents online and HiFusion, and Lightspan.com provide teachers with tools for posting homework assignments for students and parents to read.

There are numerous studies that provide adequate guidelines for determining the elements of a teacher website through the compilation and analysis of currently published teacher websites (frequency of appearance) or simply recommendation of the pioneers. For example, Lunts (2003) quantitatively analyzed the content and functionality of 93 teacher websites authored by 84 math teachers of one North Eastern county, 16 of whom have been interviewed in depth about their website, instructional, communication and parental involvement practices. The study concluded that the most widely items used on a teacher website were teacher's self introduction, curriculum description, instructional activities and other links for parents, homework, and examples of student work. Halcomb, Castek & Johnson (2007) reviewed over two thousands teacher websites with a checklist and found out that the most commonly used elements for teacher websites (elementary) were course overview, calendar, teacher info, email link, link to school, date updated and visitor counter. Schoolwires (2008) recommends that teacher websites should have the following elements on a teacher website; contact information, welcome message, teacher bio, syllabus, homework, calendar, links, classroom rules, worksheets, resource lists.

Current literature supports the idea of teacher created websites for parental involvement and provides guidelines for determining formal elements of a teacher website. While potential benefits are often suggested, specific guidelines appear frequently, these guidelines and suggestions usually come from the frequency of appearance of the currently teacher websites or just simple recommendations of the professionals. However, it is a known fact that designing a teacher website is a complex task and each element might require different set of skills, the representation of currently used elements might not be the evidence of what elements really are the ones desired by both teachers and parents. For example, none of the examples given above studies includes publishing student grades or the number of absent days for each student on a safe protected environment for parents. Although providing this information might be beneficial to the parents, the reason for not making it available to them a password protected environment might be the complexity of creating such functional websites. Thus one cannot stop but wonder "what would be the most common elements of a teacher website that both teachers and parents would agree regardless of complexity of the task?" This study tries to answer to this question and sought to address some of the shortcomings in the literature on teacher websites by conducting an online survey of both teachers and parents of elementary schools regarding their beliefs about what is essential and ideal content for teacher websites.

METHODS

Elementary school teachers (N=244) and parents of at least one elementary school student (N=483) participated in the study by completing an online survey which provided a checklist and description of different elements one can place on a teacher website. Participants were uncompensated volunteers from various elementary schools, solicited by e-mails which were sent to elementary school districts, elementary school teachers, and parents, online teacher discussion forums, and listservs. Also, invitation to the study participation took place by distributing flyers through Educational Technology Conferences (FETC & NECC). Table 1 shows demographic information of the survey participants.

Table 1: Demographic Information

	Teachers (n=244)	Parents (n=483)
Age	M=38.58 SD=12.83	M=36.42 SD=14.76
Gender	Female=%65.67 Male=%34.33	Female=59.42 Male=40.58
Years of Teaching Experience	M=11.15 SD=7.56	
Number of years their children attended in their current elementary school		M=3.54 SD=3.06

The survey consisted three sections.

1. Demographic information was asked in the first section of the survey including age, gender, years of teaching experience in elementary schools (for teachers), number of years their children attended in their current elementary school (for parents).
2. In the second phase, the survey asked participants about their opinions on how important having a teacher website (for teachers), or having a teacher website to access and communicate with their children’s teachers (for parents) and why it was important or not.
3. The last section of the survey listed 38 elements and asked participants to select the elements that they considered to be essential components of a teacher website and asked what other non-listed elements they believe should be available on a teacher website (a title and description were provided each element to familiarize those without the technical knowledge).

RESULTS

In the first section of the study, the researcher extracted the demographic data. The demographic information for both teachers and parents appear in Table 1. While 244 participants were elementary teachers, 483 were parents of at least one child attending elementary school.

In the second section of the study, the study aimed to find out whether teachers and parents believe that having a teacher website to publish/access is important for them and why. The results of the data analysis showed that while 97% of the teachers and 94% of the parents believed that a teacher website would be beneficial.

When the next question (open ended) asked them why they believed that teacher website is important or unimportant, the following themes were extracted from the data (Table 2). The themes were grouped together by analyzing the frequencies of the statements from the answers and the table below provides the comparisons of these frequencies.

Table 2: Themes derived from Section 2

Statement	Teachers	Parents
Benefits		
Another way of communication	%78	%81
Keep parents involved in their children’s education	%73	%45
Allows break the place and time requirements	%62	%32
No limits of the physical classroom.	%54	%37
Provide more information & resources	%51	%76
Creates teamwork of teachers and parents	%48	%35
Get recognition	%31	%13
Problems		
Time consuming task	%64	%11
No internet connection at home	%26	%29
Would be useless if parents do not visit website frequently	%13	-

Table 3: T-test Analysis of Essential Teacher Website Elements for Teachers and Parents

Elements	Teachers		Parents		Diff.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
E-mail Address	4.95	.217	4.94	.242	.481
Course/Class Information	4.31	.710	4.29	.705	.725
Homework/Assignments	4.80	.404	4.84	.392	.184
Office Hours/Schedule	4.23	.733	4.21	.742	.834
Online Practice Tests	3.43	.836	3.56	.790	.042*
Lecture Notes/Power Points	4.07	.678	4.03	.735	.493
School Calendar	4.34	.598	4.37	.485	.856
Homework Help Pages	4.55	.498	4.54	.506	.823
Links within the institution/school	3.17	.970	2.99	.889	.012*
Classroom Rules	3.28	1.081	3.08	1.214	.016*
Telephone Number	4.51	.688	4.48	.709	.537
Class News/Teacher Blogs	2.90	1.018	2.47	.874	.000*
Curriculum and Standards	3.89	.864	2.70	1.143	.000*
Field Trip Information	4.23	.710	4.20	.714	.661
Student Work Samples	3.39	.633	3.51	.891	.063
Tips for Parents	4.04	.746	4.12	.914	.134
Vocabulary Words, Spelling Lists, Numbers etc.	3.14	1.159	3.06	1.085	.418
Teaching Philosophy	1.88	.733	1.91	.746	.608
Parent Conference Information	4.48	.651	4.46	.628	.632
Forms for Students/Parents	4.70	.508	4.74	.478	.318
Supply List	4.58	.586	3.14	1.346	.000*
Lesson Plans	1.59	.645	1.57	.648	.805
Links Outside of the Institution	1.64	.642	1.63	.635	.908
Pictures of the Teacher/Faculty	4.09	.746	4.06	.743	.631
Online Articles or Newsletters	2.08	.965	2.56	1.220	.000*
Classroom Photo Album	2.51	.966	2.42	.972	.260
Administration and School Board News	2.55	1.274	3.65	1.254	.000*
Password Protected Student Attendance	4.39	.621	4.31	.618	.136
Password Protected Student Grades	3.61	1.022	3.50	1.043	.163
Password Protected Parent Contact Info	4.37	.618	4.32	.635	.293
Visitor Statistics	4.61	.615	2.18	.996	.000*
Launch Menus	1.83	.877	1.77	.873	.350
Academic Advising Information	2.98	.975	3.52	.838	.000*
Guestbook	3.89	1.120	2.41	1.126	.000*
Samples of Flashcards	1.95	.820	1.72	.690	.000*
School Tournament/Sport Activity Results	1.57	.607	1.55	.600	.690
Personal Links	1.39	.490	1.32	.468	.060
Resume	1.36	.514	3.61	1.360	.000*
Family Information	1.11	.319	1.12	.320	.962

*p <.05

Finally the last section of the study tried to identify which elements teachers and parents consider to be essential components of a teacher website. In addition to selecting the pre-listed elements, the participants were also asked what other elements they think to be essential part of a teacher website (Table 3).

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This purpose of this study was to investigate shortcomings in the literature on teacher websites by conducting an online survey of both teachers and parents of elementary schools regarding their beliefs about what is the essential and ideal content for teacher websites. Elementary school teachers and parents of at least one elementary school student participated in the study by completing an online attitude survey.

The majority of the teachers and parents who believed in the importance of having a teacher website made a reference to the communication from school to home and home to school as the first benefit. They believe that having a teacher website would be another form of communication between parents and teachers. A large number of the participants stated that it would be the easiest way to make contact with parents and for parents to obtain accurate information about what is happening in their students' daily life, learn about the goals and achievements by levels, learn about the current news, check classroom calendar, homework, and grades. Secondly, some of the teachers and parents indicated that teacher websites can keep parents involved in their children's education. It would allow teachers and parents to break the place and time requirements and limits of the physical classroom. Also teachers and parents can feel more involved in the task of learning and teaching when they share a space that they build a little day by day. Thirdly, the participants stated that teacher websites can provide more information and resources for parents which improves collaboration, sharing and participating. These resources can help parents expand the learning possibilities for their children beyond the classroom walls. Finally, teachers and parents agreed that teacher websites can help teachers to get recognition. The teacher will be accessed at any time and his/her work will be able to be seen/ recognized/ criticized or shared by anyone interested.

While agreeing upon on the importance of having a website, teachers and parents also mentioned about the difficulties of implementing such activity. The difficulties involved items including not having internet connection at home. Parents stated that even the number of internet users increasing; this still would be a problem for low socioeconomic locations. The next important issue mostly came from the teachers. Naturally, creating and updating a teacher website could be a time consuming task and requires technical knowledge. Maintaining a website would be an extra effort for them which they are not paid for it. Lastly teachers hesitated that the effort would be useless if the parents do not visit the websites frequently. One teacher specifically said that "It's only important if they read it. If you put a lot of time and the parents don't read it, it's a waste of time for a teacher, who is short on time anyway. Time is a premium for teachers and we don't have time to maintain it". A few participants stated that teachers should not have a website. The reason for their belief was that the availability of the internet for parents and the difficulty of maintaining a teacher website would create problems which would cause waste of time and energy.

On the last portion of the survey, the majority of teachers and parents agreed that teachers should include the following elements on their pages: e-mail address, course/class information, homework/assignments, office hours/schedule, lecture notes/powerpoints, school calendar, homework help pages, telephone number, field trip information, student work samples, tips for parents, vocabulary words, spelling lists, numbers etc., parent conference information, forms for students/parents, pictures of the teacher, password protected student attendance, password protected student grades, and password protected parent contact information. In addition to selecting the pre-listed items, the majority of teachers and parents also suggested that adding a password protected discussion board (forum) on a teacher website to discuss current events taking place in the classroom and school would be beneficial.

While teachers suggested that links within the institution/school, classroom rules, curriculum and standards, supply list, visitor statistics, guestbook would be essential for a teacher website, the significant difference ($p < .05$) showed that parents did not agree with the teachers on those items. On the other hand, parents selected that they would like to see online practice tests, academic advising information, administration and school board news and teacher resume.

Finally, both teachers and parents agreed that school tournament/sport activity results, teaching philosophy, lesson plans, links outside of the institution, online articles or newsletters, classroom photo album, class news/teacher blogs, launch menus, samples of flashcards, personal links, and teacher's family information are not essential elements of a teacher website.

The results of the survey was also used to create the following layout which includes all the items both teachers and parents agreed upon (Figure 1). The layout above was created to only visualize the results not to draw a conclusion that this would be the perfect teacher website layout since this layout has been created by analyzing only parents' and teachers' common responses about what parents and teachers would like to see/place on a teacher website.

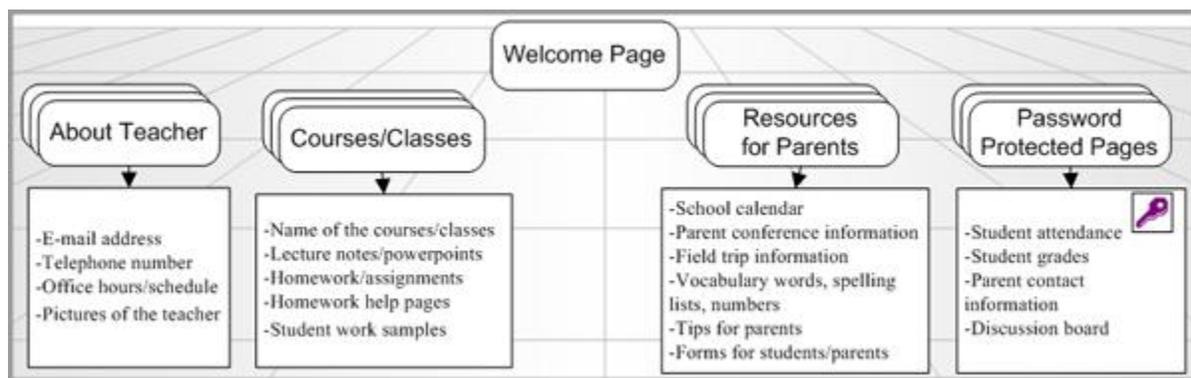


Figure 1: Layout of a Teacher website including essential items driven from results of this study

The large body of the literature indicates that parent involvement can be, and often is, a significant factor in the success of a student throughout their academic career. Working together, parents and teachers can use the Internet to communicate, advise and inform, propelling student achievement to the next level. This study has provided a rationale for using web based technology to establish continuous, inclusive, two-way communications between families and teachers. In particular, this study focused on examining the potentials of web site technology and its content. If teacher websites have their content and design thoughtfully planned, they will be able to attract parents and engage them in communicating with the teachers. This study gives specific information about what parents and teachers agree in what goes on a teacher website. The results of the study can be a used as guidance:

- for teachers planning their teacher websites
- for school IT teams to train teachers in their schools
- Commercial product producers (PowerSchool, TeacherNet) planning their instant-made teacher website products.

This study had certain limitations. The study did not include students and school principals. Conducting a similar study with a larger sample size with a more diverse group in different institutions can bring about generalizable results.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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