

Standard Student Email Systems are Seeing Diminishing Returns

It's time for change: The Next Generation in Student Messaging Platforms

The Current State of Student Email Systems

Over the past 20 years, thousands of school districts have adopted student email solutions. The overarching goal in implementing these systems was to improve communication between teachers, students and their parents.

Research has shown student achievement to be directly linked to communication levels in the student, parent, and teacher triangle. To enhance communication, schools looked to student email solutions to ensure equal access and wide spread adoption.

Although the baseline benefit of student email solutions as a communication tool to parents has remained in tact over the past 20-years, today's environment is far different, and its benefit has come into question. A 2005 report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, found that teenagers preferred new technology, like instant messaging or text messaging, for talking to friends and now view email "as something you use to talk to 'old people'."¹

The following will clarify why standard email solutions are no longer as successful in reaching students as in the past, and will illuminate the future of effective school communications.

Multiple Identity Crisis

School assigned email addresses will rarely, if ever, be a student's primary email account. As part of their online identity, students today have multiple email aliases' which they create on a whim, then rapidly abandon. A majority simply won't use or check more than one primary account with consistency.

Today's students think of technology as the foundation of their learning, while most school administrators view it simply as a tool. The problem with these very different views becomes evident in the way schools are choosing to communicate with their students.

A majority (61%) of online teens say they most often choose IM and text messaging over email for written conversations with friends. Only a third (33%) say they most often use email for written communication.² Schools that choose to disregard their students' preferred channels of communication continue to assign school email addresses, expecting the information distributed there to be widely consumed by their students.

In 2003, 76 percent of kids studied had one or more email accounts.³ Considering the rapid technological expansion over the last several years, the proliferation of multiple email accounts owned by students has grown exponentially. Students' reluctance to use their school email address as their primary account has rendered school email as an ineffective method to convey information.

Planned Obsolescence

Students today expect to use communication tools that last a lifetime. Just as their MySpace or Facebook profile will be theirs for life, they seek continuity in their online identities and expect their email addresses to be permanent, until they proactively choose to move-on.

Unlike other email accounts students own, school assigned email accounts are only valid until the student graduates, or transfers to another district. This gap between a school's offering and a student's expectations further cements the secondary status of a school email address.

Further compounding the negatives of an expiring email account is its ability to keep students in touch with school friends throughout their life. It is impossible to build a lasting social network with school

friends using school assigned email addresses that expire. Therefore, school assigned email accounts won't be used as frequently as a trusted permanent email account students create themselves.

Outdated Technology

Antiquated technology in schools has little impact when used in student communications. With the advent of Gmail and new "Rich" interfaces seen in Yahoo & Hotmail, students have come to expect these types of interfaces in every Web-based application.

Unfortunately, the interfaces found in school specific email applications are often outdated and rarely built with ease of use, or tech-savvy users, in mind. Students today use computers with tenacity and speed, often showing little tolerance for slow or outdated technology. Effectively reaching students requires clean, intuitive interfaces commonly found in newer Web-based applications.

Inundated Inboxes and Underutilized Websites

School email systems allow parents and students unrestricted access to a teacher's inbox. Inevitably, the result is teachers receiving a continuous deluge of emails from parents and students. Of these emails, most ask the same questions and seek similar information. To respond to these emails, teachers are faced with a redundant, time-consuming project.

Unfortunately for the teacher, the added work not only causes an overload on their nightly tasks, it also leaves parents disgruntled with the teacher's perceived work ethic. A no-win situation, if teachers do reply to all of their emails, they're forced to work inefficiently. If they don't, they'll be considered poor communicators.

Most teachers today have access to their own class Website. However, since their email address is widely distributed, the effectiveness of this Website is compromised. Most parents and students simply email their teacher rather than visiting the Website to find the information they need.

This is where a teacher's Website should save the day. If students and parents were forced to view the teacher's Website before sending an email, significant gains in teacher efficiency would be won. As the website should serve as the primary source of information and email an important secondary communication tool to fill the gaps.

SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging is the Answer

Accommodating the immediate communication needs of teachers, parents and digitally native students, SchoolFusion Classroom's Student Messaging Platform is the next generation in effective school communications.

With no need for an expensive POP3 server, SchoolFusion Classroom offers a streamlined solution that's suited to the current technology, not only through its functionality, but most importantly through its simplicity and overall ease of use. SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging increases efficiency of school to home information transfer while dramatically enhancing the effectiveness of a teacher's website.

Existing as a layer between a users primary email account and the faculty & staff, SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging directly links all parties, without the cumbersome addition of yet another email address.

Ensuring adherence to school Acceptable Use Policies, this messaging platform conducts complete scans of all messages while giving system administrators views of all inboxes and access to any messages flagged for inappropriate content.

Advanced functionalities never perfected in traditional school email systems can be found in this messaging solution, including "unsend" and message tracking to verify time received & read.

The remainder of this document will explain just how SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging is the solution to effective school communication and why it is the right choice for 21st century learning institutions.

How it Works

With SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging, correspondence from parents and students are sent directly to teachers and school administrators through their Teacher's SchoolFusion Classroom profile page within the school website.

Driving students and parents to the school Website before they send a message, answers to frequently asked questions are answered by a teachers classroom site, limiting the overall number of emails sent.

To send a teacher a message, a student uses the Message Center composition box found on the teacher's profile page. Students will not have to know the email address of their teacher as they simply need to login to the school website and access their teachers profile page.

Users of the SchoolFusion Content Management System have the additional benefit of sending mass messages to an infinite number of defined user groups throughout the system.

Once a message is sent, the recipient is notified that they have received a new message through an email notification, RSS feed, and/or by a notice that appears the next time they login. All notifications include a link to the message found in the online inbox.

The online inbox integrates with the SchoolFusion platform, with a quick access link appearing in the user's side-toolbar upon login; however, the Messenger can also easily integrate with other pre-existing school website solutions. The Messenger may be skinned to match the existing website and synced with existing website logins.

The online inbox breaks down messages by user type, both student and parent, and will also track sent and received messages in a manner similar to a traditional email client.

The Inbox shows all messages, bolding unread messages and indicating the date and time that the message was sent. The inbox includes all the traditional features that you would expect, including the ability to sort messages by sender, status or date.

Within the message center, each message can be grouped into a conversation view, meaning all connected messages are grouped with the originating message. This enables the user to see the complete conversation history.

Messages can automatically be pushed to a designated e-mail address, chosen by the user, solving the quandary of needing to sign-in to multiple email accounts throughout the day, a practice that leads to deprioritized, ineffective school email accounts.

The inbox provides for a standard storage capacity of 15 MB, which can be adjusted per request of the district or school.

SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging utilizes an integrated translation tool. Messages are immediately available in several default languages. Specifically, it employs Google's Language Translation Tool, which claims to produce the best computer generated language translation available. Additionally, as a fully CSS 2.0 and ADA compliant solution, this innovative solution works beautifully with screen reader applications.

Redefining Efficient Communications

SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging sends a clear message to the public, asserting the school website as the primary source of information. This redefines the classroom Website as the universal repository of

information and single point of contact between the school, its faculty, and everyone else.

SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging's centralized location on the school site simultaneously increases use of the classroom site as a resource, while dramatically decreasing time spent by faculty answering phone calls and emails relating to information easily located on the site. Increasing overall efficiency, SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging establishes a strong chain of communication.

Lower Cost of Ownership

School wide email system implementations are expensive. Regardless of the subsidies provided by E-rate to offset the overall cost, schools must cut a large check to set-up these systems. All of this in addition to the opportunity cost of teachers overburdened with email.

SchoolFusion Classroom messaging eliminates the need for this expenditure; substantially reducing the investment required by schools for a streamlined communication solution at a fraction of the cost.

Longevity of Contact

As SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging is a solution that utilizes previously existing email addresses hand selected by the users themselves, this contact information will not become obsolete following graduation. Unlike a majority of school assigned email accounts that expire and allow students to be lost by a school potentially forever. SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging allows schools to maintain contact with alumnus, should they choose to do so, long after students have moved along with their lives.

Secure & Simple

Falling in-line with K-12 acceptable use policies and consistent with standard school email protocol, SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging uses powerful profanity filters to automatically scan and flag all messages for inappropriate content.

Safeguarding teachers and administrator's privacy, this unique direct messaging tool also stops email addresses from being distributed. This eliminates copious amounts of emails inundating teacher in-boxes and prevents abusive email targeting educators directly.

The real benefit can be found in the systems simplicity for its users. Because the message center is located within the online classroom environment, teachers can easily multi-task and respond to messages while posting new information to their class site through a centralized location.

Security Features:

- Automatic content monitoring of student email with questionable messages redirected to teacher accounts for approval, revision request or deletion.
- The SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging is CIPA compliant platform in functionality and security.
- Easy and clear approval system, allowing teachers to quickly ascertain the reasons a message was deemed as inappropriate.
- Each message and attachment is scanned for viruses. SchoolFusion Classroom's virus definition libraries are regularly updated.
- Automatic blocking of known threatening file types.
- Access to message details so staff can track down the source of offending messages.

Reliable Network:

- SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging's Platform resides on servers owned and maintained by SchoolFusion, in an industry leading Class A, SAS 70, Type II certified environment in Denver, CO. Our partnership with this service provider enables us to assure reliability, security and 24x7 up-time needed in today's dynamic environment. We are able to deliver a highly reliable network of connectivity and intelligent traffic load balancing among multiple servers and multiple gigabit connections all while monitoring and supporting network connections and server availability 24x7.

Proactive, Not Reactive, Communication

There are many advantages of steering an email culture toward becoming a Website focused culture. By pushing parents and students to use the website first, schools will proactively distribute information by posting it in a location frequented by visitors.

Email is largely reactive; as it involves one party sending-off (often poorly researched) questions, which in turn require a reactive response. Email breeds complacency & knee-jerk responses, neither of which fosters efficient communication.

Driving traffic to a website where a repository of frequently updated information can be found educates a community on more than just current events. It teaches the community to proactively acquire the information they need while encouraging teachers to maintain their site.

SchoolFusion Classroom's Messaging solution supports a website focused culture, teachers spend their time updating their site instead of answering emails, the community actively uses the school website to obtain information, and a powerful communication cycle is created.

Integrated Solution

Embedded within the school's web environment, SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging is an integrated solution with easy access to calendars, classroom sites, online grades online quizzes, multimedia blogs and more.

Because the messaging system is similar to IM and is located alongside other teacher tools, messaging doesn't detract from communications, it actually enhances them.

The quick and unified nature of this tool increases the overall value of a school site as information is seen and responded to with convenience and ease. Posting web-based content and managing messages with SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging is a simple, one-step process.

Vastly different than traditional school email system requiring a separate interface, when a student logs-in to their school site, new message notification will be shown inline.

Additionally, because this tool is a messaging layer between their free account and school, it offers highly personalized information via RSS, SMS and XSLT. RSS makes notifications available on their desktop, SMS on their phone, etc.

Offering the most up to date information delivered to individuals via their preferred channel, SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging is similar to follow-me calling.

Additional Integration Features:

- Secure password protected login via Secure Socket Layer (SSL).
- Integrates with either an LDAP or Active Directory authenticating process.
- SIF agent offers the SIF compliance needed for seamless integration in real time with the Student Information System (SIS).
- SchoolFusion Classroom's Message Center is seamlessly integrated into a teachers profile page within their SchoolFusion Website.
- SchoolFusion Classroom Messaging can integrate with any SIS through manual and scheduled data imports via FTP, typically utilizing the .CSV file format.

SchoolFusion Classroom Integration

Additionally, SchoolFusion Classroom messaging is integrated with SchoolFusion's student participation platform (Visit: www.SchoolFusion.com for more information). This unique platform encourages student

participation through web-based collaboration, rewards positive interactions while restricting those with a history of negative behavior.

With this system, teachers have overarching ability to flag messages for constructive or inappropriate use, simultaneously enhancing the system's knowledge of which students can be trusted with more freedoms and which cannot.

The more intelligent this system, the greater the educational value, due to the creation of an educationally focused real-time collaboration center that's forever K-12 safe.

Visit www.SchoolFusionClassroom.com to learn more about free teacher Web 2.0 tools

¹ Pew Internet & American Life Project. Amanda Lenhart, Mary Madden & Paul Hitlin. (2005, July) Teens and Technology: Youth are

leading the transition to a fully wired and mobile nation. Retrieved on July 19th from http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Tech_July2005web.pdf

² Pew Internet & American Life Project. Amanda Lenhart, Mary Madden & Paul Hitlin. (2005, July) Teens and Technology: Youth are

leading the transition to a fully wired and mobile nation. Retrieved on July 19th from http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Tech_July2005web.pdf

³ Symantec. (2003, June). Symantec Survey Reveals More Than 80 Percent of Children Using Email Receive Inappropriate Spam Daily.

Retrieved on July 19th from <http://www.symantec.com/press/2003/n030609a.html>