

Why Equitable Communications Access Matters for School Districts

A WHITE PAPER BY K12 *Insight* 



Summary

Families want information about their child's progress in school and to be updated regularly with critical information they need to know. But with the influx of communications and channels available for distributing information, it has become a cluttered environment where information often gets lost in the shuffle and, unfortunately, doesn't reach every family.

On top of this scattered environment and information overload, many families slip through the cracks and don't get the information they need when they need it because of inequities and barriers to communication.

Email may work for some parents, but there are also families who only have access to a cell phone with text messaging. In other cases, communication to families is more difficult due to language or translation issues.

In today's education environment, schools need to meet their families where they are with communications and to eliminate barriers that cause inequities.

At [K12 Insight](#), we have worked with hundreds of school districts across the United States to create equitable access to communications by implementing our solutions, including [Let's Talk!](#) and [Let's Talk! Assistant](#) — the first chatbot designed for schools. In this white paper, we'll explore ways school districts can close the information gap and foster inclusivity by increasing access to equitable communications and customer service.

The challenge:

Inequitable access to information prevents families from accessing the support and services they need

Every student, family, teacher, and staff member has unique needs when receiving information and accessing support. While technology has increased access to information, many stakeholders in school communities still face barriers to support and services. These barriers often include language and culture, limited or no internet access, lack of access to technology, low literacy skills, or disabilities that prevent them from easily accessing information.

Today, effective and equitable school communications requires using the right channels and messaging for the right audience — while being inclusive of every stakeholder's needs and preferences.

It's not enough anymore to post on a district's website once and hope every stakeholder sees it. School leaders — including superintendents, communications professionals, and IT professionals — need to evaluate their communications through an equity lens to make sure no one is left out.

Historically, schools are great at distributing information to their stakeholders. However, not every person receives information or has an opportunity to easily provide input or ask questions. Whether it's a language barrier or infrastructure barrier, we've found many stakeholders can't access the information and support they need when they need it most. At K12 *Insight*, we work with school leaders across the United States to help create equitable communication access in their school districts.



In addition to existing barriers to communications, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges for school districts. Inbound questions and concerns are at a historic all-time high and school districts are faced with staffing shortages and employee engagement challenges. The increase of inbound communications combined with a lack of resources has made it even harder for school districts to connect with their hard-to-reach families.

Equitable communications access means every student, family, teacher and staff member can ask questions, share feedback and receive information through the channel that best fits their needs.

Schools must customize communications to meet the needs of families, teachers, students, and school staff. Research from the [Center for American Progress](#) found parents, teachers and school leaders report high value in communications systems and individualization of those systems mattered the most. Additionally, the research also suggests parents may not find all available systems at their school effective, accessible, or clear.

Implementing equitable communications access for all stakeholders is more important than ever. In this white paper, you'll learn how to increase equitable communications access in your district and meet your stakeholders where they are using the tools that best fit their needs. We hope you find these insights valuable and help pave the path to increasing equitable communications access in your district.



The solution:

Meet your families where they are

A one-size-fits-all approach for communications is no longer effective for school districts, and diversifying communications channels is critical for reaching families and connecting them to information, resources, and services. That's why school districts need to meet families where they are to ensure they get the information and services they need when they need it.

Here are four ways school districts can increase equitable communications access.

1. Identify your school community's communication needs and use their preferred channels.

Every student, family, and school employee has unique needs and communicates differently. According to a 2020 [article](#) from the Center for American Progress, parents prioritized instant communication methods, such as calls, texts, and comments, while teachers considered scheduled meetings, such as parent-teacher conferences, to be the best indicators of engagement. Parents and teachers also want information to be communicated more frequently and consistently.

The Center for American Progress found perceived barriers differ amongst stakeholders. One focus group of parents and school staff found parents were more likely to cite timeliness, quality, and clarity as the biggest barriers to effective communication, while school staff cited more structural barriers — such as lack of contact information and language fluency.

It's clear: each stakeholder has unique needs when it comes to communications. According to a 2014 [study](#), Black and Latino adults who have been traditionally less engaged with schools send or receive texts more frequently than white adults, and rely more on their phones — as opposed to computers — for information and communication.

Cellular access is helping to level the playing field. According to data from [Pew Research](#), the percentage of low-income families with access to smartphone and cellular data networks is nearly identical to that of their higher-income, more advantaged counterparts. Additionally, a quarter of Hispanic parents said they used only their smartphones to access the internet, compared to just 12% of white adults.

The first step to increasing equitable communications access is identifying how your stakeholders communicate and when they desire information.

Take a look at your current communications channels and the frequency communications are delivered. After you've completed an audit, consider surveying your families to see what communications channels they prefer and their preferred frequency for receiving information. This feedback will help inform an equitable communications plan.

To improve equitable communications access, [Austin Independent School District](#) in Texas introduced the ability for community members to reach out via text message using K12 *Insight's* Let's Talk! texting feature. Texts automatically become Let's Talk! Dialogues within a unified inbox, empowering staff members to collaborate and deliver a single, timely response.

While many schools across the U.S. send outbound text notifications, the concept of allowing parents, students, and staff to send inbound text messages directly to the school or district is new — and very powerful. The introduction of texting in Austin ISD dramatically streamlined back-to-school processes, such as curbside registration and device distribution, while providing community members another way to reach out that is both comfortable and familiar for many families, including their Spanish-speaking population.

“Our schools continue to see a rise in text messages, including a significant increase in Spanish-fluent families connecting with us,” said Darla Caughey, Administrative Supervisor of Customer Service in Austin ISD's Office of Human Capital. “It provides a convenient and comfortable way for families and others to reach out and get a quick response. We don't foresee that slowing down anytime soon.”

Another part of Austin ISD's Let's Talk! expansion includes bringing the solution to campuses. The expansion makes it easy for families to engage directly with their school's leaders (whether the campus buildings are open or closed) and increases collaboration between school sites and the district.

“We can't control how our customers want to engage,” Caughey said. “But by providing multiple ways to reach out to their school or the district, we make it easy for them to stay connected and have a voice in Austin ISD.”



2. Make information available across different languages and cultures

Structural barriers — such as language fluency — can make it difficult for staff to connect with families and parents. In [Supporting English Language Learners: A Guide for Teachers and Administrators](#), [Farin A. Houk](#) says it's important to establish two-way communication on both sides, as well as the necessity for a translation process that is “formal, steady, and reliable.”



What does not work, she says, is sending notes home in English, talking slower or louder, using students to translate, or asking a friend or relative to translate confidential or detailed information.

Multilingual communication is critical for school districts to ensure all families can access services and information. Providence Public Schools District, based in Providence, Rhode Island, has made equitable communications a priority. With nearly 22,000 students attending 37 schools and approximately 35% of students being multilingual learners, making communications accessible for students and their families is essential. Approximately 55% of PPSD students come from homes where English is not the primary language spoken.

Providence Public Schools District — where students and families speak 75 different languages and hail from 91 countries of origin — knew how important it was to make sure the district could meet the needs of its families, so the district implemented Let's Talk! to manage its inbound communications.

“When we communicate with our multilingual families, it is their right to receive pertinent information about their child's education in the language they prefer,” Jennifer Efflandt, Executive Director of Multilingual Learners at Providence Public Schools District, said. “Using Let's Talk! has allowed our district to offer an easier access point for our families and ensure questions are connected with the right person or department.”

3. Prioritize equitable communications in district strategic plans and policies

Equitable communications access requires an intentional, long-term plan. It takes time to build trust with families, teachers, and school staff, and changes within a school district don't happen overnight. As school leaders plan for the future, it's important to prioritize equitable access to communications and services, and define a vision for what equitable communications looks like for the school district.

Involving stakeholders and using data to inform communications plans are an important part of providing equitable communications access. While a district may think they are reaching every stakeholder, outcomes cannot be certain without tracking those interactions to provide data-based evidence.

For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Indianapolis Public Schools developed a [strategic plan](#) that makes racial equity a top priority.

Ashley Cowger, Executive Director of Strategy & Integration at Indianapolis Public Schools, shared during a November 2021 [webinar](#) with K12 *Insight* and the Consortium for School Network (CoSN) how the district created its strategic plan. Cowger said it was important to involve all voices within the district, so the district created teacher committees, principal committees, and district leader committees for gathering input. The district also surveyed students and families.

“We had an opportunity to improve our organization-wide communication and involve people in developing new processes,” Cowger said. “The collaboration brought people together to share feedback, and these committees were incredibly powerful because they allowed people to be vulnerable and share what needed to change.”

Indianapolis Public Schools is working to launch Let's Talk! in 2021 to further improve communications access and equity within the district.



4. Use tools like Let's Talk! to create a central hub for handling communications, questions, and feedback from stakeholders

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the achievement gap in schools and district leaders are using [Let's Talk!](#) to understand and address issues that disproportionately affect underserved communities — such as learning recovery and social-emotional learning disparities. By using Let's Talk! in their school districts, superintendents can ensure all families have equitable access to services.

As a community-first solution, Let's Talk! helps school districts increase engagement, build relationships, strengthen trust, and improve customer satisfaction. The platform helps superintendents address growing equity gaps by strengthening connections and engagement with hard-to-reach stakeholders, particularly economically disadvantaged and underserved families.

On the IT front, IT departments are evolving quickly and having to adapt to becoming a one-stop shop for customer service. With school staffing shortages happening across the country, IT departments are finding creative ways to handle incoming communications and questions.

When a [school district](#) in Beaverton, Oregon went fully remote in 2020, it discovered a problem: About 20% of its 40,000 students came from primarily Spanish-speaking homes. The district's IT team didn't have enough personnel who were bilingual, so they pulled in bus drivers and other support staff to help with communications.

Not every district can pull in additional support from other departments though. By using solutions like Let's Talk! and [Let's Talk! Assistant in Spanish](#), school districts can expand their team by automating common communications tasks and making it easier to offer answers in their stakeholders' languages.

School districts can also give more time back to their staff by creating a bank of informational articles on their website using [Let's Talk! Knowledge Base](#), which was released in October 2021. Knowledge Base offers stakeholders an exceptional self-service experience and can easily connect them with human support if needed.



**With Let's Talk!
Knowledge Base, school
districts can reduce
the volume of inbound
stakeholder inquiries by
as much as 60%.**

Let's Talk! Assistant is available in Spanish — making it easy for districts to provide families with fast, efficient, and equitable access to important information around the clock, whether school is open or closed. It also helps school districts reach more families through mobile devices.

¿Con que puedo ayudarte hoy?



24/7 customer service

Let's Talk! Assistant gives every community member an easy way to find the information they need while significantly reducing the time your team spends responding to emails, phone calls, and voicemails. In addition, the bilingual chatbot and translation tools offered by Let's Talk! make it possible for every family to receive the same high-level of service — regardless of language barriers, device or other challenges.



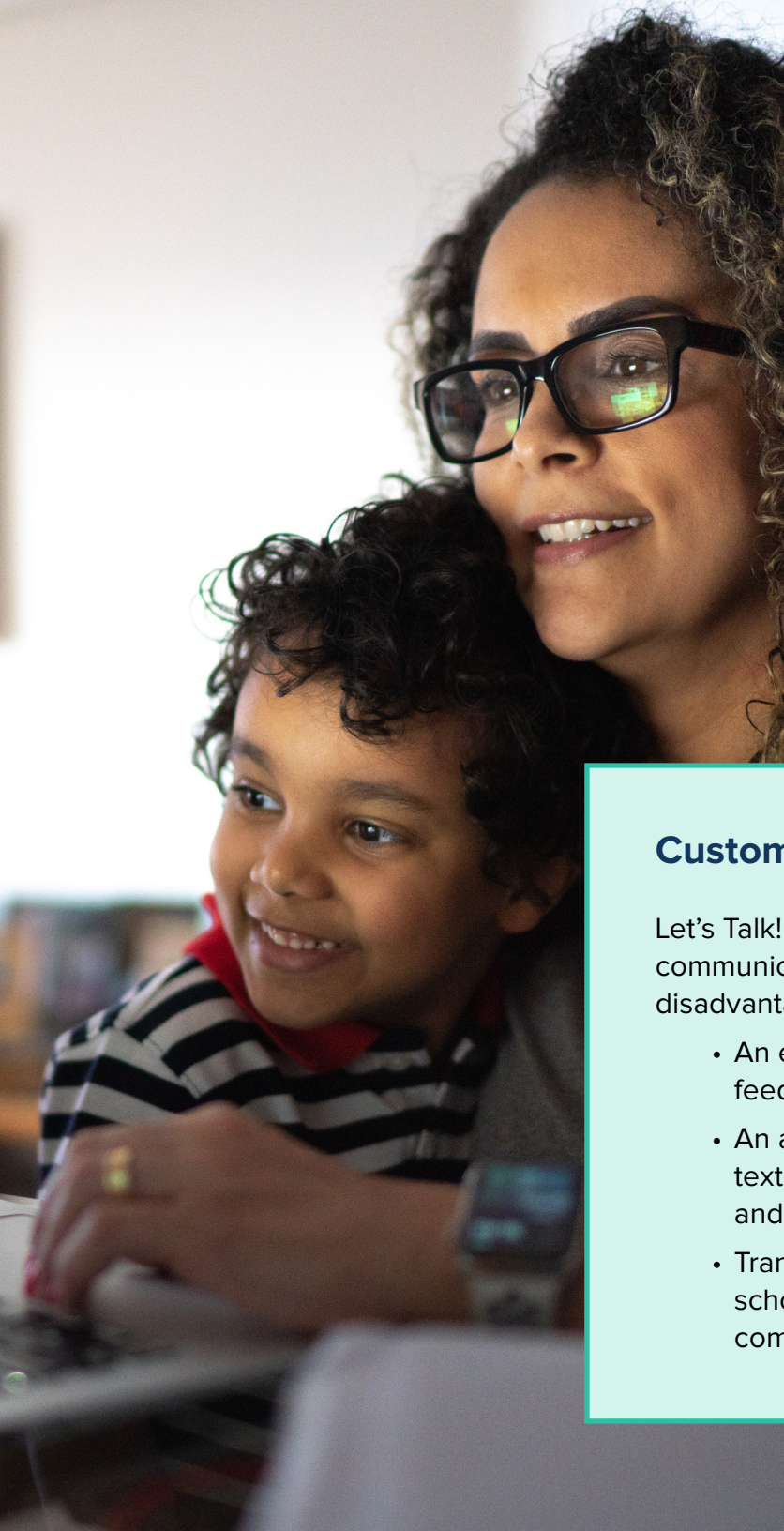
Automation with a human touch

Backed by Natural Language Processing and Artificial Intelligence, Let's Talk! Assistant correctly answers frequently asked questions and uses customer input to continue learning and improving.



Live agent capabilities

Let's Talk! Assistant can also connect users to a live agent, helping stakeholders find the information they need if an answer online isn't immediately available. We'll help you set up teams of any size and scale up or down, depending on time of day.



Equitable communications access matters for your school district

Successful communication requires equitable access for all stakeholders. When equitable communication is done well, students, families, teachers, and staff feel informed about what they need to know and what's happening in their school district.

K12 *Insight* is committed to helping schools turn everyday interactions into exceptional experiences. Our experts are ready to help you make sure all of your stakeholders feel included and informed, and have access to the services and support they need. If you're interested in learning more about how to create equitable communications access in your district, contact us today.

Customer service doesn't end when the school bell rings.

Let's Talk! empowers K-12 education leaders to provide more accessible communications and equitable services for all families, especially underserved and disadvantaged groups, by giving school communities:

- An equitable, convenient way to ask questions, report concerns, and provide feedback 24-7 from any device.
- An avenue for two-way communication from a variety of channels — including text message, phone call, mobile app, mobile-responsive web pages, chatbot, and social media.
- Translation tools and a chatbot with Spanish language capabilities that allows school districts to manage multilingual communications, demonstrate cultural competency, and meet community needs.

ABOUT K12 *Insight*

K12 *Insight* combines a powerful customer experience platform, engaging professional learning, expert analytics and industry-leading research to help K-12 school leaders deliver remarkable experiences. K12 *Insight* works with over 400 school districts across the nation. Visit k12insight.com to learn more.

ABOUT Let's Talk!®

[Let's Talk!](#) is the leading customer service solution for school districts across the U.S. Let's Talk! empowers K-12 school district leaders to better understand the needs, expectations, and opinions of students, families, staff, and teachers so they can provide more accessible communications and equitable services for all families.

Increase access to information and services through equitable communications within your school district with Let's Talk!



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