e4education

AN E4EDUCATION WHITE PAPER INTO CURRENT COMMUNICATION METHODS AND THE RELEVANCE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT TOOLS WITHIN SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

In 2011, a review of parental engagement best practice by the Department for Education found that 'Parental Engagement has a large and positive impact on children's learning.' (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011) This study highlighted the importance of building positive parent-school communications in relation to developing the school community and how the increase in engagement had a positive bearing on pupil's education.

As a leading provider of school websites, here at e4education, we know from many conversations with our customers that implementing and encouraging successful communication with parents is vital. As the times change and we move further into the digital era, ensuring parents have full access to information about their child's school has never been more important.

To help schools find ways to improve parental engagement, especially through home-school communication, we decided to investigate the relevance and effectiveness of parental engagement tools within schools and to research the communication methods that are currently being utilised.

Our aim was to see how schools currently communicate and if there are any ways in which methods of communication can be improved based on feedback from teachers and support staff.

APPROACH & METHOD

As part of our research, we sent out an email to a large audience of teachers from a range of educational sectors asking them to complete our survey (e4education, 2018) on parental engagement methods.

The survey was broken down into four sections:

- Sector specific information (school type and role)
- How the school currently communicate with parents
- How the school would look to increase parental engagement in future
- Contact information (optional)

The breakdown of questions was set in order to target specific areas of communication and also to determine if there were any sector-specific responses.

All recipients were asked to complete the survey themselves and to focus on their specific school requirements. The survey remained open for one week from the email being sent, and once closed, the data was collated in a .csv file within our website.

To preserve anonymity and to ensure all responses were impartial, any personal data was removed from the survey responses prior to analysis.

The results of our survey findings and conclusions can be seen within the remainder of this report.

SECTOR SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

Which sector best describes your school?

RESULTS

8%

46%

46%

- PRIMARY
- SECONDARY
- INDEPENDENT
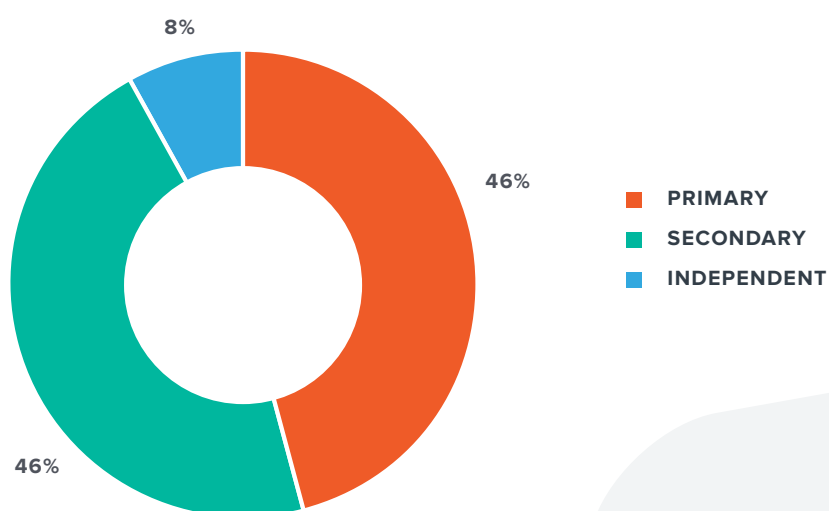
SUMMARY

We had an equal number of responses from Primary and Secondary schools (46% each) with a very small number of responses from Independent schools (8%). We had no responses to the survey from Special Schools or Sixth Form provisions.

What is your current role within your school?

RESULTS

- HEAD / DEPUTY HEAD / ASSISTANT HEAD — 46%
- SLT — 21%
- IT SUPPORT / NETWORK MANAGER — 17%
- TEACHING STAFF — 4%
- ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF — 4%
- OTHER — 8%

SUMMARY

Overall, the majority of responses were from Senior Leadership Roles; either from a Head or Deputy Head, or from another member of the SLT. This balance was equal across both the primary and secondary sectors. In the Independent sector, we found that all participants were either a Head or Deputy Head.

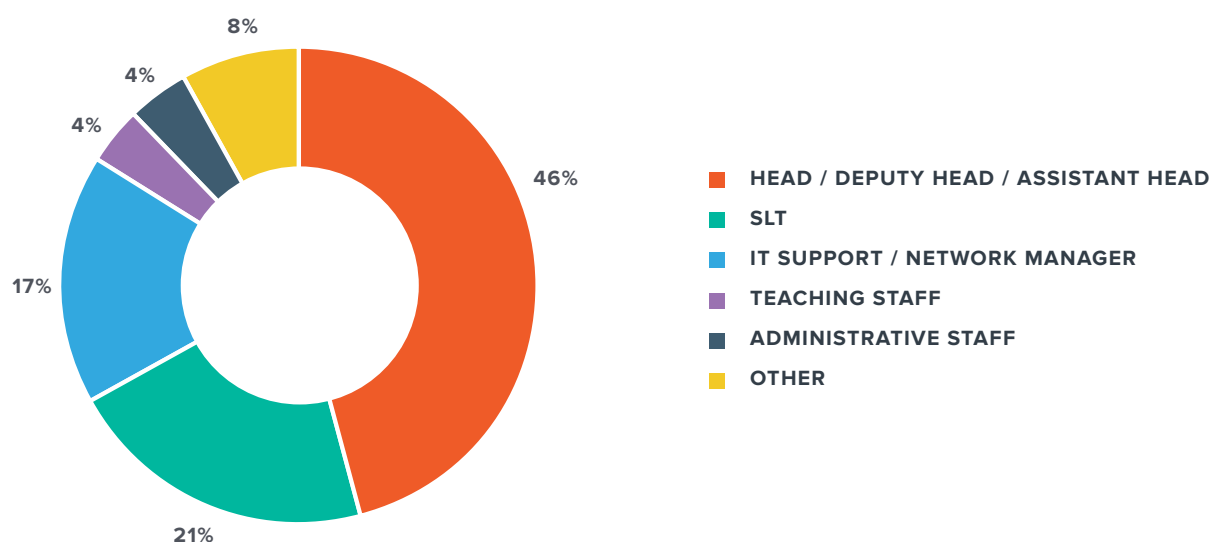As members of SLT are traditionally in decision maker roles within school, this is helpful for our survey data. This is because school leaders are likely to have all of the information on the methods they're currently implementing within school as well as being directly responsible for directing change.

It is also important to note that the third largest percentage of responses came from participants in IT Support / Network Manager roles. This is also an important data set as the IT team are quite often the members of staff implementing new tools and software. Their opinions can be very valuable in terms of objectively evaluating the ease of use in current methods and the future requirements that a school may need. We noticed that these roles were predominantly cross-referenced with the secondary sector, however this is not unexpected, as there is often a dedicated IT department in larger schools as opposed to one individual person within smaller schools.

CURRENT COMMUNICATION METHODS

What format(s) do you currently use for parental communication and engagement?

RESULTS

- **ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTERS**
- **PAPER NEWSLETTERS**
- **SCHOOL APP**
- **SCHOOL WEBSITE**
- **GENERAL LETTERS**
- **EMAIL**
- **TEXT MESSAGING**
- **BOOKING SYSTEMS**
- **FACE TO FACE MEETINGS**
- **SOCIAL MEDIA**
- **OTHER**
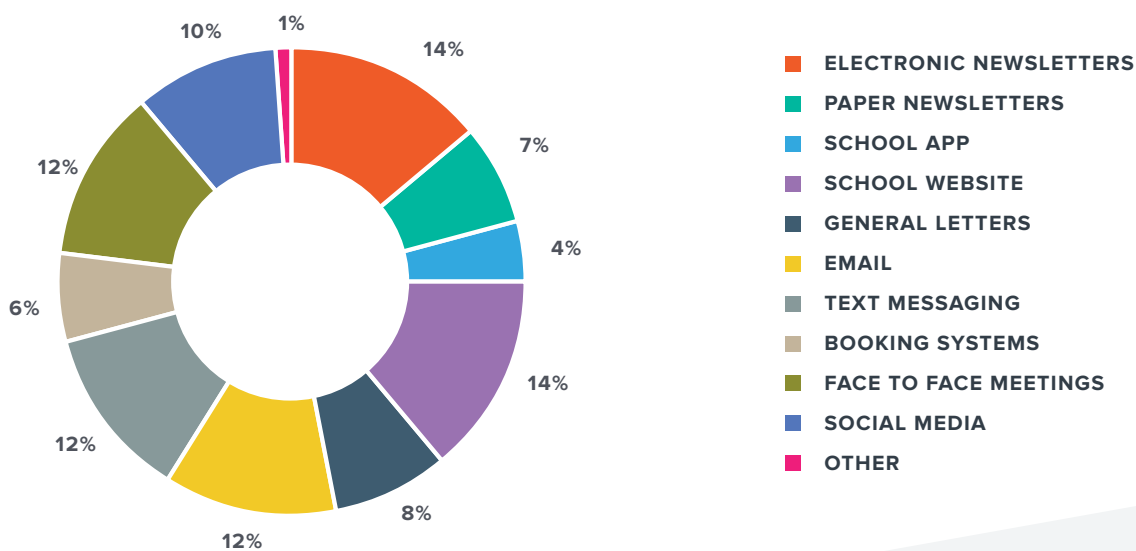
SUMMARY

Our research has shown that currently the most popular format of parental communication and engagement within school is sharing information via the school website and through electronic newsletters. These two formats came in as the most frequently selected option and this was consistent across all three sectors; primary, secondary and independent. Email and Text Messaging services have also proven to be a frequent method of communication, coming in joint second.
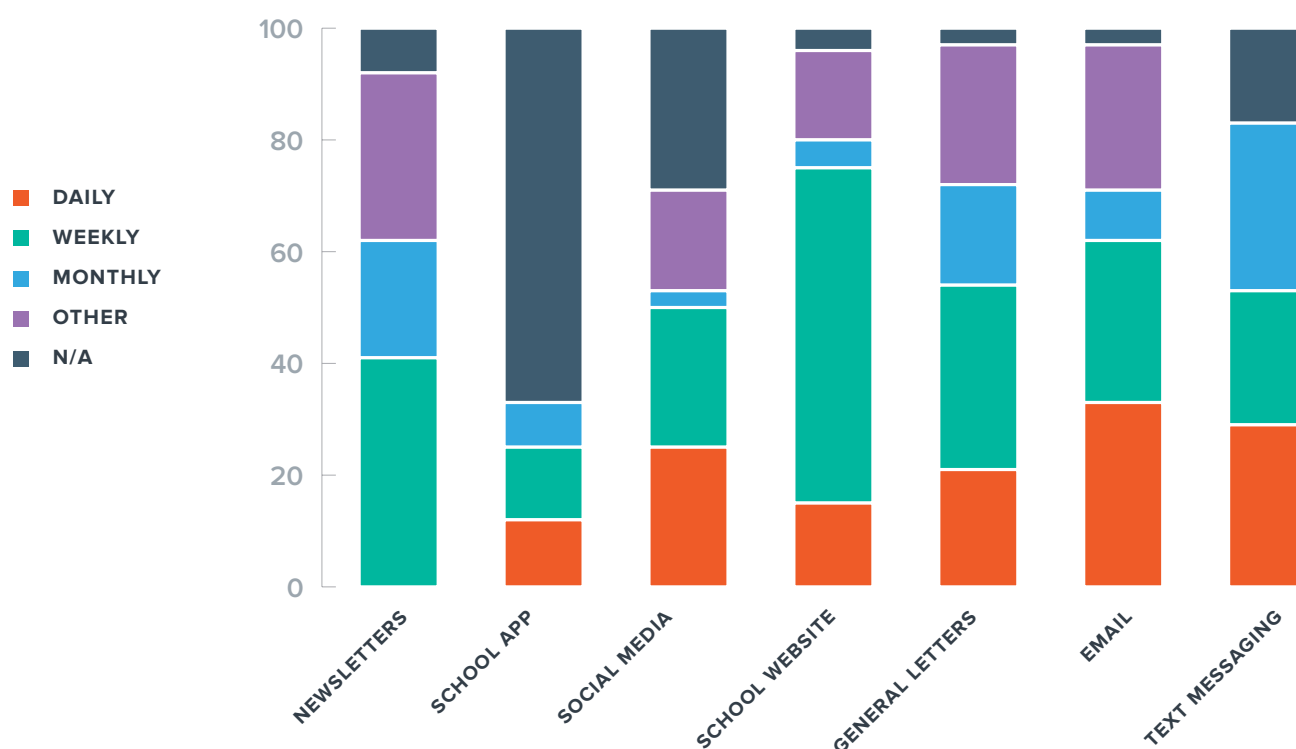
Social Media also featured heavily amongst the secondary and independent schools surveyed. This may be due to the rise in Twitter and Facebook usage by schools, either as a standalone channel, or as a link back to information on their website. Despite the stats skewing in favour of secondary and independent on this format, it is interesting to note that there were also a number of primary schools who selected social media as one of their current communication methods. This may be due to a shift in perspectives towards the possibility of utilising social channels as an engagement tool, especially for existing parents.

Most of the schools surveyed advised that they do not currently use a school app, however, additional research carried out later in our survey showed it is a tool a lot of schools are considering introducing.

Finally, we noticed that despite the rise in using electronic formats for communication over previous staple methods such as paper newsletters, most schools have still selected face-to-face meetings as a frequent way of communicating for schools. Again, this is consistent across all sectors.

RESULTS

Legend:
- DAILY
- WEEKLY
- MONTHLY
- OTHER
- N/A

Categories: NEWSLETTERS, SCHOOL APP, SOCIAL MEDIA, SCHOOL WEBSITE, GENERAL LETTERS, EMAIL, TEXT MESSAGING

SUMMARY

We found that the majority of schools advised that they send out communications to their parents at least once a week, which is excellent news, however we also discovered that this frequency depended very much on the format being used.

• NEWSLETTERS

40% of the schools surveyed send a regular newsletter out at least once a week. None of the schools who were surveyed send out daily newsletters (which may be due to time restrictions and lack of information for a daily bulletin) but it was interesting to see that there were only two schools that we questioned who advised that they don't send any newsletters out at all. Both of these were secondary schools. There was a higher percentage of primary schools sending out newsletters than secondary schools – we feel this could be down to smaller student numbers within primary schools combined with a higher likelihood of sending class newsletters out.

• SCHOOL APP

A lot of schools advised that they do not currently use a school app at the moment, however those that do have the technology, tended to communicate using it on a daily or weekly basis.

• SOCIAL MEDIA

For those schools using social media, 50% of participants posted on either a daily or a weekly basis. All of the independent schools that we surveyed advised that they update their social media every day. The regularity (across all sectors) could be attributed to the dynamic nature of social media and also the relative ease and speed of updating, as opposed to some other methods.

• SCHOOL WEBSITE

Our research found that 75% of schools update their school website on either a daily or weekly basis, making it the most frequently used tool when sending out parental communications. Whilst usage was fairly average across the board in terms of sector, it appears that secondary schools were slightly more likely to have daily updates whereas primary schools edged ahead slightly with regards to weekly updates.

• GENERAL LETTERS

Of all schools surveyed, secondary schools were more likely to send daily general letters home, whereas primary schools were more inclined to send home weekly general letters. A large percentage of participants, across all sectors, chose 'other' on this section which may imply that general letters are sent home on a more ad-hoc basis than as a regular method of parental communication.

• EMAIL MESSAGING

Email communication had the highest percentage of 'daily' responses over all other forms of communication that we investigated in our survey. This was consistently used daily across all three sectors. Weekly and monthly email correspondence was also high with only around 3% of participants advising that their school didn't use it at all.

• TEXT MESSAGING

Text messaging is fairly evenly split frequency-wise across the daily, weekly and monthly options, however it is important to notice that this was the most regular 'monthly' communication selected. Interestingly, every independent school participant that completed our survey advised that text messaging was not a method of communication that they used. The reasons for this are unknown.

Overall, the consensus seems to be that having weekly communication with parents is important (and also, from a time and efficiency point of view this frequency is easier to maintain on a regular basis) with daily and monthly communications becoming more relevant and achievable depending on the format used and the message being communicated.

The frequency of 'other' was quite high for all of the options researched. We conclude that this may be due to some messages being sent out to parents on an ad hoc basis (trip notification, yearly reports, payment requests, snow days etc) so whilst not designed to be regular or frequent communications, they are likely to still be important.

Do you feel like you currently engage and communicate enough with your parents?
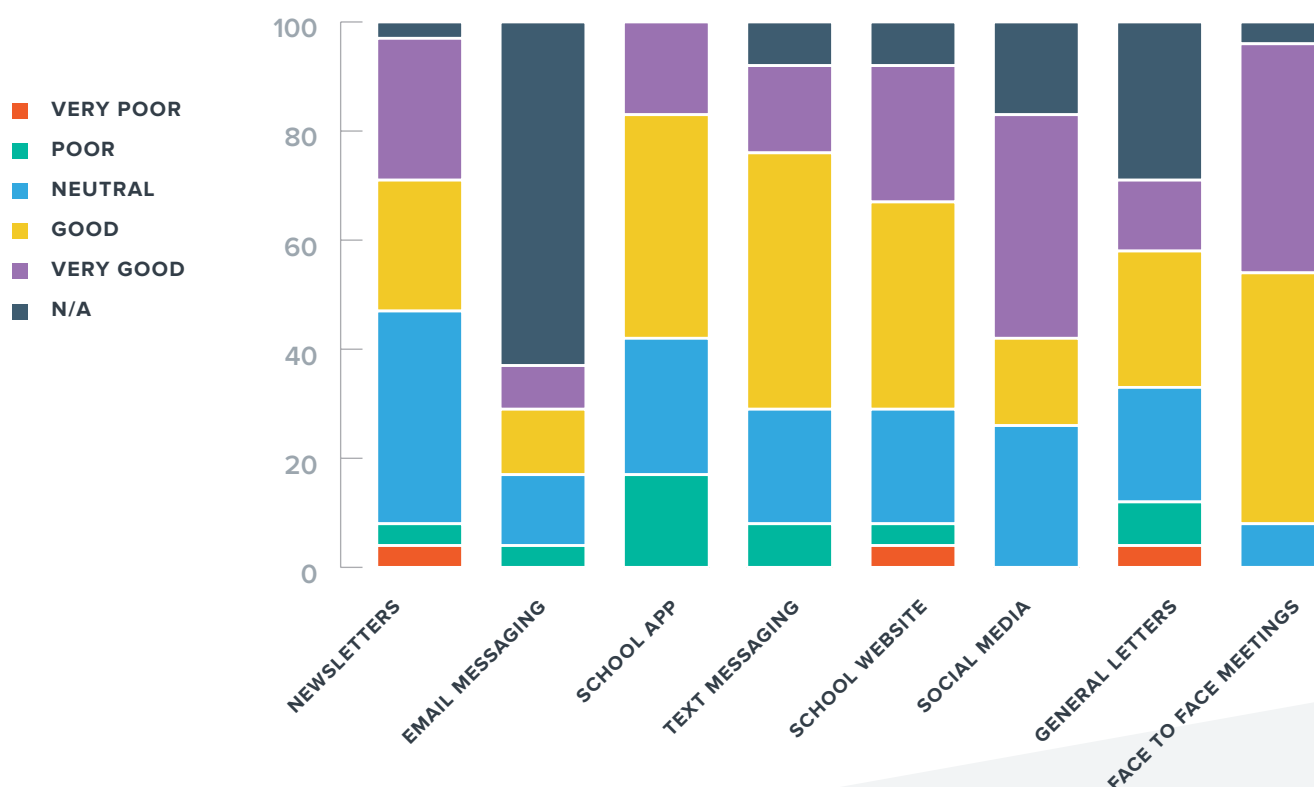
RESULTS
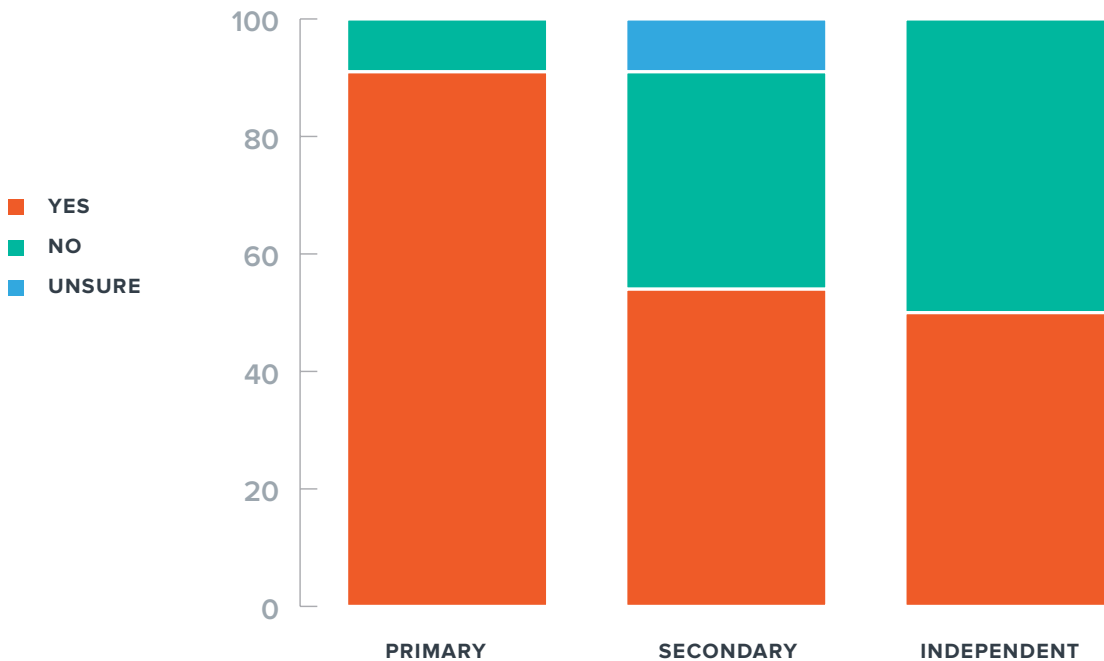
SUMMARY

The results of this question were quite varied across the different school sectors. 91% of primary schools surveyed felt that they currently engage and communicate enough with their parents, as opposed to 54% of secondary schools and 50% of independents. In contrast, 37% of secondary schools felt that they didn't engage and communicate enough, as opposed to 50% of independents and only 9% of primary schools. 9% of secondary schools advised that they were unsure whether they were doing enough to engage and communicate with parents.

It is important to note that these results are based off a school-specific survey reflecting on parental engagement and communication from the school perspective and that no participants were interviewed in a parental capacity within this research.

To ensure that these views are accurately reflected by parents, we would strongly recommend that individual schools reach out to their parent base directly (either face to face during an event, added as a request for information within an existing communication or by sending out a specific survey) to ensure that this view is reflected by the parent community. This will also give individual schools the opportunity to make any required changes, and to increase or improve communications, if there are any areas of concern highlighted by their specific parent base.

RESULTS

Legend:
- VERY POOR
- POOR
- NEUTRAL
- GOOD
- VERY GOOD
- N/A

Categories: NEWSLETTERS, EMAIL MESSAGING, SCHOOL APP, TEXT MESSAGING, SCHOOL WEBSITE, SOCIAL MEDIA, GENERAL LETTERS, FACE TO FACE MEETINGS

SUMMARY

With an overwhelming 88% positive response rate, the most effective way of communicating with parents was judged by schools in our survey to be through face to face meetings. This is likely to be due to the instant response and engagement available in real time contact as well as the ability to discuss and resolve any queries and questions as and when they arrive. Speaking face to face also allows both participants to be aware of expression and tone of voice as these nuances can sometimes be lost or misinterpreted through written methods of communication.

Text messaging was the only other communication method aside from face to face to receive no negative responses. This tool came in a positive response of 57% and a neutral response of 26%. 17% of the schools surveyed advised that this was not a method that they currently use so were unable to comment on its effectiveness.

Whilst only a small percentage of schools are using one, the school app was seen as an effective method by primary schools and independent schools but doesn't appear to have a large take up by secondary schools at the moment.

The opinion on newsletters and general letters seems to be quite divided between schools as to whether it is an effective method of engaging with parents. The primary schools were overwhelmingly confident that newsletters are a positive way forward whereas a lot of the secondary schools in our sample were either undecided or thought it was a poor way of engaging with their audience. This was also true of general letters home, with primary and independent schools taking the lead on promoting the positive effects whilst secondary schools still tended to be neutral or negative. In contrast to newsletters however (with no positive secondary responses), there was a small percentage of secondary schools flagged general letters to be in the very good category.

School websites came in as the most interesting result as despite being highlighted as one of the most regularly updated communications tools, it also came in top of the negative responses on effectiveness.

17% of schools thought the school website was a poor way to engage with parents, sharply contrasting with the 58% of schools who thought it was a good or very good method of communicating. In our experience, a wide range of opinions on website effectiveness can sometimes be down to some site-specific factors such as:

- responsiveness and speed; can the parents get onto the site easily from all devices?
- navigation and design; can the parents easily find the information they're looking for? Is the design clean, tidy and consistent throughout?
- analytics and SEO; is the site working for the school and are they generating traffic to the relevant areas?

Websites which are not working hard for the school and are difficult to use, can often detract users from returning which will then lessen the likelihood of it being an effective communication tool.

> **Is there anything about your current communication and engagement methods that you would like to improve?**

RESULTS

As this was an open-text question, there is no result graph available for this question.
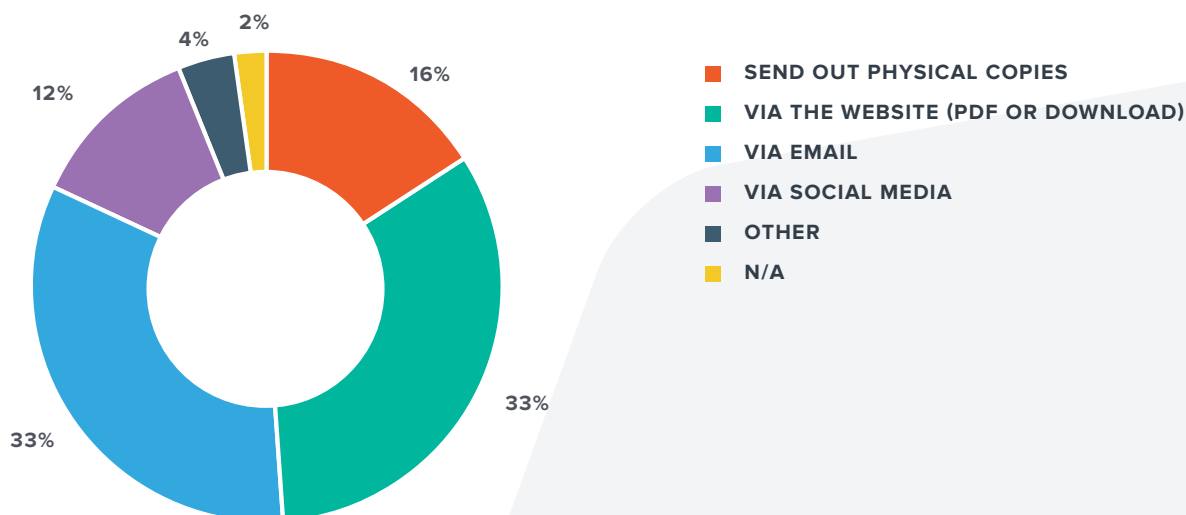
SUMMARY

The majority of respondents left this open question blank, however the responses we did receive were quite similar relating to improving current communication methods. These comments came from several different schools and all related to concerns around language barriers, consolidation and frequency suggesting that these are common considerations.

- **Language Barriers;** quite a number of primary and secondary schools highlighted that there can be issues for parents to access communications which have been sent home if they have a large number of students and families who have English as an Additional Language. Whereas websites can have translation options added to aid with accessibility and language differences, it can be more difficult to ensure that email/text/written communications have the same accessible options. A lot of schools are looking for methods to make communication between students, staff and parents

- **Consolidation and Frequency;** especially amongst the secondary school responses, there was a concern around the frequency of communications they were sending out and whether this was oversaturating their audience. These schools highlighted wanting to improve the frequency of publications to be timelier and more targeted as well as consolidating the information into digestible chunks; as a daily or weekly bulletin, as opposed to sporadic multiple emails. The option for consolidating all of the communication tools into one central management system also proved a popular response rather than engaging multiple non-interacting tools.

If you create newsletters, how do you share them with parents?

RESULTS

- 2%
- 4%
- 12%
- 16%
- 33%
- 33%

SEND OUT PHYSICAL COPIES
VIA THE WEBSITE (PDF OR DOWNLOAD)
VIA EMAIL
VIA SOCIAL MEDIA
OTHER
N/A

SUMMARY

The most popular methods for sharing newsletters with parents were via the website (PDF or Download) or via email – with 33% each. This was a consistent response across all sectors implying that this is a universal approach to sending out newsletter communications. Despite the push towards more digital forms of media, 16% of schools advised that they still create physical copies, either to send them home to all parents or to keep paper copies in the main office and teachers' classrooms, for those who would prefer to read a printed version. 12% of schools mentioned sharing the links on social media – either the direct link to the newsletter or linking back to the website.

Which communication methods do you currently use to organise your parents evening bookings?

RESULTS

8%

31%

28%

18%

8%

7%

- ■ LETTERS HOME WITH RETURN SLIPS
- ■ EMAIL TO PARENTS/CARERS
- ■ FORM ON YOUR WEBSITE
- ■ TELEPHONE
- ■ BOOKING WEBSITE/SYSTEM
- ■ OTHER
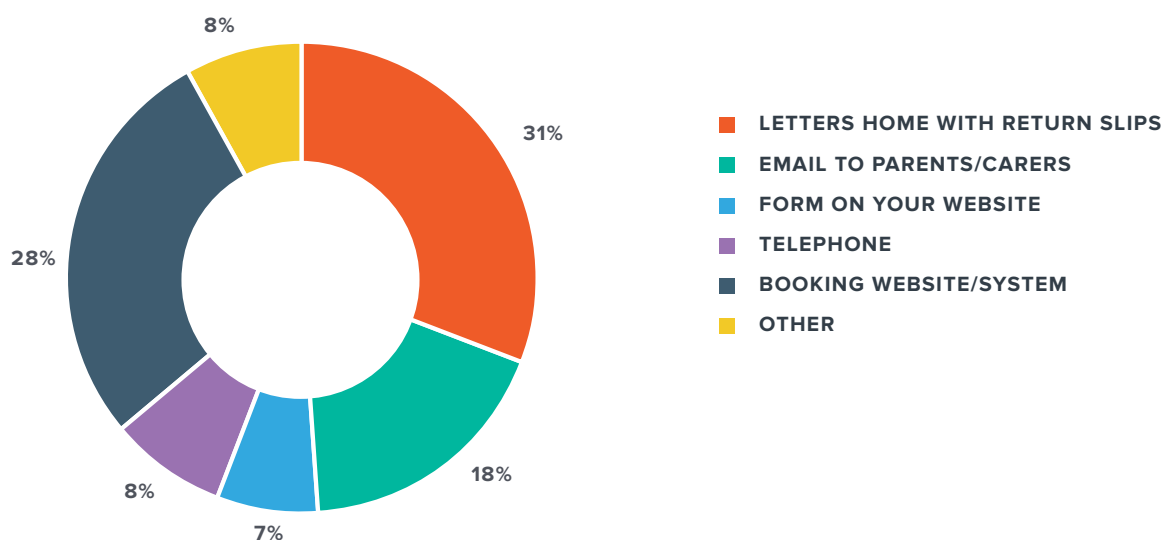
SUMMARY

With 31% of responses, the most popular current method of organising parents evening bookings is through sending letters home with return slips for the students to bring back for their teachers. This is closely followed by the use of online booking systems or websites, with 28% of participants stating that this is their current preferred method. A third of the schools that we surveyed selected that they use multiple options such as email and booking systems, or letters home combined with digital correspondence or a follow up telephone call whereas the other two thirds were happy to just use one method of communication.
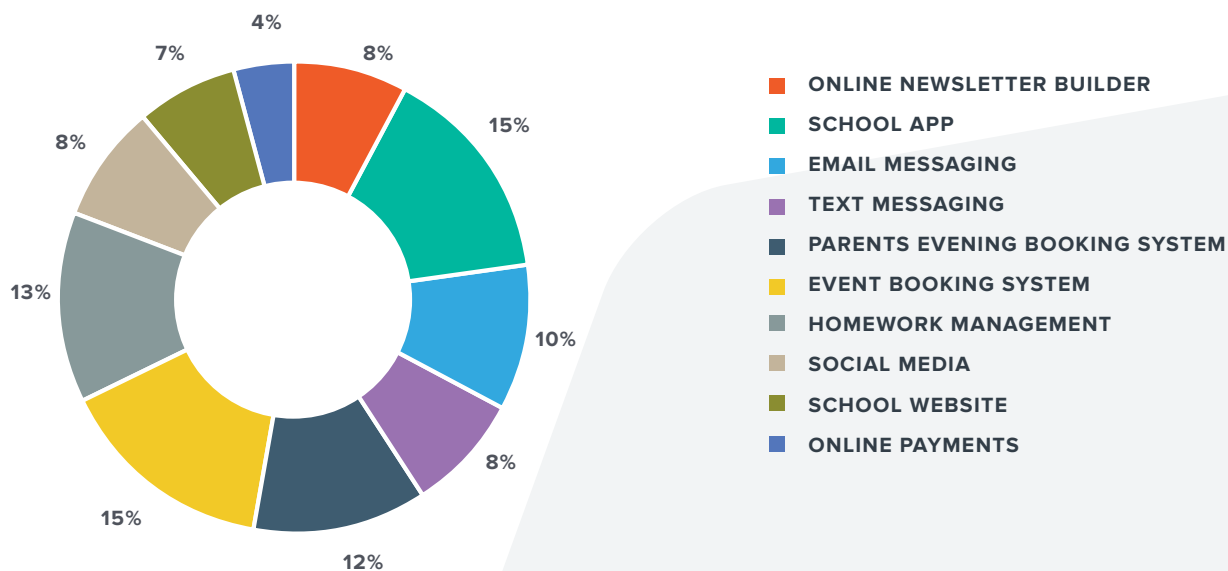
The reasons for these differences may be due to phasing in new technology slowly, or to using multiple methods to capture information from a larger audience. It may also be that schools wish to give their parents a larger selection of ways to respond – to cater to their specific audience requirements.

WAYS TO INCREASE PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT IN FUTURE

Do you think you would look to use any of the following methods to help increase parental engagement within your school in the future?

RESULTS

OVERALL RESPONSES ACROSS ALL SECTORS

- 8%
- 15%
- 10%
- 8%
- 12%
- 15%
- 13%
- 8%
- 7%
- 4%

Legend:
- ■ ONLINE NEWSLETTER BUILDER
- ■ SCHOOL APP
- ■ EMAIL MESSAGING
- ■ TEXT MESSAGING
- ■ PARENTS EVENING BOOKING SYSTEM
- ■ EVENT BOOKING SYSTEM
- ■ HOMEWORK MANAGEMENT
- ■ SOCIAL MEDIA
- ■ SCHOOL WEBSITE
- ■ ONLINE PAYMENTS

OVERALL RESPONSE FOR EACH SECTION PERCENTAGE BROKEN DOWN BY SECTOR

PRIMARY
SECONDARY
INDEPENDENT
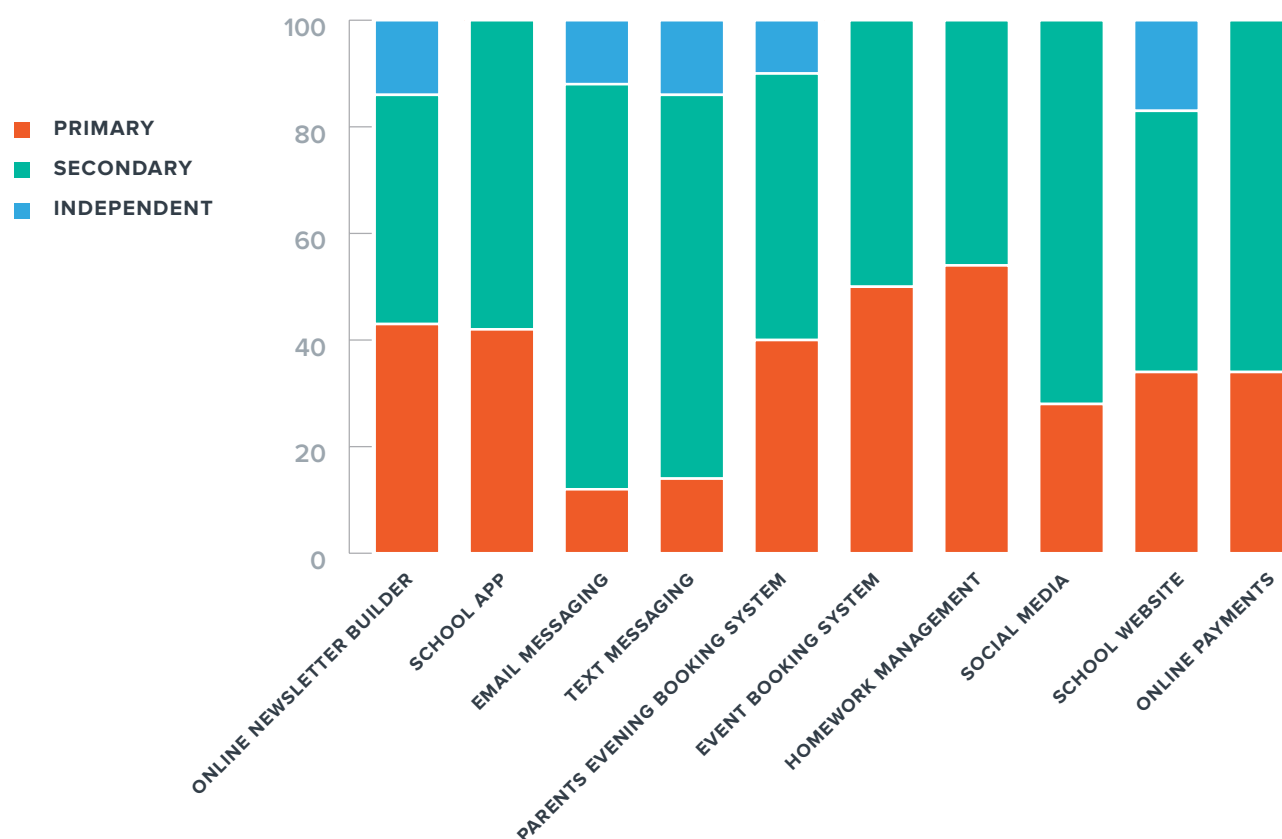
SUMMARY

All of the schools we surveyed would definitely look to use additional methods of communication in future to increase parental engagement within their schools. The most popular method to be considered for future implementation was the School App, an Event Booking System, a Parent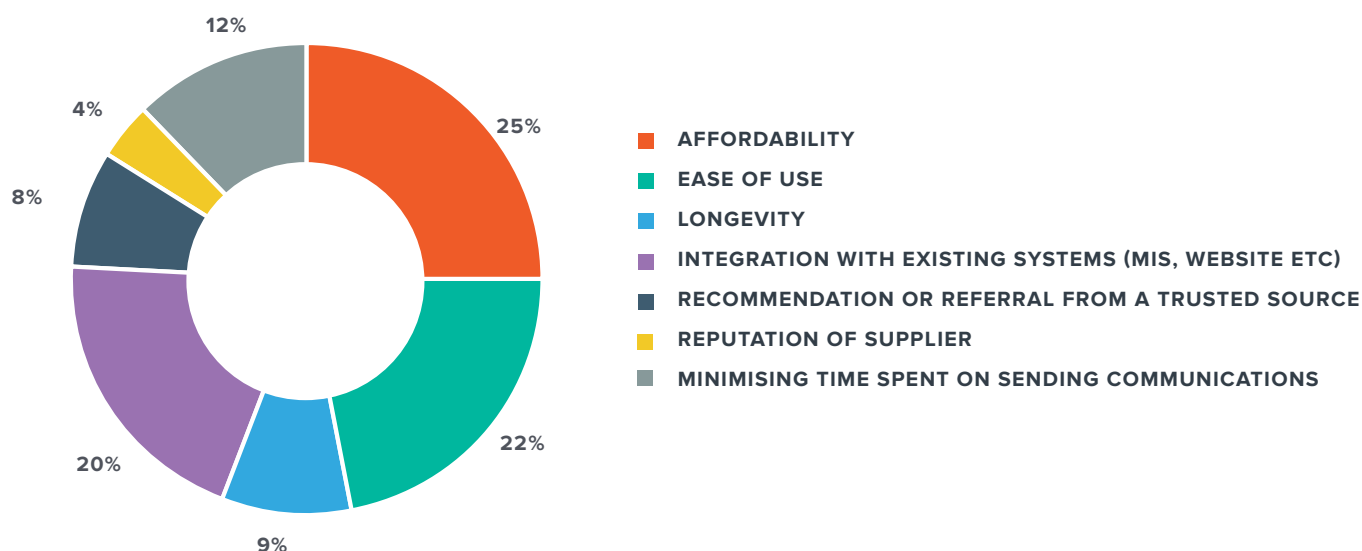s Evening Booking System and a Homework Management tool. The least popular option chosen by our sample group was Online Payments, with only a 4% interest in adapting this method specifically to increase engagement (although that is not to say that schools may wish to implement this functionality for alternative reasons).

Upon breaking the data down in sector specific details, it became evident that secondary schools in particular are very keen on implementing additional methods of communication to increase parental engagement. Secondary schools had the highest percentage of responses for all but one of the options given. The only tool which was ranked as more important to primary schools was the possibility of using a homework management system.

Email messaging, text messaging and social media seemed the most popular secondary specific areas of future investment for engagement, with the school app following close behind. For independent schools, the areas they seemed most keen to improve on were the school website, text messaging, online newsletter builder and parents evening booking. The other options had no independent school responses, implying that they either already have them implemented within their schools, or do not see a need for them at this time.

What are your key considerations when it comes to purchasing new communication and parental engagement tools for your school?

RESULTS

- **AFFORDABILITY** — 25%
- **EASE OF USE** — 22%
- **LONGEVITY** — 9%
- **INTEGRATION WITH EXISTING SYSTEMS (MIS, WEBSITE ETC)** — 20%
- **RECOMMENDATION OR REFERRAL FROM A TRUSTED SOURCE** — 8%
- **REPUTATION OF SUPPLIER** — 4%
- **MINIMISING TIME SPENT ON SENDING COMMUNICATIONS** — 12%

SUMMARY:

As part of our investigation, we wanted to research not only which methods of communication would be most beneficial for schools to implement, but also the key considerations for buying new tools and what they feel would be gained from making these investments.

The key considerations that we found were important to schools across all sectors were affordability, ease of use and the ability to integrate with existing systems such as the school website or MIS software. With school budgets ever-tightening, it is crucial that school investments provide value for money and are easy to use by a wide majority of staff members. Having a new tool that already provides an option to integrate with current software and systems will also be beneficial in terms of remaining cost-effective.
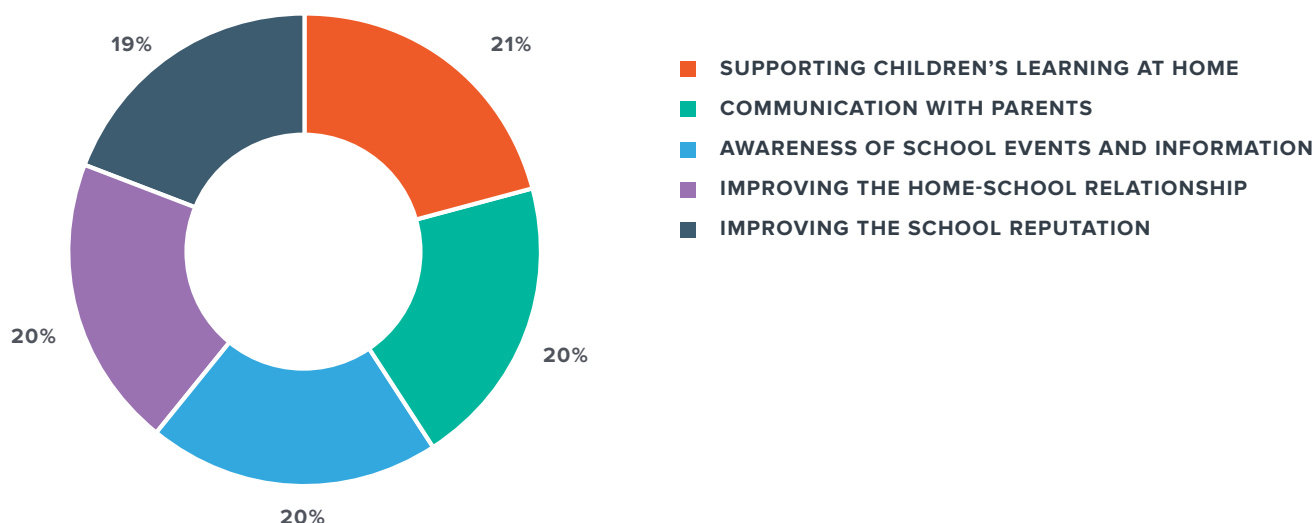
A high importance for primary schools (but not as much for secondary and independent) was that any tool provides longevity, however this again may be linked with affordability and budgets – any new systems need to be future-proofed and provide a long-term solution in order to stay financially viable.

The least important consideration, which was a little surprising, was the reputation of the supplier; only 4% of the schools surveyed noted that this would be a key requirement for their purchase whilst only 8% would require a recommendation or referral from a trusted supplier.

We also asked the schools if there were any other key considerations which would come into their decision-making process which were not listed in the previous selection. The additional responses we received were mainly around the security of the product and the ability to tailor the communications to a specific audience. The other frequently mentioned requirement which schools would want to consider was related to language barriers; whether a tool would allow the communications to be read and understood by all of their school community and if there would be any settings available to cater to additional language requirements.

Do you feel that increasing parental engagement has a positive effect on any of the following?

RESULTS

Legend:
- **SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S LEARNING AT HOME** — 21%
- **COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS** — 20%
- **AWARENESS OF SCHOOL EVENTS AND INFORMATION** — 20%
- **IMPROVING THE HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP** — 20%
- **IMPROVING THE SCHOOL REPUTATION** — 19%

SUMMARY

Our final survey question was to ask the participants about the positive effects of increasing parental engagement. The responses were unanimous with all schools across all sectors equally noting that increasing parental engagement has a positive effect on support children's learning at home, communication with parents, raising awareness of school events and information, improving the home-school relationship and improving the school reputation.

All of these factors are extremely beneficial for the school and it's excellent to see the positive and beneficial impact that increasing parental engagement has for schools.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of our research was to investigate the ways in which schools currently communicate with parents, the relevance and effectiveness of the parental engagement tools they currently use and if there are any ways in which communication can be improved to increase parental engagement.

Whilst we were unable to obtain a response from every school in the country, we are confident that the samples obtained reflect an accurate cross-section of the views of staff across the primary, secondary and independent sectors.

Every school that we surveyed uses at least one communication tool on a regular basis to increase parental engagement however there was a strong consensus amongst all sectors that additional methods or an increase in frequency or relevance of communication was required to successfully reach out to all of their parents.

As we move further into a digitally-led environment, we have seen an increasingly large push for schools to utilise digital correspondence over paper copies. The majority of schools surveyed are already using, or are looking to use, electronic methods of communication such as email, text and apps for sending messages home and relaying information. The use of social media is also on the rise, especially as a way to communicate with existing parents and market to potential parents.

The frequency of these communications has also increased, with most schools now aiming to send home information at least once a week with other information sent on a daily, monthly or ad hoc basis as appropriate.

In conclusion, our research has shown that regardless of sector, positive parental engagement within schools is vital and that improving home-school communications through the use of parental engagement tools has never been more important.

Whilst on the whole, schools are confident that their current methods and tools are engaging parents successfully, our research has shown that they are open to looking into alternative options and interested in expanding the variety of methods used to increase parental engagement.

School staff across all sectors are looking for communication systems that are easy to use and that do not overcomplicate the process, ensuring that any member of staff regardless of whether they are from a technical or non-technical background, can be in charge of the process. They are keen for all systems that they use to integrate and interact to avoid duplication of content and resource, and they are eager for any new tools to be flexible enough to tailor information to a variety of different audiences.

With school budgets ever-tightening, it is also crucial that any new investments provide high value for money and provide a long-term solution to an existing problem.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Whilst our research shows a high-level overall analysis on communication tools and parental engagement, it is important to highlight that these results are based on school staff responses from a school perspective and no parental responses were collected.

To ensure that these responses can be tailored to individual schools, we would recommend schools reaching out directly to their own parent base to see which methods would work best for their particular community.

This could be done either face-to-face during an event, added as a request into an existing communication, or by sending out a specific survey. Undertaking school specific research, will give individual schools the opportunity and information to tailor their own communication processes and improve engagement in response to the comments and concerns raised by their own parent community.

REFERENCES:

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Goodall, J and Vorhaus J, 2011, Review of best practice in parental engagement, Department for Education – gov.uk website – accessed Monday 1st October 2018 - **https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/ uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182508/DFE-RR156.pdf**

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Create beautiful newsletters, linked to your school website and email them to all of your parents in minutes.

CONNECT **APP**

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CONNECT **PARENTS EVENING BOOKING**

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COMING SOON: TEXT MESSAGING – HOMEWORK – RECRUITMENT - PAYMENT

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