

Technology in Parent - Teacher Conferences

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"If I would only have known..." is a comment echoed during many of those anxiety filled Parent - Teacher conferences, yet the task of keeping parents informed about their child's progress can be a process wrought with burdensome challenges. There is the time it takes to accumulate the child's assignment scores, formulate a progress report, photocopy the material, play the telephone tag game, and try to untangle the scheduling conflicts to meet. There must be a better way to keep the lines of communication open with a minimal amount of effort and time on the part of the teacher?! Thanks to the challenge and foresight put forth in the Canadian Seventh-day Adventist Schools Technology Plan, the initiative of conference education leaders, school administrators, teachers, and forward thinking parents classrooms across the nation now have the appropriate software, hardware, and internet access to enhance the communication between home and school. Using the technology provided can lay the groundwork for a better, less anxiety prone process of keeping parents informed of their child's progress.

Email

Probably the simplest use of technology is the use of email to keep a parent informed. By simply gathering a list of those parents having email accounts and entering them in your email program's address book you can open the door to enhancing parent communication. This form of electronic communication is not dependent on the other person's schedule and can be done in the immediate time frame. Now add to this the ability to place addresses into groups and using the BCC (blind carbon copy - to ensure privacy) function, it is possible to mass mail messages. Use this to alert parents of missing assignments, important tests and assignments upcoming, weekly assignment schedules, classroom announcements, and concerns over student behavior are just a few of the potential uses of this form of mail delivery. If you are in the habit of typing your assignments out using a word processor, it may be possible for you to send the assignments as attachments (or if you are using Microsoft Word, email your document directly from the application). The use of email to communicate with parents takes very little effort and time but is huge in the minds of parents. It keeps them in touch with what is happening in their child's school life. Should your computer have a fax modem installed and you have access to a phone line, you may be able to fax assignments and progress reports directly from the application via the FILE - Fax menu selection.

Print to PDF

Another very useful set of applications are programs that create PDF (Portable Document Format - a standard cross platform file format created by [Adobe](#)) by simply choosing this option as if selecting a printer and going to FILE - PRINT as your menu selection. The benefit of these types of applications is that the parents neither have to have the same computer platform or the same software application to access the file. Once you have created the PDF file you can send it as an attachment to emails, send it home on a floppy disk (or any other removable storage medium), or even place the file on your web site to be downloaded. Parents simply install the [Acrobat® Reader™](#) program to be able to read the file on their home computers. Having the ability to create PDF files from any application by simply choosing the FILE - PRINT option within any application opens the door for a number of uses. Consider the ability to produce a mid-term progress report using the format directly from your electronic gradebook. How about sending an assignment to a student who has been away for an extended time period, or sending a fully formatted school handbook to interested prospective students, producing an electronic class list, complete with pictures, or even an electronic version of your yearbook to mention just a few.

The application to create the PDF file is called [Adobe Acrobat®](#) and although fairly pricey (depending on the amount of educational discount/pricing that you may get) it does, once installed and configured properly, makes the creation of PDF files almost transparent. As an Apple Macintosh user, you can get much the same functionality from a shareware program called "[PrinttoPDF](#)". This is a wonderful software utility that will produce your PDF files at fraction of the cost (author's note: I personally use this program and find it a delight to use). There are similar shareware programs available to users of the Window's platforms but I have found them not quite as easy to install and configure (a search on the internet should give you some leads). There is also a few newer software programs that have the ability to output PDF files as a function inherent to the program (eg [AppleWorks 6.02](#) for MacOS X, [Adobe PageMaker 7.xx](#).

Electronic Gradebooks

With the use of an electronic gradebook it is extremely easy to keep a student's progress up to date. Sending those midterm progress reports, or progress reports on demand is simply a click or two away. Using these gradebooks, the teacher can keep parents informed of their child's progress on a timely basis (eg after major exams or every two weeks). Another alternative to electronic gradebooks would be to use a web based gradebook application. Examples of this type of web application can be found at "[mygradebook.com](#)" or "[Thinkwave](#)". This web based application allows the teacher to maintain their gradebook on line, giving them access to student grades from any internet connected computer. Additional to this, the program allows for email messaging from teacher to student/parent and the ability for parents to login into your gradebook to get a view of their child's progress (but not allowing access to other student's grades). Wow, talk about keeping your parents up to date! Finally for those schools using a full-featured school administration package there may be provisions for parents to view student progress via the internet, as a function of the program.

Teacher Web Sites

With the use of today's web design applications (eg [Microsoft Frontpage](#), [Macromedia Dreamweaver 4.xx](#). It is becoming increasingly easier to design and maintain a web site. These programs almost allow you to design a web page as if you were using a page layout program. Being just a little adventuresome it is possible to develop your own personal web site for parents to access. These programs make it possible to take your class policies, course content, and letters to parents information created in other programs and either import them into the web design programs or create the html files directly within the program. For those that maintain their lesson plans and assignment schedules in database or spreadsheet programs, it is possible to import this information into tables on your web page with just a few clicks of the mouse. In fact some database programs (eg [FileMaker Pro 5.5](#), [4th Dimension 6.xx](#), and [Microsoft Access](#) will allow for web access directly from the program! Publishing your assignment schedule on your web site allows for parents to track assignments completed, exams coming up, and an overview of what is being taught (for an example of this type of use see the [author's web site](#). Having a teacher's web site allows for so many other possibilities with your imagination and needs being the upper limit. Think of having the ability to share pictures of a recent field trip, having a PowerPoint presentation online for students that may have missed the lecture, or a list of clickable internet resources supporting the course content to mention just a few possibilities. Another possible option for those teachers not inclined to delving too deeply in database design and web page design can take advantage of web sites that offer the ability for teachers to publish their course schedules and content online through their web site. Such sites as [TeacherWeb.com](#) and [SchoolNotes.com](#), give teachers free access to post, to the internet, their course information.

Through the use of computer technology and the internet access you really can improve the lines of communications between home and school. The previous burdensome and time consuming process of

assembling parent information and finding the time in busy schedules to keep parents abreast of their child's performance can truly be reduced and become much more timely and effective. Simply make technology work for you!!