



TEXT, TWITTER, EMAIL, CALL:

Parents' Preferences for Communication and Engagement in 2022

Speak Up Research Project

15 YEARS OF PARTNERSHIP

We share a vision of supporting more effective decision-making and innovation by K-12 leaders through an understanding of the authentic views of K-12 students, teachers, parents, and administrators.

PARTNERSHIP OUTPUT

Project Tomorrow develops and disseminates 30 highly-regarded national reports and eBooks on timely trends and topics in education.

Topics include:

- Attributes of visionary school leaders
- Calculating ROI for online learning
- Community engagement
- Digital learning trends
- Equity in education
- Impact of the pandemic and school disruption
- Mobile device usage in classrooms
- Online and virtual learning
- Parents' preferences for communication
- Role of communication officers
- School-to-home communications
- Student empowerment
- Technology use preparation by pre-service teachers

Leveraging ideas and insights of K-12 stakeholders from

106,686

schools since 2007:



4,332,151

K-12 STUDENTS



411,770

PARENTS



434,485

TEACHERS, LIBRARIANS, AND PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS



52,871

SCHOOL AND DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS

Why Effective Communication and Engagement with Parents is More Important Today

While the jury is still out on many aspects of the longstanding impact on K-12 education from the pandemic and the resulting disruptions to traditional learning models, one key lesson learned from that experience is already widely accepted.

As an education leader, you have probably realized for a long time that a “one size fits all” strategy for district communication and engagement to your various community stakeholders is not most effective or an ideal choice in K-12 education.



One Size Doesn't Fit All

The perceived value of the local school district today is critically dependent upon exemplar school-to-home communication and the effective engagement of parents in their children's learning lives.



From 2019 to 2022, the percentage of district administrators who said communication with parents is a significant challenge (one that is most likely to wake them up in the middle of the night) has doubled.

But the stakes are higher today for personalized communication because of the pandemic:

- Parents have new demands and expectations for being engaged with their local school
- Parents really liked the new transparency into their child's learning lives afforded to them through virtual learning
- Parents want more (not less) communication from their child's teacher and school district, but they also want it "their way!"

School district leaders are identifying with these higher stakes and increased demands.

Effective communication today is not just about having the right message for the right audience at the right time anymore, but rather, it is increasingly critical that communication leaders lean into the differentiation of messages and modes of engagement based upon audience preferences for one simple reason:

Our school community today consists of four different generations of parents and grandparents serving as education guardians.

DEFINING THE GENERATIONS

BABY BOOMERS

birth years 1944 – 1964
(age 58 and older)

GEN X

birth years 1965 – 1980
(age 42 – 57)

MILLENNIALS

birth years 1981 – 1996
(age 26 – 41)

GEN Z

birth years 1997 – 2012
(age 25 and younger)

Source: Pew Research



Not only are there four generations of parents in K-12 schools, but there are four generations of teachers and administrators in schools. **Don't forget them when you think about your audience!**

Four generations of parents with K-12 children in school:

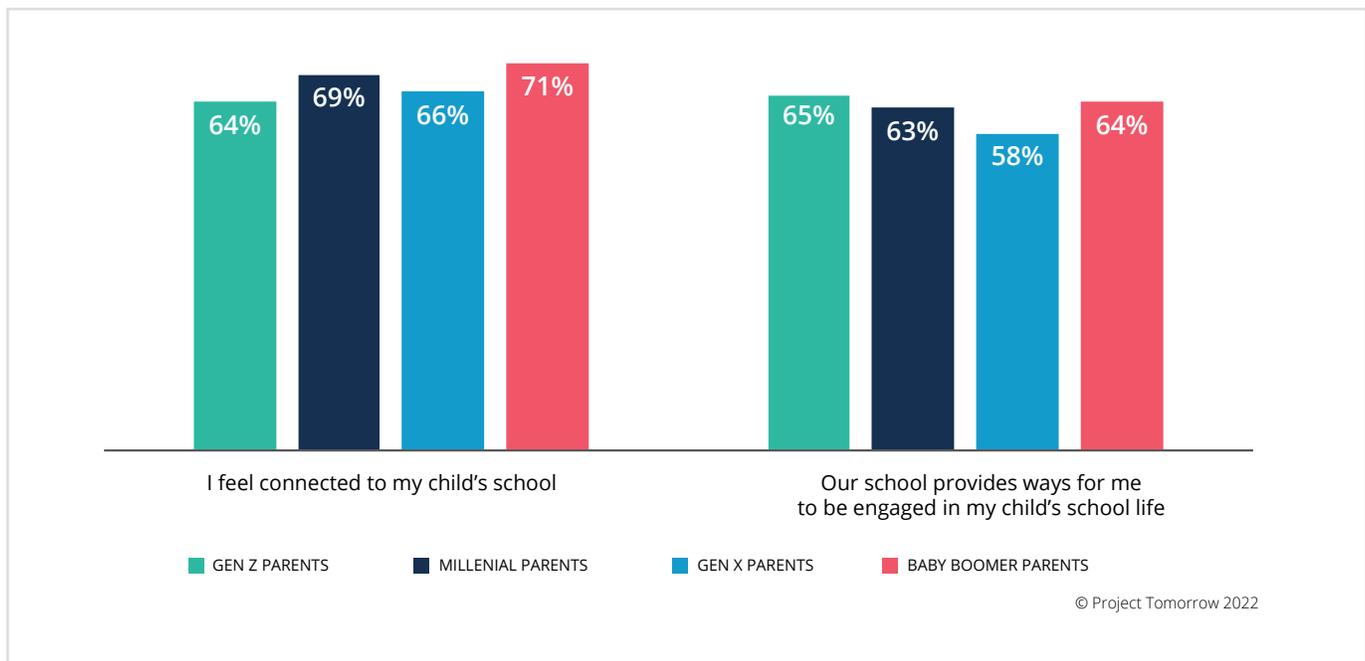
- Younger parents (Gen Z and Millennials) are most likely to have children in elementary school.
- The children of Gen X parents are now in middle and high school.
- Baby Boomer parents (and grandparents) are shepherding children through the high school years.

GRADE OF CHILD(REN) IN SCHOOL	GEN Z PARENTS	MILLENNIAL PARENTS	GEN X PARENTS	BABY BOOMER PARENTS (GRANDPARENTS)
PrK-Gr 2	48%	64%	17%	20%
Gr 3-Gr 5	16%	38%	28%	26%
Gr 6-Gr 8	9%	25%	39%	21%
Gr 9-Gr 12	6%	11%	46%	44%

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Do different generations of parents have divergent views and opinions about their child's school?

ANSWER: More alike than not: Parents across all generations feel connected to their child's school and believe that the school enables them to be engaged in their child's school life also.

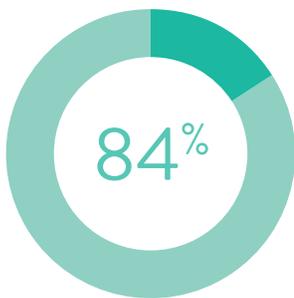




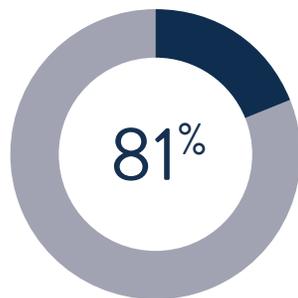
But differences between generations are revealed when we add technology to the conversation. For example, only **63% of Boomer** parents are comfortable helping their child with digital homework compared to **84% of Gen Z parents**.

"I am comfortable helping my child with homework that has a technology component."

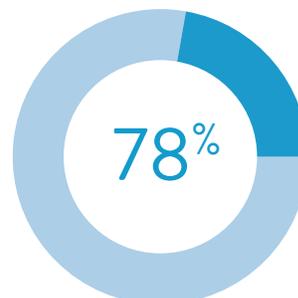
% THAT AGREE WITH THIS STATEMENT IS TRUE FOR THEM



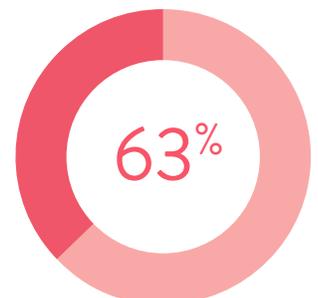
GEN Z PARENTS



MILLENNIAL PARENTS



GEN X PARENTS



BABY BOOMERS PARENTS & GRANDPARENTS

We continue to see generational differences when it comes to feeling comfortable with digital tools and resources, even if that involves their child's homework. This generational digital comfort disconnect also influences parents' preferences for teacher and school communication.

Does this apparent difference in technology comfort manifest itself in terms of parents' preferences for different modalities for communication from their child's teacher?

ANSWER: It depends upon the communication modality.

PREFERENCES FOR TEACHER-TO-HOME COMMUNICATIONS:

FACE TO FACE MEETING VS. ONLINE MEETING

COMMUNICATION VIA...	GEN Z PARENTS	MILLENNIAL PARENTS	GEN X PARENTS	BABY BOOMER PARENTS & GRANDPARENTS
Face-to-face meeting	75%	72%	67%	67%
Online meeting	34%	43%	49%	27%

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- Across all four generations, parents value a face-to-face meeting with their child's teacher.
- Millennial and Gen X parents are more likely to be satisfied with an online meeting compared to Gen Z parents and Baby Boomer parents and grandparents.

MOBILE APP VS. CLASS OR SCHOOL PORTAL

COMMUNICATION VIA...	GEN Z PARENTS	MILLENNIAL PARENTS	GEN X PARENTS	BABY BOOMER PARENTS & GRANDPARENTS
Mobile app	47%	39%	20%	22%
Class or school portal	29%	13%	12%	13%

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- Gen Z parents are more than twice as likely as Gen X and Baby Boomer parents to be comfortable with a mobile app.
- In 2018, 65% of parents favored the class or school portal for teacher communications.



ASK YOURSELF THIS QUESTION:

Are we providing different options for meetings with parents? Are our teachers, for example, providing an online meeting option for parent-teacher conferences?



ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS:

What can we do to help teachers see the value of different modes of communications to support various types of parents and education guardians?

PERSONAL PHONE CALL VS. PERSONAL EMAIL VS. TEXT MESSAGE

COMMUNICATION VIA...	GEN Z PARENTS	MILLENNIAL PARENTS	GEN X PARENTS	BABY BOOMER PARENTS & GRANDPARENTS
Personal phone call	56%	43%	43%	48%
Personal email	45%	62%	71%	66%
Text message	58%	46%	37%	43%

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- Text message communication between parents and teachers continues to gain in popularity, notably as younger parents become part of the school community. 58% of Gen Z parents say “text me” to their child’s teacher; only 37% of Gen X parents have the same wish.
- Email is on the decline across all groups – after being favored by 83% of parents in 2018.



There is no clear leading channel across all demographics. For the best results, think about a broad, multi-channel communications strategy.



ASK YOURSELF THIS QUESTION:

What can we do as leaders to help our teams suspend their personal assumptions about what parents want or need in terms of communication modalities?

Does this apparent difference in technology comfort manifest itself in terms of parents' preferences for different modalities for communication from their child's school and district?

ANSWER: It depends upon the message content as well as the digital tool.

Message content types:

- General information
- Information about emotional and mental health resources
- Crisis alerts
- Health alerts

Types of digital tools:

- Automated phone messages
- District mobile app
- Email blasts
- Messaging app with conversation capabilities
- Online newsletters
- Personal emails
- Social media
- Text messages
- Website

PREFERENCES FOR DISTRICT-TO-HOME COMMUNICATIONS

MESSAGE TYPE: GENERAL INFORMATION

Over two-thirds of parents across all four generations say this is the most effective way to disseminate general information messages to them:



However, two-thirds of Gen Z parents also want their general school information transmitted to them via text message. Texting as an optimal mode of communication is less favored by the older generations of parents. Only 1/3 of Gen X and Baby Boomer parents endorse texting as a preferable way to receive information about school events, schedule changes, or good new stories.

GENERAL INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TOOLS	GEN Z PARENTS	MILLENNIAL PARENTS	GEN X PARENTS	BABY BOOMER PARENTS & GRANDPARENTS
Text message	65%	51%	37%	36%

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MESSAGE TYPE: INFORMATION ABOUT EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

Seven in 10 school principals say that providing resources to support the social, emotional, and mental health of students is a good priority for the COVID pandemic funds. Consequently, many districts are sharing information about emotional and mental health resources with their parent community now.

But how parents want to receive that information varies by generation.

PARENT GENERATION	How do you want to receive information from your school district about emotional and mental health resources to support your child?
GEN Z PARENTS	Text messages – 55% District mobile app – 49% Messaging app with conversation capabilities – 47%
MILLENNIAL PARENTS	General email blast – 51% Online newsletter or flyer – 45%
GEN X PARENTS	General email blast – 50% Personal email – 49%
BABY BOOMER PARENTS & GRANDPARENTS	Personal email – 42%

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- Gen Z parents are much more interested in having these types of resources “pushed” to them for each access and convenience such as through a text or mobile app.
- Older parents prefer more traditional means of accessing information such as through an email or online newsletter.



ASK YOURSELF THIS QUESTION:

As noted in this research, Gen Z parents, and to a lesser extent their older Millennial peers, are advocates for the efficacy of text messages for district communication. But they also value the more traditional means used to support general district information dissemination and branding such as emails, online newsletters, and social media posts. How are you evaluating the efficacy of your dissemination efforts when using so many different tools for communication and engagement?



ASK YOURSELF THIS QUESTION:

While school districts have long shared community information with parents, this topic is a new one for many district communication teams. How are you effectively leveraging online and digital tools to address this new community need?

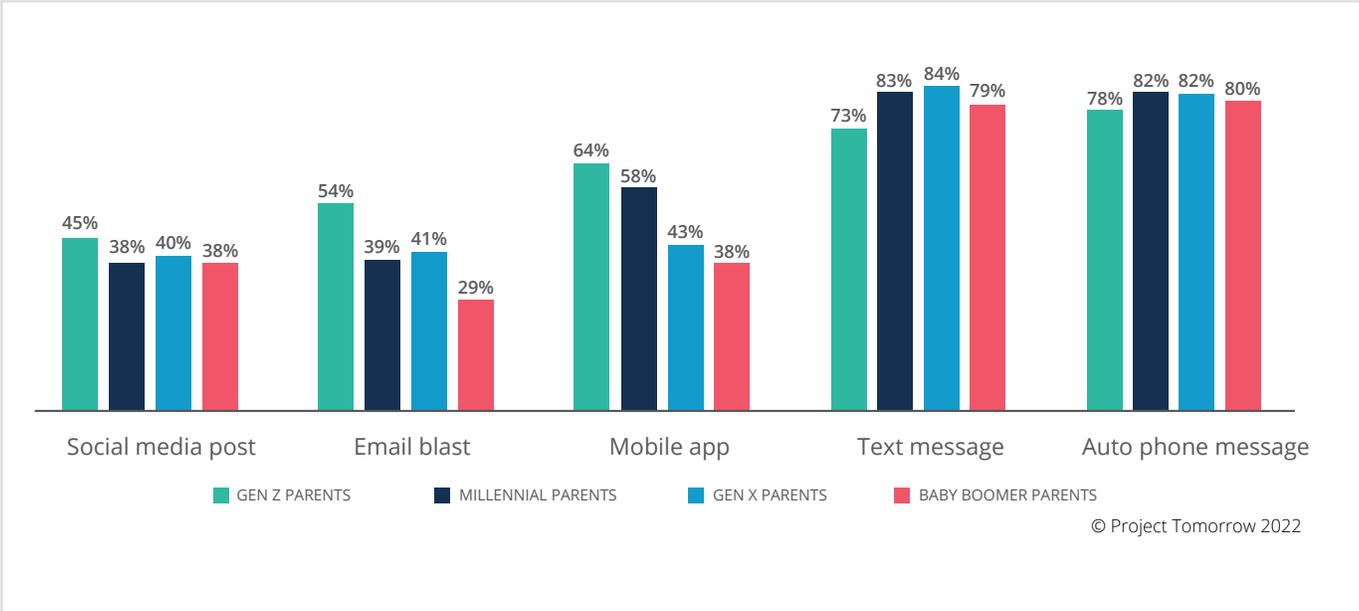
PREFERENCES FOR DISTRICT-TO-HOME COMMUNICATIONS

MESSAGE TYPE: CRISIS-ALERT COMMUNICATION

Expanding beyond automated phone messages to alert parents to school crises, many districts have adopted mobile apps and social media as vehicles for those alerts. But what are parents' preferences for those types of communication?

- Across all generations, parents favor an auto phone message to receive crisis alerts from their child's school district. Text messages are also highly popular across all generations reflecting the ubiquity of smartphones.
- Nearly twice as many Gen Z parents want alerts sent through the district mobile app compared to Boomer parents or grandparents. 51% of Gen Z parents also say that a messaging app with conversation capabilities would be an effective tool for crisis messages.

 Crisis communications need to reach everyone fast, and be consistent across all channels. Make sure your message is the same on your website, social media, phone call, email message, and mobile app notifications to avoid confusion.



ASK YOURSELF THIS QUESTION:

Are we unintentionally disenfranchising certain parents, especially grandparents or older education guardians, with our communication choices for crisis and alert type messages?

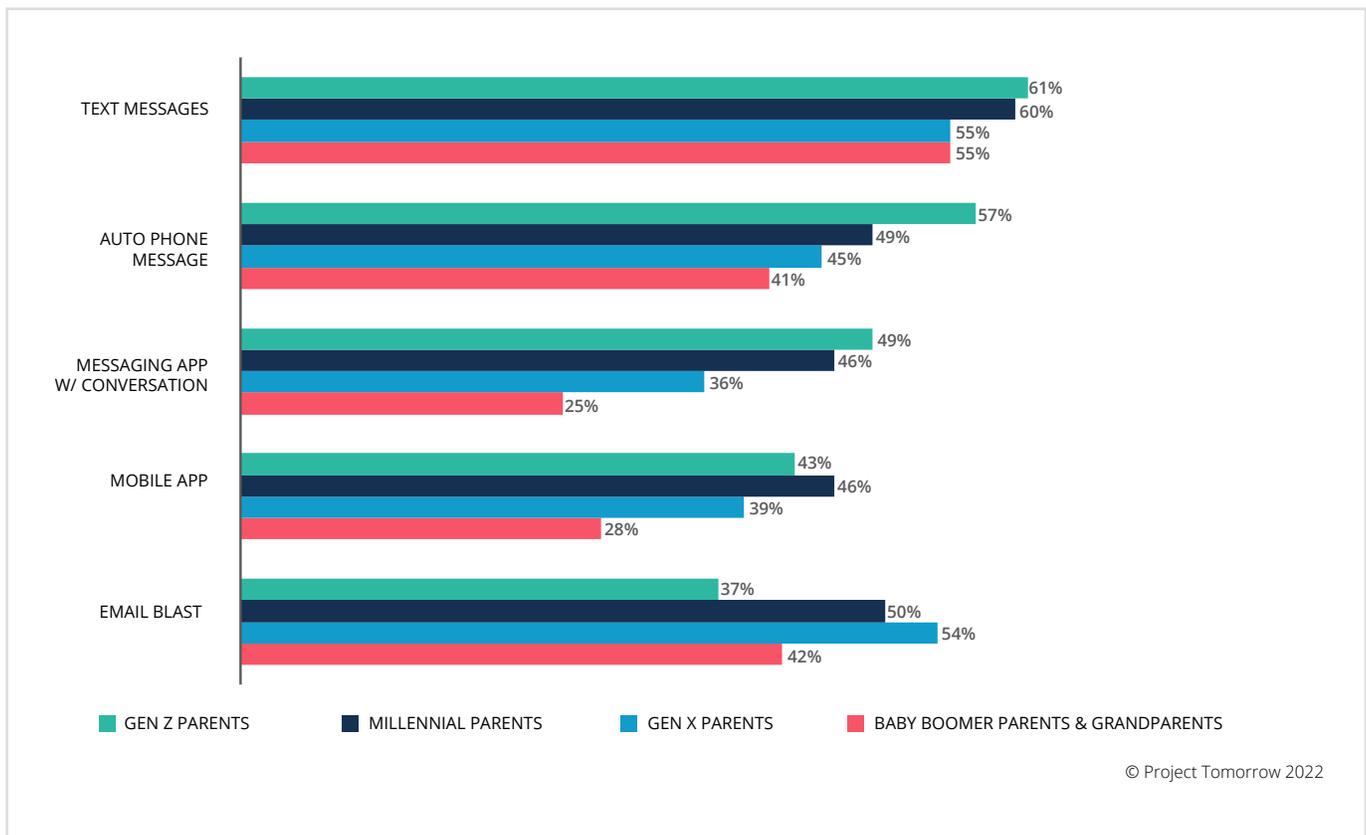
PREFERENCES FOR DISTRICT-TO-HOME COMMUNICATIONS

MESSAGE TYPE: HEALTH ALERTS

As a result of the pandemic, there now exists a special type of alert message which specifically is meant to share health information such as when there is an outbreak of transmittal disease within the school population. Parents' preferences for how to learn about these health situations continues to have some generational variances as was seen with the general crisis messaging.



COVID-19 has dominated the health conversation for K-12 schools over the last few years, but there are other health concerns facing schools too. Flu outbreaks, contaminated water, and high or low temperatures, are among the health issues educators commonly communicate about.



While a text message alert is the favorite for all four generations of parents, an email blast is just as valuable for the Gen X parents. As was demonstrated with general crisis messages, the Gen Z parents are more likely to value a messaging app as part of district communication.



ASK YOURSELF THIS QUESTION:
To effectively manage any kind of crisis, it is paramount that your messaging tools are efficient and easy for both you and your parent community to use. How well prepared are you today to use multiple types of digital tools to ensure that you reach a wide audience with your crisis and health alerts?

Role of Social Media Platforms in District Communication and Engagement Strategies



Is social media an effective tool for parent engagement? What social media tools are most effective for school or district communications with different generations of parents?

ANSWER: Overall, today's parents are using more social media tools in their personal lives compared to four years ago. However, understanding how different generations of parents are using social media in their personal lives is the key to understanding the potential efficacy of school district usage for communication and engagement.

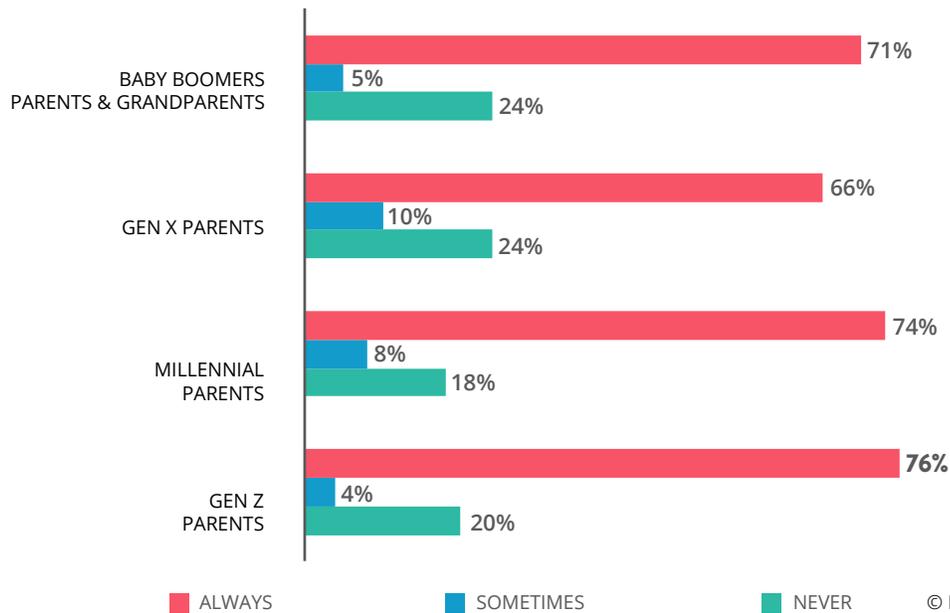


Think about your own social media consumption and remember that parents and students are likely using the same tools you regularly use - both for entertainment and as a source of information.



PARENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA TOOL USAGE:

Frequency of Use of Facebook in their Personal Lives



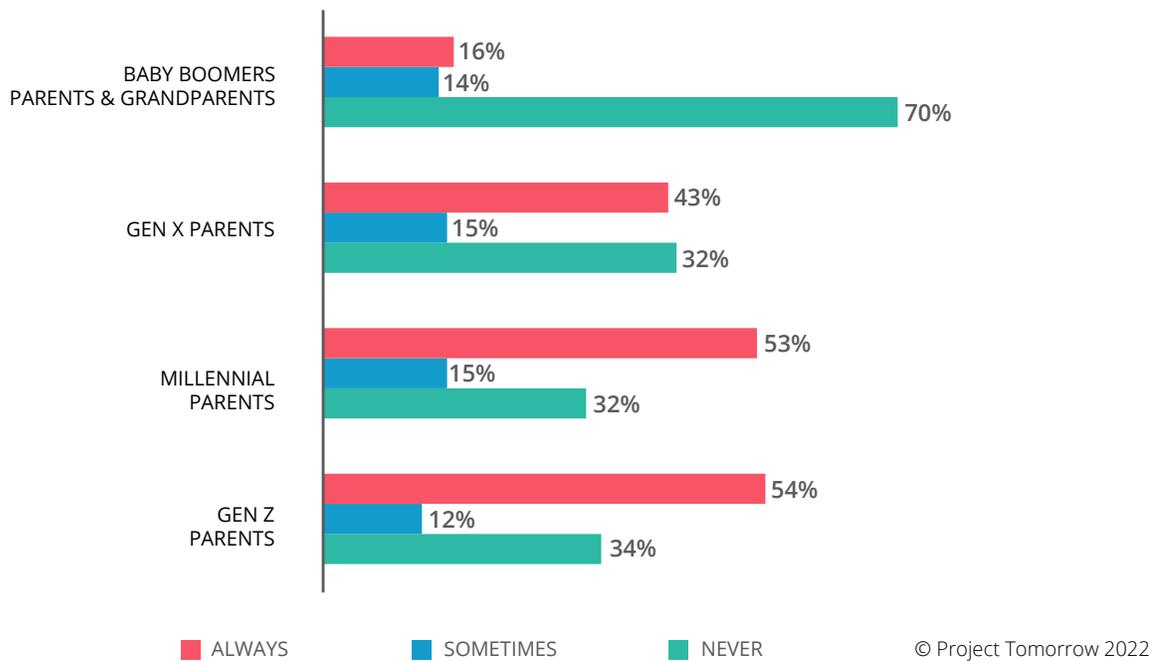
Despite a high percentage of parents who use Facebook in their personal lives, on **average 22% of parents** (or one-fifth of your parent community) say they never use **Facebook**.

22%



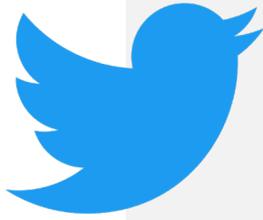
PARENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA TOOL USAGE:

Frequency of Use of Instagram in their Personal Lives



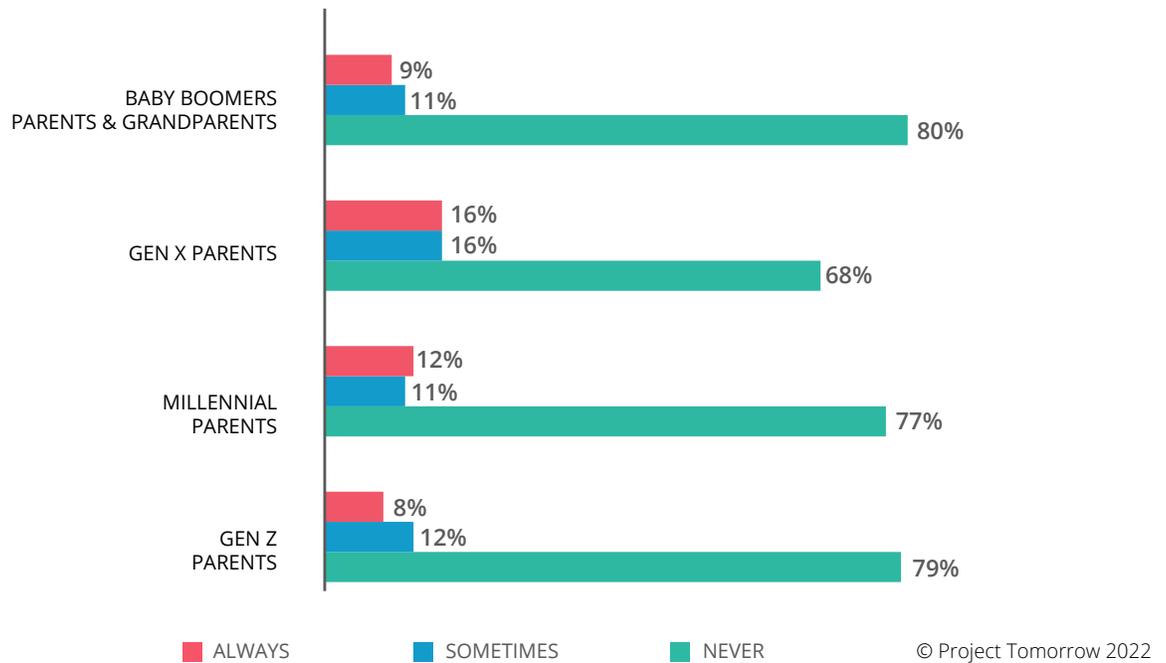
A majority of your **GEN Z** and **MILLENNIAL** parents say they use Instagram always or often in their personal lives. However, for **70%** of your **BABY BOOMERS** parents or grandparents, “Insta” is just not part of their day-to-day lives.

70%



PARENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA TOOL USAGE:

Frequency of Use of Twitter in their Personal Lives



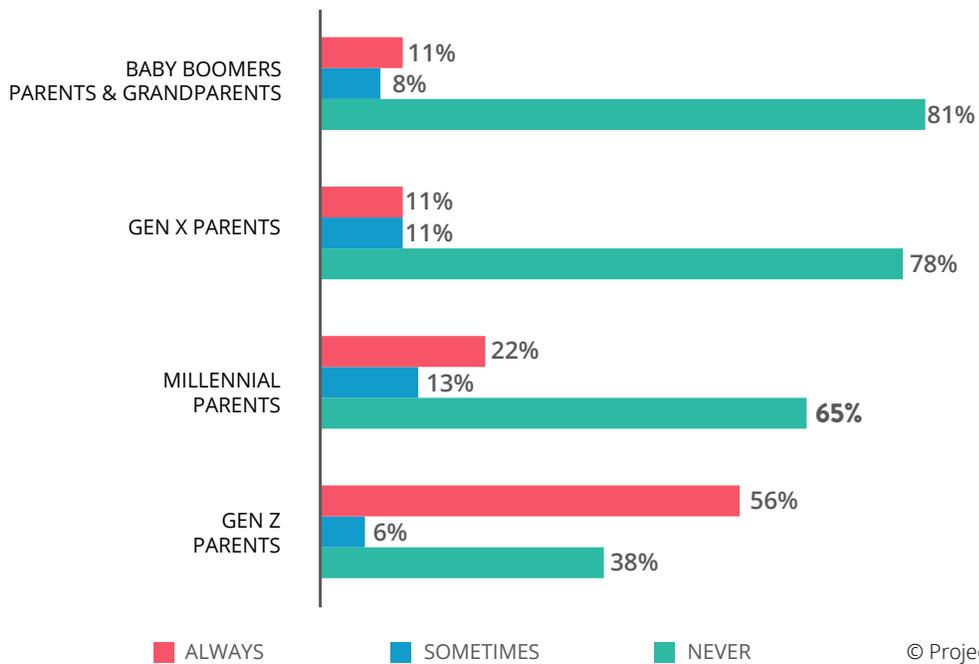
Despite high levels of media attention on Twitter usage and followers, only 11% of all parents, across the four generations in our schools currently, say they tweet or follow Twitter posts always or often. Even among the youngest parents, 79% of **GEN Z** parents say they never are on Twitter.

79%



PARENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA TOOL USAGE:

Frequency of Use of TikTok in their Personal Lives

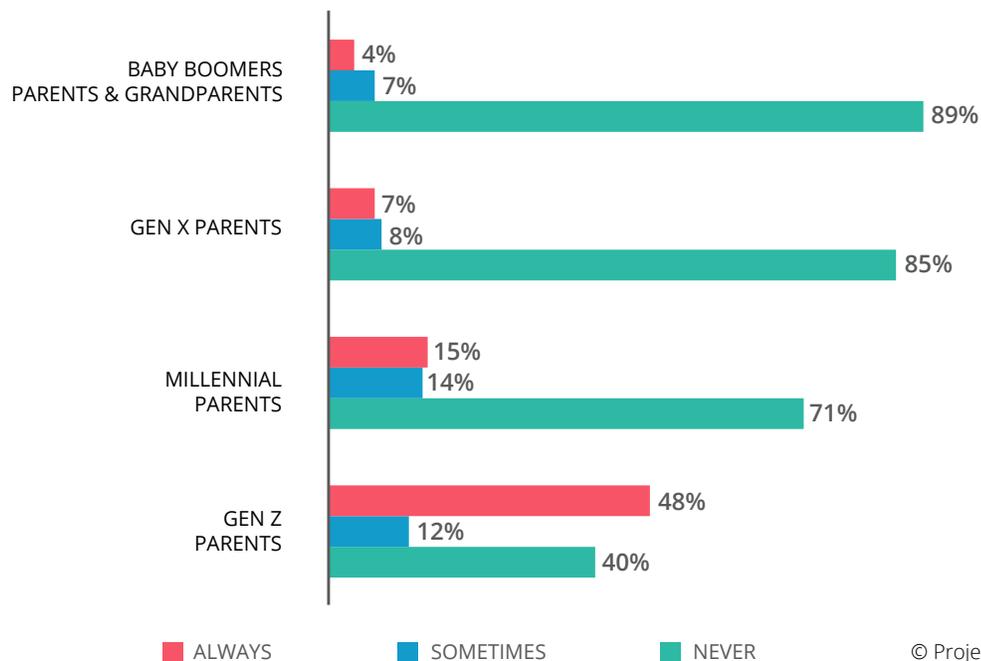


With both **TikTok** and **Snapchat** usage, the generational divide on social media usage is very apparent. While **56%** of **GEN Z** parents say they use TikTok always or often, only **22%** of **MILLENNIAL** parents and half as many **GEN X** and **BABY BOOMERS** parents (**11%**) are on **TikTok**.



PARENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA TOOL USAGE:

Frequency of Use of Snapchat in their Personal Lives

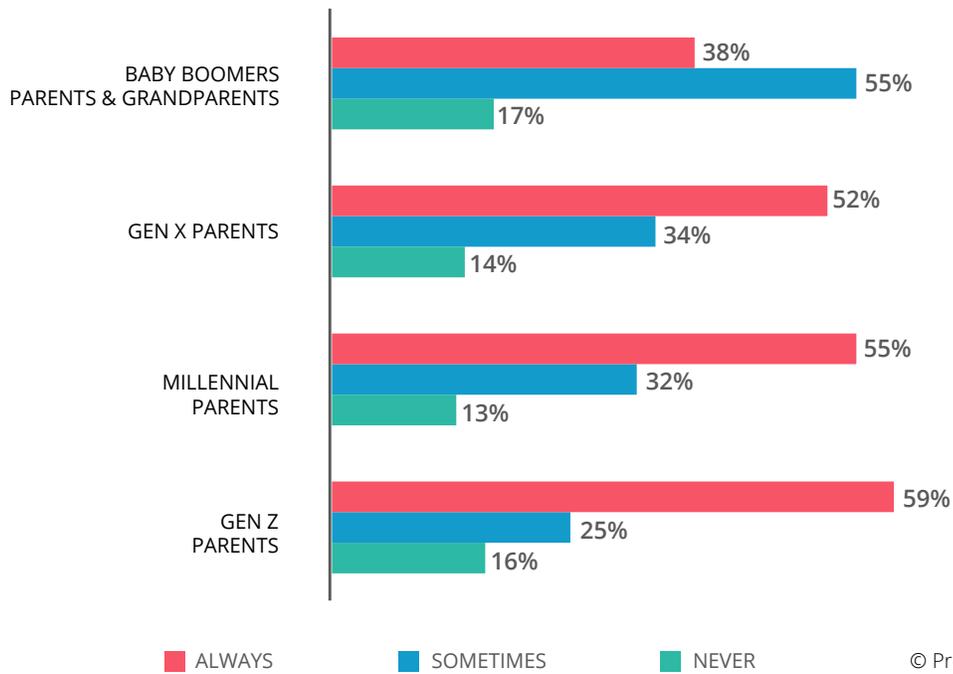


The numbers of **MILLENNIAL**, **GEN X** and **BABY BOOMERS** parents who say that they are never on Snapchat is demonstrative of how this social media platform has not made in-roads with these age groups. And as compared to TikTok, a similar percentage of **GEN Z** parents are high Snapchat users (**40%**) as those that are never on Snapchat (**48%**).



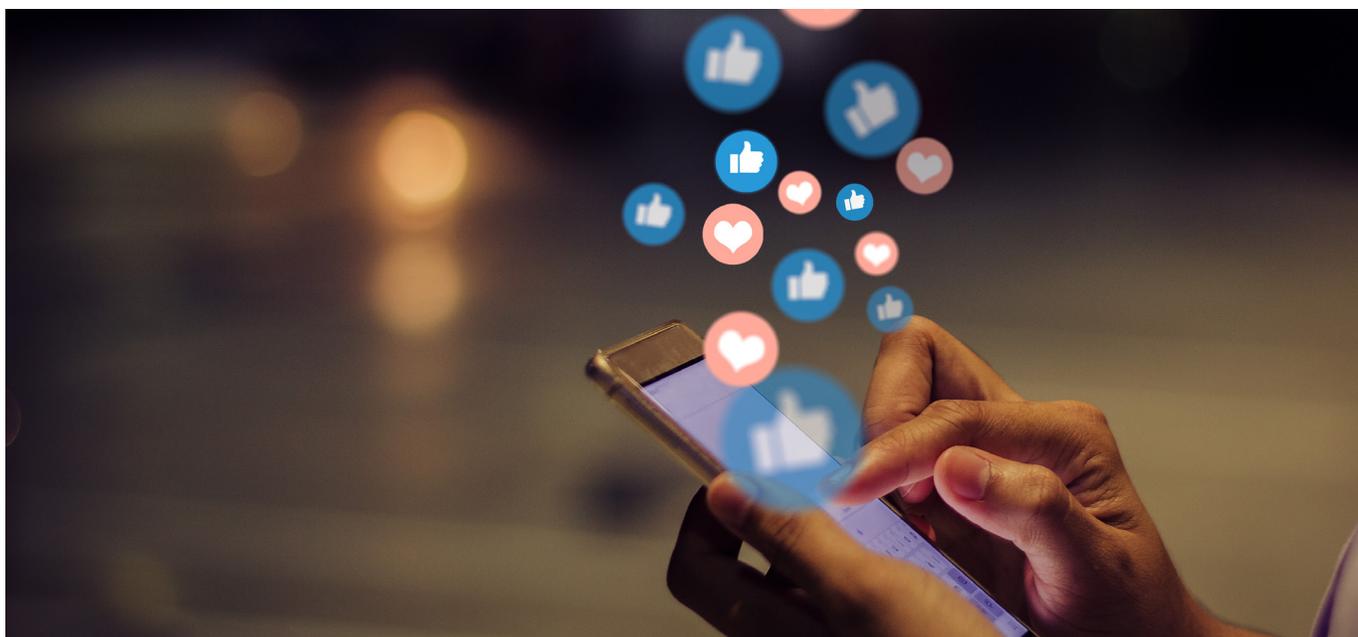
PARENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA TOOL USAGE:

Frequency of Use of YouTube in their Personal Lives



YouTube appears to have a more universal appeal across the generations of parents. A majority of **GEN Z** parents, **MILLENNIAL** parents and **GEN X** parents say they use YouTube always or often; slightly more than one-third of Baby Boomer parents say the same. Across all four generations **only 15% of parents report never using YouTube.**

15%



Role of Social Media Platforms in District Communication and Engagement Strategies



ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS:

- *What is driving our usage of various social media platforms with parents? Are we choosing certain tools for parent communication because we like the efficiency of the message dissemination or because we know that the tools we choose are the best ones for reaching the widest audience?*
- *And conversely, do we shy away from some social media platforms because of our own unfamiliarity with those tools or maybe, because of negative media attention on those channels? How can we better leverage social media tools that some of our parents, particularly Gen Z parents, are using in their personal lives as effective vehicles for engaging those younger parents in our school community?*
- *How can we embrace a new communications culture that understands that one size doesn't fit all, especially relative to social media platforms and parents? And how can we ensure that this new culture is change-ready and adaptable to whatever new social media platforms emerge over the next few years?*

Text, Twitter, Email, Call: Parents' Preferences for Communication and Engagement in 2022

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS RESEARCH TO SHARE WITH COLLEAGUES AND PEERS:

There are four generations of parents with children in our schools today. Most people probably realize that Millennials and Gen X parents have school-aged children. The Gen Z generation of parents are also showing up in our schools now with children in elementary school. And Baby Boomer parents and increasingly grandparents are part of the school community as well.

As a result of the pandemic and remote learning, parents are now accustomed to a high degree of transparency from their child's school. They want more communication now from their child's teacher and school district, but they want that information highly personalized to their needs.

The challenge for many district communication teams is that "one size doesn't fit all" when we think about the use of online and digital tools across the four generations of parents.

In terms of teacher-to-home communications, the Gen Z parents want more text messaging and mobile app communications than their older peers.

For district communications, whether that is general information or crisis alerts and updates, the preferences of parents depend upon the message, the tool, and their overall familiarity and comfort with using technology. For example, younger parents who are fluent with mobile apps see the value in that tool usage for crisis communication. Baby Boomer parents and grandparents who may lack that familiarity are more comfortable with a traditional alert tool like an auto phone message.

Likewise, as more and more districts adopt the use of various social media platforms to disseminate information and support positive branding, it is important to not make assumptions about parents' access to different platforms. Your district Instagram account may be viewed frequently by Gen Z and Millennial parents, but that is a foreign land for your Baby Boomer parents and grandparents.

ABOUT THIS E-BOOK

Since 2007, Blackboard K-12 (now part of Finalsite) and Project Tomorrow have collaborated annually on the Speak Up Research Project to infuse the voices and views of K-12 education stakeholders including students, parents, teachers and administrators into local, state and national discussions and decisions on education.

As part of this effort during the 2021-22 school year, Project Tomorrow polled nearly 5,000 parents of school-aged children from across the country about their personal preferences for teacher, school and district communication. The resulting data was analyzed using a variety of different lens to reveal both common aspirations as well as important differences in those preferences. A key factor in the analysis was understanding how a parent's age or generation influenced their preferences for different communication modalities or digital engagement tools.

Our goal with this new e-book is to help district leaders appreciate the importance of personalizing the messaging within their school community, and to understand how to use emerging digital tools effectively to address the needs of an increasingly diverse parent audience within that community.

Let's keep this conversation going! Share with us how you are using the research findings and insights in this e-book about parent preferences to transform your communication and engagement plans.

Engage with us on

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#SpeakUpEd to join the conversation

About Project Tomorrow

Project Tomorrow's nonprofit mission is to support the effective implementation of research-based learning experiences for students in K-12 schools. Project Tomorrow is particularly interested in the role of digital tools, content and resources in supporting students' development of college and career ready skills. The organization's landmark research is the Speak Up Research Project which annually polls K-12 students, parents, educators and community members about the impact of technology resources on learning experiences both in school and out of school, and represents the largest collection of authentic, unfiltered stakeholder voice on digital learning. Since 2003, over 6.2 million K-12 students, parents, teachers, librarians, principals, technology leaders, district administrators and members of the community have shared their views and ideas through the Speak Up Project. Learn more at www.tomorrow.org.



ABOUT FINALSITE

Finalsite is the preferred website, communications, and marketing platform of more than 7,000 schools and districts in 115 countries worldwide. The company's people, products and services transform how schools connect and engage with their community, recruit students and staff, and fundraise; while managing the complex requirements around data privacy, accessibility, hosting and security.

Finalsite products and services include award-winning website designs, a robust content management system, mass notifications system, innovative inbound marketing tools, data integration, training, support and marketing consulting.

Finalsite is headquartered in Glastonbury, Conn. with employees based internationally across the U.S., Canada, Europe, Asia and South America.

For more information, please visit www.finalsite.com.



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