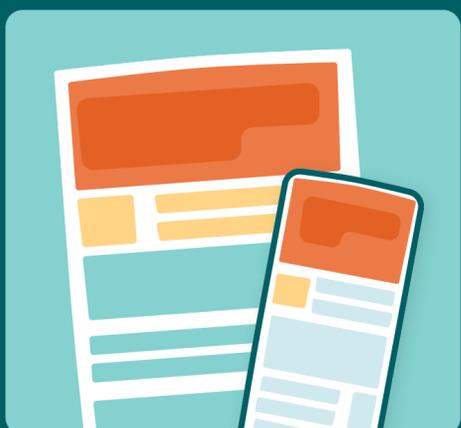
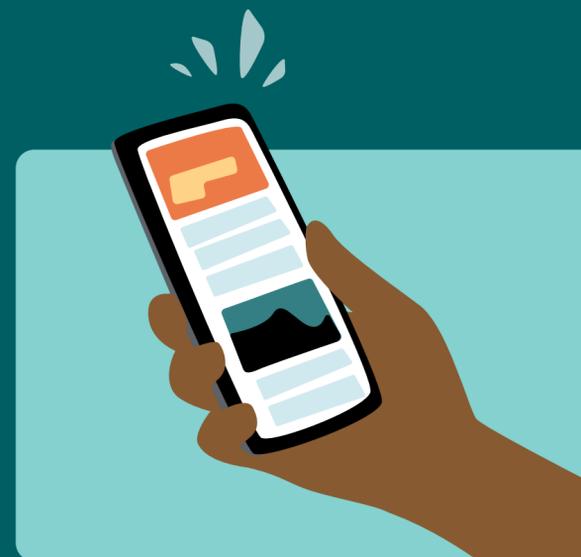


REPORT

The State of School Communication: Midyear Trends That Matter





School communication is evolving fast. In 2026, four trends are reshaping how districts connect with families and students:

- 1 The growing prominence of brand as competitive infrastructure
- 2 The rapid adoption of bell-to-bell cell phone bans
- 3 The shift toward student-centered communication in secondary schools
- 4 The consolidation of communication tools

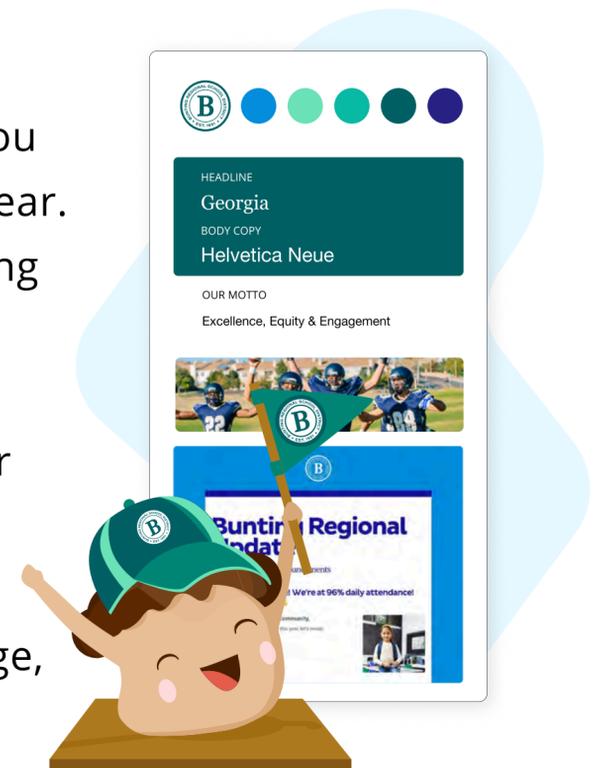
This report identifies what's changing, why it matters, and what district communication leaders should do about it.

Trend 1: Brand becomes infrastructure

School districts now compete for enrollment in ways they never have before. Open enrollment, charter schools, and demographic shifts mean families actively choose where to send their kids. In this environment, school brand matters.

Not brand in a marketing sense. Brand as the cohesive visual and verbal identity that signals to families: we're organized, we care, you can trust us. Recent research on education branding makes this clear. As one education leader noted, "A school must represent something meaningful in people's minds." That "something" is your brand.

Your brand is also your reputation. It's what people say about your district when you're not in the room. Public schools face the same challenge as higher ed: families form impressions from every interaction, whether it's a newsletter, a website visit, a text message, or a conversation with a neighbor.



Consistent, professional communication builds trust. Sharing achievements and good news shapes perception. Responding to concerns manages reputation. When all of this happens with visual consistency, families see a district that has its act together.

The good news: you don't need a marketing department to build a strong district brand. You need systems that make consistency easy: Brand kits, templates, and platforms that let every school communicate professionally. And you need intentional strategies to tell your district's story, so that everyone is aligned.

What this means:

- Invest in brand guidelines and communication templates that work district-wide
- Train staff on why visual consistency matters for trust and enrollment
- Use tools that make professional design accessible to non-designers
- Ensure every school can produce on-brand newsletters, emails, and websites
- Share good news from the district in publicly available formats, like newsletters that highlight school achievements, student success stories, and program highlights



Trend 2: Cell phone bans accelerate nationwide

Twenty-six states now have laws or policies requiring school boards ban or limit cell phone use in K-12 classrooms. Twenty-two of those laws were enacted in 2025 alone. New York became the largest state to require statewide bell-to-bell restrictions on smartphones in schools, effective for the 2025-2026 school year. California's Phone-Free Schools Act takes effect July 2026. New Jersey, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and others are following suit.

The intent is clear: reduce distraction, improve focus, support student mental health. What you need to prepare for: **students can no longer be the information bridge between school and home.**

This shift is particularly critical for multilingual families. If a student has been translating information or serving as the communication link, device restrictions cut that pathway entirely.



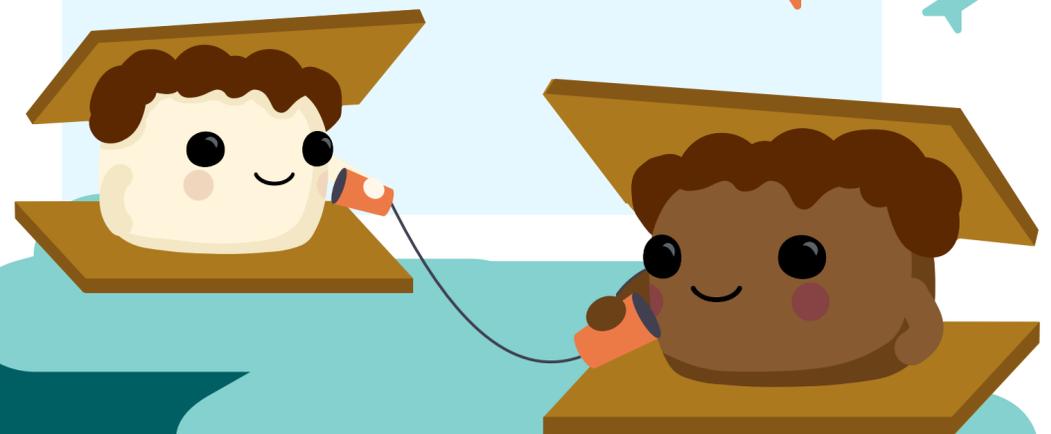
For years, many families relied on their kids to relay information. A student checks the school website during lunch, reads a reminder about picture day, tells their parent. Bell-to-bell bans eliminate all of that. Students can't check websites, can't read texts from parents, can't relay information they saw on social media. If schools want families to have information, it has to come through official channels that reach parents directly.

This shift is particularly critical for multilingual families. If a student has been translating information or serving as the communication link, device restrictions cut that pathway entirely. Schools must reach families in their home languages through text messages, emails, mobile-optimized websites, and translatable newsletters.

The bottom line: when students can't be the middleman, school communication infrastructure becomes the only reliable way to keep families informed.



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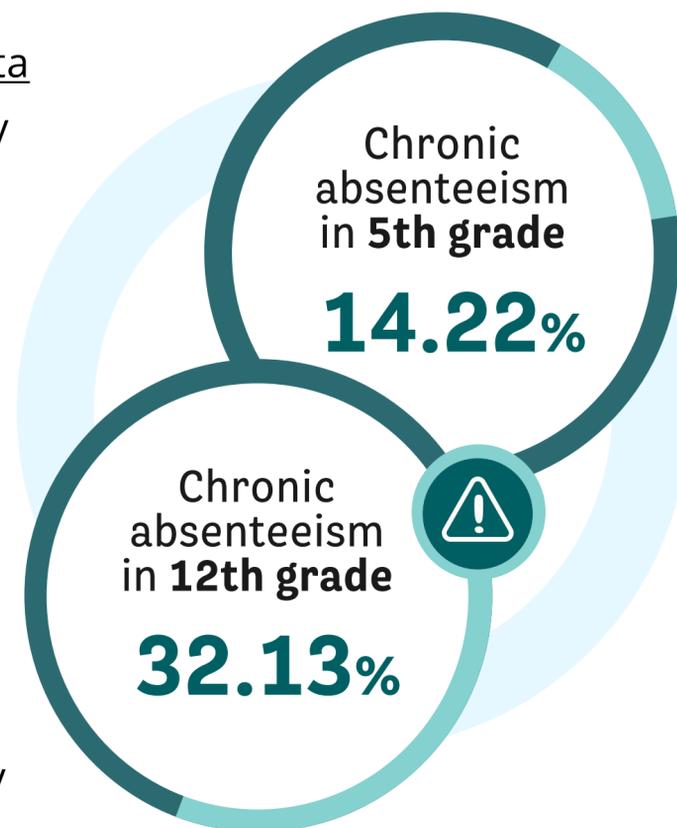
What this means:

- Reach families directly through channels they actually use (text and email, not just backpack flyers)
- Make multilingual access automatic, not opt-in
- Create a single, consistent place families know to check for official school information
- Train all staff to use the same platform so information isn't scattered across multiple tools
- Test your systems. Can you reliably get time-sensitive information to every family?

Trend 3: Secondary engagement collapses—and communication strategies haven't adapted

Family engagement doesn't slow down after elementary school. It collapses. SchoolStatus SMS data from over 3 million text messages shows parent reply rates to school communications drop significantly starting in 6th grade. Chronic absenteeism tells the same story: rates more than double from 5th grade (14.22%) to 12th grade (32.13%).

Yet most districts are reducing personalized communication for older students rather than increasing it. Elementary families get weekly classroom newsletters, photos from field trips, and regular updates. Middle and high school families may only get monthly school calendars and report cards.



This misses a fundamental truth: students entering adolescence need more connection to school, not less. They just need it delivered differently.



What doesn't work:

- Cutesy classroom newsletters—feel infantilizing to teens
- Parent-only communication excludes the primary stakeholders—students
- Heavy emphasis on behavior management—reinforces compliance over community
- Adult voices telling student stories—lacks authenticity

What does work:



Direct communication with students, not just about them. We worked with the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) to survey districts and found that while 97% of participating districts regularly communicate with families about student progress, only 3% always inform students when communications go home about them. That gap matters.

Schools that shift to direct student communication see results. That same NSPRA survey showed 59% of communication professionals report that student storytelling increases school connectedness. Another 56% see improved attendance when students help create school communications. And 45% report stronger family engagement when students are involved in school communications.

The best unexpected benefit is that parents reported feeling more informed because their teenagers actually talk about what's happening at school.

What this means:

- Communicate directly with students, not just their families
- Create student-specific sections in newsletters (peer spotlights, opportunities, practical info teens actually need)
- Invite students to co-create content through journalism programs, social media ambassadors, guest-edited newsletters
- Ask students about their communication preferences (currently only 8% of districts do this)
- Design everything mobile-first—and make it shareable



Trend 4: Families want fewer tools, better access

Another SchoolStatus report shows more than half of families use three or more school communication tools for one child. The majority of families (62%) say using a single tool would make school-home communication easier. One parent captured the frustration: "**A single, easy-to-use platform for communication would simplify things. We don't want to be overwhelmed with too many different channels.**" Text messages continue to outperform email and app messaging with 70% of families preferring text messages as the main form of communication. Response data confirms this: 73% of families reply to school texts, with an average response time of just 11 minutes.

Traditional methods like paper flyers and printed newsletters lag far behind. Mobile-first design is also an accessibility requirement, not just a convenience.



What this means:

- Centralize communications and consolidate to one primary platform for all school-home communication
- Prioritize text and email (the channels families actually prefer)
- Design everything mobile-first to be both accessible and convenient
- Track engagement metrics to see what's actually working
- Stop adding tools—start streamlining

What to do next

These four trends converge around a single insight: communication is infrastructure. It's about building systems that ensure every family can access information, every student feels connected, and every school presents itself consistently.

Start here:



Strengthen your brand

Create templates and guidelines that make visual consistency easy across every school in your district.



Prepare for cell phone bans

Audit your communication channels. Make sure families and students know where to find official information when devices aren't accessible.



Rethink secondary communication

Talk directly to students. Invite them to co-create content. Ask what they need. Design for the platforms they actually use.



Streamline your tools

Pick one school communications platform. Train everyone to use it consistently. Make sure it's mobile-first and multilingual by default.

The families you serve are waiting for communication that works. The tools exist to make it happen.

Smore helps districts create beautiful, on-brand newsletters that bring communities together. Centralize and streamline communication with multilingual access, team collaboration, and accessible, mobile-first design to meet every family's needs.

When integrated with SchoolStatus Connect, you get a complete communication ecosystem: text messaging that reaches families instantly, student data insights for more personalized outreach, the ability to send messages across multiple channels (including Smore newsletters!) based on family preferences, and easy-to-use dashboards to manage everything.

Let's build the communication infrastructure your district deserves!

[Learn more about Smore](#)

[Learn more about SchoolStatus Connect](#)

