

Programs to Engage Parents and Other Family Members

SNAPSHOT

Program:

Infinite Campus Parent Portal, Ninth Grade Outreach Program

District:

Washoe County School District

Location:

Reno, Nev.

Grades: PreK-12 with focus on 9th grade

Enrollment: 62,431 students, including 18,854 in high school

Free/reduced-price lunch: 41%

ELL: 18%

Helping families use data to support high school students

*Infinite Campus Parent Portal,
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Monitoring a child's grades, homework completion, and attendance is often one of the best things parents can do to guide a child's progress in middle and high school. In 2008, Washoe County School District (WCSD) introduced online access for parents to view their child's attendance and achievement data, but soon the district realized that parents did not have equitable access to the information. For many families, especially those with limited English or limited formal education, lack of Internet access at home and lack of computer literacy skills were formidable barriers.

During the 2009-2010 school year, district staff for family engagement began checking usage data to identify families that had not accessed the online tool. Among students who receive free or reduced lunch, 72 percent did not have an active parent account; among ELL students, 74 percent did not have an active parent account. Because ninth grade is a critical year for students, family engagement staff at the school and district levels developed a program to reach families with no activated account and support them with training and access to the online tool.

Glenn Waddell, a math teacher at North Valleys High School in Reno, says that the Infinite Campus (IC) Parent Portal is removing barriers and making it easy for parents to see what is occurring in the classroom. "The instantaneous nature of IC creates many more opportunities for parents to engage their learner and the teacher in the course material and assignments," he says. "Once parents' and teachers' goals are aligned in pushing learner achievement, the learner can't help but be more engaged."

Now, families report they can have well-informed conversations with their children about how they are doing in school and can collaborate with teachers to help students make up missed assignments. Ana Barajas, mother of a ninth grader, said, "The parent portal helped me to check his grades and open the communication between his teachers and me. It really helped me to be part of his education. I'm trying to show him that I care about his education." Only

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about 45 percent of Hispanic students in Washoe County graduate from high school with their cohort.

How the program works

The program is staffed by three members of the district's Family School Partnership Office, as well as staff from the state's Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC) and school-based parent involvement facilitators at the 12 comprehensive high schools. Using the district's Risk Index for students, families of all ninth-grade students with a score above three (on a one-to-10 scale) were targeted. The parent involvement facilitators, who are AmeriCorps volunteers, reach out to the families on the list for their high school and provide support and training on how to use the online tool.

The portal has real-time information for each student, with red flags identifying problem areas. The information includes:

- ▶ Attendance for each class, including excused and unexcused absences and tardiness
- ▶ Grades for assignments, quizzes, and tests in each class
- ▶ Upcoming assignments for each class.

Workshops for parents explain what information is available and how to access and use it. The workshops are kept small, so that facilitators and district staff can have individual conversations with parents and develop an action plan for each student. For example, a student whose attendance falls below 90 percent in any class will not receive credit for that class. Parents learn how to track attendance and press their children to attend class and earn credit. They also learn how to obtain tutoring and other academic support to help their child make up assignments.

The district has created resources that schools can use

to inform parents about the Infinite Campus Parent Portal. A training toolkit, support videos, and kiosk materials are available in English and Spanish. District bond funding also provided the resources to establish a kiosk at each of the district's 94 schools and at local libraries and community centers.

Evidence of effectiveness

The district is still studying the impact of the program. The 2010-2011 school year was the first that WCSD could correlate parent portal activation and student achievement data. This first year, the focus has been to reach out and support the families of the district's 1,322 ninth graders who were deemed "at risk" based on the district's Risk Index. Of these, 582 parents have activated their parent portal account, and 397 have logged in more than once. By the middle of the 2010-2011 school year, 601 students on the Risk Index list had earned three or more credits to be on track for graduation.

Exemplary practices

Providing support for parent-teacher collaboration:

Teachers can determine which parents in their classes do not have active parent portal accounts and contact parent involvement facilitators—many of whom are bilingual—to help families open their accounts. The parent involvement facilitators also encourage families to contact teachers and schedule conferences about how to help their students. Washoe County high schools offer parent-teacher conferences only upon request.

Targeting areas of specific need: The program is primarily targeted to ninth-grade students who are at risk. Using the parent portal, families can identify the classes in which their students are struggling and focus on helping to raise attendance and assignment completion rates. The trainings have led to conversations about attendance, unexcused absences, missing assignments, credits earned, and how these matters relate to high school graduation.

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Building community support and buy-in: The state's Parent Information and Resource Center at the Education Alliance helps to provide training to enable more parents to use the portal. The Boys & Girls Club and county libraries offer computer kiosks where parents can log in to check their child's progress. The district also has worked with Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Northern Nevada to provide mentors with access to the parent portal if the family has given permission. The mentors often serve as a bridge between school and family.

Aligning information with the teacher evaluation process: Washoe County has a federal grant to upgrade its teacher evaluation system. The new evaluation criteria include several items on family engagement: helping families to navigate the educational system; sharing information about the instructional program; helping families to support learning; sharing information about the instructional program; and understanding cultural differences. Helping families use the parent portal and participating in the district's Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project are among the criteria for showing evidence of effectiveness. After a positive home visit, family members often log in to the parent portal.

Outlook

During the 2010-2011 school year, the district transitioned from using Edline for middle and high schools to using the Infinite Campus Parent Portal for all 94 schools. The district is establishing baseline data on the number of students at each school who are associated with at least one active parent account. The district will be setting targets and asking each school to achieve growth in the number of active parent accounts during the 2011-2012 school year. District staff members look at usage data internally to determine growth, and they collect parent evaluations from workshops.

RENO, NEVADA

NEA Contact: Roberta E. Hantgan
Manager, NEA Public Engagement Project
(202) 822-7721; rhantgan@nea.org

Association perspective

The Washoe Education Association (WEA) is a key partner in the school district's family engagement efforts. In addition, WEA worked with the school district in establishing criteria for teacher-family engagement. WEA supports the Infinite Campus Parent Portal outreach initiative and is also a partner in the local adoption of the Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project model.

Dana Galvin, WEA president, offers a personal perspective as well: "My younger daughter is a senior who attends one of Washoe County's high schools. I have been using the Infinite Campus Parent Portal for over a year now. It is easy to navigate. I can leave and receive messages from her teachers, and it is updated frequently."

Local contact

D'Lisa Crain, administrator, Family School Partnerships
775-325-2000; dcrain@washoeschools.net

Related information

Report card: www.nevadareportcard.com/profile/pdf/09-10/16.E.pdf

Parent resources: www.washoe.k12.nv.us/parents/parent-involvement/school-resources

Harvard Family Research Project Issue Brief, "**Breaking New Ground: Data Systems Transform Family Engagement in Education**," January 2011, www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/breaking-new-ground-data-systems-transform-family-engagement-in-education2



1201 16 ST., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-3290 www.nea.org