

#PRoTips | 2023

What's New in ParentSquare?

A new feature in ParentSquare is the ability to reply to direct messages via email. Also, your incoming kindergarteners now appear in ParentSquare and elementary principals can select "Incoming" when communicating with families.

ParentSquare Best Practices

Throughout the year, we will be sharing best practices for using ParentSquare via the Weekly Whistle. You can view the comprehensive list via the Public Relations Portal.

Set a reminder on your calendar to nudge parents and staff to download the ParentSquare app so they can receive push notifications from you, set their message preferences and select their delivery language. If they don't, they'll still get notifications, but with less options in how they receive them.

ParentSquare Templates

To brand your communication to families, the PR Department loaded a wide array of templates into the newsletter section of ParentSquare for you to customize, such as fire drills, the addition of a classroom, bed bugs, and many more. Follow these easy steps to view the templates:

- Log into ParentSquare
- Click Add-ons in the top, black menu bar on the left-hand side
- Click Newsletter/Post Templates from the left side menu bar

Note that all of these letter templates are just that – templates. Each has details that will need to be customized for your community, including uploading your school logo, before it is shared. ParentSquare is working on allowing school districts to customize the Smart Alerts messages that go out so in the meantime, please brand your non-urgent messages in the newsletter/post section until that has update has been made.

Updating Your Website

Try to carve out 15 minutes each week to do a quick scan of the home page of your schools' website and make sure that the information is current and relevant. Are your announcements updated? Are there any photographs that need swapped out? Keeping your website current will not only make your community happy, but it can help attract individuals who are looking for job opportunities at your school and are doing research on your campus.

Communication Frequency

Keep in mind that you are not the only individual a parent is receiving communication from in a day; try to consolidate your messages. If you can, instead creating a new post for every announcement group them together into a newsletter. Additionally, work with your leadership team to coordinate what you are communicating with families.

Consistency is key, recipients are far more likely to read your content if they know when to expect it. Let your audience know when to expect communication and keep to that expectation throughout the year.

Who Should Use ParentSquare?

Only administrators, select office staff, classroom teachers and coaches should be using ParentSquare to communicate with families and students. We are considering adding other staff members at a later date, however, we are still in the

process of training these select employees at all school sites and want to ensure a smooth rollout across the district for the 2022-23 school year.

As a reminder, if you have not signed up to roll ParentSquare out to your teachers, you can do so via this spreadsheet.

Update Your Website

As we head into winter break, take time to connect with your site webmaster to update your website. In the coming weeks, potential families and employees are beginning to look more critically into their options for next school year; data shows that many people use the school website to inform their decision-making process. This is why it is so important that it is up-to-date and accurately communicates what makes your school unique.

How can you tell your website needs updating? Ask yourself the following questions!

Connect with Your Site Webmaster

Early next week, Jacob Stanek will be sharing draft posts for winter break to ensure your social media stays up to date. Set up a time with your site webmaster to develop a plan for social media over winter break. This is also a great opportunity to do a quick audit of your social media and website.

Frequency in Communication

When communicating with external audiences, sometimes it's not always what we say that catches people's attention – but how frequently we say it. We always encourage employees to share timely updates with others but over-communicating can result in people tuning out your messages. Keep communication succinct and consider combining like-items and sharing with others weekly if they are not tied to specific deadlines.

Staying Connected

Did you know that ParentSquare shows you which families you are reaching with your messaging? More importantly, it shares who we cannot connect with and who needs updated contact information. Fortunately, across Peoria Unified we are able to connect with 99 percent of our families! While that is certainly something to celebrate, we would love to see that number reach 100 percent. In a crisis, we definitely need to reach 100 percent of those impacted.

Did you also know that to get to 100 percent, most schools would need to reach out to less than 20 people? We encourage all schools to take time over the next week to reach out to the families that show they either have no contact information or are non-contactable.

Shout out to Apache, Copperwood, Heritage, Peoria Traditional, Vistancia and Zuni Hills for reaching 100 percent of their families!

Getting Organized

As we begin a new year, we challenge you to take some time and get organized for the semester ahead. Set up a meeting with your office staff and site-webmaster to review any special events or programs taking place this spring and create a plan for communicating them. Remember the Rule of Seven! On average, a person needs to see something seven times for it to stick. Make sure your plan includes updating our website, social media and ParentSquare!

New Year, New Jobs

As we head into recruiting season and college students are preparing to graduate, take time to market your school to potential employees. Over the next few weeks, try to answer the following questions:

What is it like to work at your school?

- What positions are you hiring for?

- Who are you looking to hire?
- Who are your all-start new employees that are in your sphere of influence?

As you are answering these questions, take time think about how you can communicate them. Recently, Desert Valley has been doing a stellar job of highlighting the employee experience on Facebook and is a great example for other campuses.

Fonts, They Matter

The font that you choose to use makes a big impact on how people interpret your message. Recently, the State Department even changed the type of font they use because, “Times New Roman, they are a changin’.”

One of the most important reasons to be selective when picking a font is accessibility. While certain fonts are hard for us to read, they are even more difficult for screen readers to understand. Try to avoid fonts that have too many additions such as certain script fonts.

As a reminder, the district style guide indicates that Calibri is the font that should be used in all communications.

Hand Gestures in Photos

Please be mindful of hand gestures that students are making in photographs. When individuals hold up their fingers, it can have multiple meanings, some with negative connotations associated with them and we do not want images of our students being misrepresented or taken out of context. We want to celebrate them and their achievements in the most professional way.

Comment vs. Reply in ParentSquare

When you share a post in ParentSquare and a parent comments underneath that post, please be sure to hit reply to respond to their statement (and not comment). What the parent shared under that post is only visible by you. If you hit the comment button, you are responding where everyone in the community can see, but it’s not directed at any one person, and may not make sense to the community who cannot see the original comment. If you hit reply, the parent who left the original statement will then get your response and will allow for a greater connection when you reach out to address their questions or concerns.

Why Pin a Post?

Whether on ParentSquare, Twitter or Instagram, pinning a post allows you to showcase what is most important to your viewers. A pinned post will be the first thing someone sees on your page, and it may impact how people view your school. Outside of major accomplishments, the pinned post should be timely information. For example, our district pins include the most recent edition of the Insider each week to increase readership.

In a recent audit, most schools were still promoting their letter grades from October. We encourage you to share something new or noteworthy that has occurred on your campus since that time. Take time this week to update your pinned posts on ParentSquare, Instagram and Twitter.

Updating Your Website

As we are working through the second quarter of the school year, be sure to take a moment to review your schools’ website and make sure the content on the home page is still timely and relevant. Work with your Site Webmaster to keep your website up-to-date and remind them that Jacob Stanek on the PR team is here to support them should they need assistance.

What Tool Should You Use?

Need to know which communication tool you should be using? Use ParentSquare to communicate to a large group (i.e. a class, a grade level, a team or a school); use ParentVUE (Synergy) to communicate to individual students about grades, attendance, etc

A Post Vs. A Smart Alert

When using ParentSquare, you have the option to send your parents, staff and students either a post or a Smart Alert.

Posts allow for two-way communication which is great for sharing upcoming events or highlighting achievements. This is also how you will send any parent or staff newsletters as this gives you the most flexibility to customize your messages. You can send this to users at their preferred time, send instantly or select the option to post to your wall without notifying users through a push notification. Most of your communication should be shared via a post vs. a Smart Alert. As teachers are communicating with students and families as well, try to condense your messages and not post too many times per week.

Smart Alerts are a one-way mass notification system to send out messages. Best if used for a text or phone call for more urgent messages, but can also be used sparingly for a simple (no graphics) email. Smart Alerts will override your recipient's notification settings and everyone will receive your message at once. Similarly, Smart Alerts will not be reflected in your school's feed the way that posts are.

How You Communicate Matters

When communicating to families, be sure to say your child instead of your student. When referring to the students on your campus, you should use the following terms: students, children or kids, not "kiddos." It is also important to note that when using the words children or kids, they should not be referred to as, "our kids." They are our students, and they are parents' children.

Frequency and Tone

Every conversation that anyone has about your school may impact your student enrollment rate and your staff retention rate. How soon you respond to a parent, the tone of your front office staff when communicating with families, how they're greeted when attending a school event – all of those are micro conversations that ultimately lead to the parent experience and whether they choose to stay with your school. We encourage you and your staff to hold mindful discussions during staff meetings or professional development about their involvement with parents so all of our audiences have the best possible experience in our schools.

Register for a PD Course!

On Sept. 14, the Comms team will be offering two PD courses to help all employees become better communicators. The two courses include:

Leveraging an Engaged Audience

The Comms Team will provide engagement tips for communicating with parents ahead of Parent Teacher Conferences, as well as ways to support communication throughout the school year.

Becoming a Brand Ambassador-Academic Achievement

Leave this course with a list of tactics that will help you celebrate academic milestones throughout the entire school year and ways in which we can share those successes with a wider audience. Additionally, attendees will be equipped with tools that allow them to become a brand ambassador. This is part one of a four-part series.

School Reputation Matters

As a reminder from Comm Camp, now is a great time to connect with those families in your sphere of influence (ex. your PTSO, Site Council or different booster groups) and ask them to consider leaving a positive review of your school on www.GreatSchools.org.

Throughout the school year, it is important for you to check your school's profile on Great Schools as you may want to follow up and address any negative reviews. Data shows that your school's online profile directly impacts student enrollment and recruiting new teachers.

If you need help improving your Great Schools rating, the PR Team will be hosting another PD Session later this semester!

Updating Your Website

Your school's website is often the first impression for future families have of your campus. It is also a recruitment tool for prospective employees to see the culture and climate on your campus. What is your website saying about you? Is your information up to date on the home page of your website? Does it have accurate information on the events you are holding? Does it feature any achievements or good stories about the students and staff at your school?

The communications team encourages you to work with your school's site webmaster this week to update your website's calendar, announcements and the pictures featured in the rotator. This work will be imperative as we approach enrollment season for families and hiring season for human resources.

Limiting the Use of School Terminology

When communicating with external audiences, remember to share information using words that all individuals can understand and avoid using educational-related acronyms or words and phrases. As employees, we use words in our everyday work setting that may not be easily known or understood by parents. Example: PLC's, etc.

Instead, use these opportunities to educate your audience on the importance of these terms. When reviewing your messages, take time to read it as a parent or community member would. What else do you need to share so they fully understand the program you are discussing?