

# CSBA Panel Handout: Improving Communication Using Technology

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## INTRODUCTION

In California, K-12 education has undergone \$12.3 billion in cuts and deferrals in the last four years. The National Education Association reports that California's per ADA funding levels has slipped from 27<sup>th</sup> in the nation to 37<sup>th</sup> in only five years. The Public Policy Institute of California reports that the State has the fewest number of teachers, administrators and support personnel per student of any state. The State economic forecasts do not show this trend abating before the end of the decade.

As school districts are primarily a people business, these cuts are significant since 85% of the typical general fund budget is spent on personnel. Many districts face the anomaly of adding students, serving a growing citizen population and downsizing the number of district employees to teach children, maintain the public trust and deliver promised services to stakeholders equitably. Other districts face declining enrollment, attendance boundary changes, school closures and parent frustration. Budget cuts frequently hit hardest away from the classroom and directly impact the delivery of non-classroom services. Parcel, tax and bond elections are increasingly necessary and increase the burden on community outreach to non-parent voters.

**Yet despite these cuts State and Federal (Title 1, Title 3 and No Child Left Behind) categorical programs mandate greater parent outreach, feedback and accountability. The recent Williams case and S.B. 550, impose a new set of outreach/ accountability goals and mandate that districts both provide complaint forms and complaint channels if parents believe a school district offers inferior textbooks or classroom facilities, as well as file quarterly reports to the county superintendent reflecting S.B. 550 compliance.**

Effective communication and accountability are critical goals of Pleasanton USD's mission. As the District's Strategic Plan states: "We believe that the District must address the needs of each student as an individual while also developing strong partnerships with families, businesses, and the community at-large. The District will act upon principles that timely and effective communication is a necessity and that accountability is essential."

## THE CHALLENGE

How will districts provide basic parent and community outreach and service and comply with these mandates? How can a district streamline internal communications to reduce operational costs and increase staff efficiency?

Given the growing burden for school districts to:

- comply with outreach and accountability mandates of categorical funding programs;
- respond to more parents and community stakeholders faster, more reliably and on an evenhanded basis, using fewer resources;

- increase staff efficiency by automating routine tasks;
- gather and index information and parent/community feedback so decisions affecting the district and its constituents can be more data driven, equitable and responsive;
- strengthen performance accountability standards of both district employees to a chain of command and the district itself to its constituents;
- respond and track the growing numbers of email inquiries;
- provide proactive customer communication and document the “stakeholder-to-district” dialogue; and
- improve the Board/ Superintendent relationship by giving each a vehicle to exchange reliable information through customized reports,

a school district needs an efficient, cost-effective, comprehensive and seamless technology product to assist the Board and Superintendent manage the district.

We believe the effectiveness of school governance rests on both effective communication and record keeping skills and adherence to the essential values of impartiality, accountability, trust, equity, probity and service. Obtaining funding (bond and parcel tax elections), maintaining leadership stability and avoiding criticisms by misinformed constituents may depend on how well a Board can communicate with its constituents. A school district must communicate its mission, goals, values and standards, respond to requests for service and information from parents and the community, and demonstrate its performance in such regards in report oriented, reliable, hard data.

Providing accurate information will assist compliance with the requirements of No Child Left Behind (“NCLB”). NCLB empowers “parents right to know” and makes them the consumers of education provided by local schools. Districts with Title 1 schools are obligated to notify parents that they have the right to request and receive timely information on the professional qualifications of their children’s classroom teachers. Under Title 1’s Coordinated Compliance Review districts face a list of parent/district interaction topics.

The *Williams* case, as implemented by S.B. 550, establishes a compliant process and obligates districts to provide a summary, on a quarterly basis, of complaints and their resolutions, to the County Superintendent and the Board.

Further to a district’s obligation to community, passage of general obligation bonds and parcel taxes creates a new layer of accountability and need for enhanced responsiveness to both parent and taxpayer inquiry. Since 75% of the typical school district’s voters are non-parents, requests for parcel taxes or bond funding are presented to taxpayers who have no direct contact with the district. Districts must be proactive, in providing those voters with reasons to support requests for local funding.

To maintain the trust of the community in its ability to fulfill their mission, districts need to provide accurate and timely information both internally and externally. By doing so, a district can take control of its story and, in an organized way, control the dissemination of accurate, truthful information about its activities.

## THE SOLUTION

As districts train students on the capacity of technology to help them meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, districts should also use technology to meet their challenges, fulfill their goals and demonstrate their commitment to their values, particularly when doing so can save money and reduce staff time and expense.

A new technology has been developed by Comcate, Inc., called eFeedbackManager (“eFM”), to assist districts capture, route, track and manage all forms of parent and community requests, analyze trends, improve customer service and respond to each of the challenges identified above. eFM is an asp customer service tracking software currently being used by over 20 local governments in California.

Significantly, eFM is a web-based technology hosted by Comcate and does not require any district IT support or implementation. Because eFM is intuitive and easy-to-use, very little training is required, and, under Comcate’s supervision all district staff is typically trained in one day.

The hosting of the solution by Comcate is important because the effectiveness of this technology does not depend on the size of a district, how complete a district’s web site might be or how large is the district’s IT department. A district would have no technology support obligations for eFM. Comcate maintains and services the technology.

eFM also contains important safeguards to protect confidential information, and access restrictions to the data to preserve its integrity.

## THE PRODUCT

eFM is a web based software technology which provides school districts with a central customer/staff service center. eFM allows parents/community members, district employees and Board members to view comprehensively all externally and internally generated communications 24 hours per day 7 days per week at eFeedbackManager’s Customer Service Center.

eFeedbackManager can be accessed from any web browser. Since Comcate hosts eFeedbackManager there is no district IT implementation or expense.

### KEY eFM BENEFITS AND FEATURES

- **Service Request (Complaints, Concerns, Questions, Suggestions) Management:** Route, track and respond promptly to all forms of parent/community (customers) communications: email, phone, postal mail and walk-in inquiries. Staff has instant access to the history of all parent/community communications.
- **Document Compliance With Categorical Program Mandates, Williams Compliance:** eFM is designed to qualify for categorical funding due to its tools for Title 1, Title 3 and NCLB parent outreach, feedback and accountability. Further, eFM can provide complaint forms and complaint channels to facilitate compliance with the directives of the Williams case settlement, as well as produce quarterly reports to the county superintendent and Board to satisfy S.B. 550.

- **Improve Parent/Community Member Satisfaction:** Parent/community member satisfaction tends to improve as a result of prompt, knowledgeable responses to inquiries that include next steps and timelines. eFM facilitates rich, informed communication between a district and the parent/community resulting in superior, impartial service. eFM creates a historical record of questions and responses that can be referenced when similar questions are posed. Gone are the pink slips and post-its. eFM helps the organization be more accountable to the public in a more timely and professional manner.
- **Increase Staff Productivity:** Fewer staff can respond to a greater number of internal or external inquiries through a systematic and streamlined request response process. Cases are automatically routed to the assigned division allowing for more efficient follow-up. eFM has automatic reminders to let staff know about unresolved questions which reduces the number of parent/community/Board questions slipping through the cracks. Proper routing of questions to the “right person” eliminates guesswork on the part of the public as to who is the employee with the answer. eFM allows that questions posed to a district will be responded to in the same way and that information is equally and impartially accurate and accessible to all citizens, without prejudice and discrimination.
- **Proactive Communications; Assists District Control Information; Available for Bond Accountability Compliance:** eFM allows a district to take the initiative in community outreach. By using eFM a district can send targeted email to parents and the community on topics they have expressed interest in and on topics a district wants them to be better informed. A district can make eFM available to its Oversight Committee to fulfill their duty to “inform the public” that bond moneys are being spent appropriately by the district. Further, eFM allows the Board to educate the public about initiatives being undertaken by the district. The use of the “Send Mail” feature can also reduce the annual postage expense of the district.
- **Better Information Means Better Decisions:** eFM provides a birds-eye view of the daily flow of questions and answers being handled by a district’s central office and by local school sites. By tracking and analyzing the source of parent/community input, the Board will better understand recurring issues which may improve the allocation of district resources. eFM’s reporting and polling tool reveals the “pulse” of the parents/community on hot topics. Parent satisfaction surveys may provide valuable information to a district on the success of its outreach and service delivery efforts. Such information will help the Board in relevant public relations endeavors to respond to questions coming to the district.
- **Customized Reports:** eFM allows the preparation of customized reports to assist the district evaluate performance, evidence Williams compliance, inform the Board and satisfy State and Federal reporting requirements. It also permits the district to quickly understand key issues facing the district through data aggregation and trend analysis reporting.
- **Access Parent/Community Communication Across Internal Division Lines:** eFM eliminates the need for multiple hand-offs and extra follow-up messages. Since staff can access case history across internal district departments they can better serve the public by providing consistent answers to similar questions.
- **Microsoft Outlook Module:** Transfer your Outlook email to eFM’s Outlook Module with a click of the mouse. Capture parent/community member information in eFM while using Outlook email to communicate with parents/community members. Because Board members and the Superintendent often receive direct emails, eFM facilitates the immediate transfer of emails received by Board members or

district staff into the eFM tracking program, automatically establishes a customer account and generates an automated acknowledgement email in reply.

- **IVR Integration:** When eFM is combined with an interactive voice response system, staff and parents/community members can request, check and verify request status from a touch-tone phone, at any time. (IVR Integration is an add-on upgrade to eFM and not part of the base product.)
- **Equally Effective for All Size Districts:** Due to eFM's centralizing features and off-site hosting by Comcate, any size district can benefit equally from its application. eFM allows the same level of service to be provided even handedly to all community members or parents notwithstanding district wealth levels or website sophistication.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

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