

Technology and its Impact in Schools

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When I was asked to write this back-to-school article, I was eager to address the issue of technology, as it is an area both parents and educators are forced to consider a bit more each time we start a new school year. In my work as a special education consultant supporting students and their families over the past 17 years, I have had the opportunity to review thousands of students' records and consult with those students' families. In writing this article, I also solicited the input of my daughter, Liana, who has just completed two years as a special education teacher through the Teach for America program.

One of the most salient technological changes my daughter and I have witnessed is the use of **email** as a form of home/school communication. As more and more parents turn to email (over phone calls and conferences) when contacting teachers, I think it is important to discuss effectiveness and consideration in sending emails to the school.

It has been my belief (as well as our experience) that teaching is one of the most stressful and demanding jobs. In addition to instructing students, teachers must spend time planning lessons, grading papers, communicating with parents, doing paperwork and attending meetings. While the advent of email has provided teachers and parents an efficient means of communication, it also has the potential to divert teachers from other important duties. At many schools, such as the one where Liana worked, teachers are given 40 minutes per day, or 200 minutes per week, of preparation time while their students are at special classes. If, for example, each parent in a particular class sends two emails per week and each email takes three minutes to read and respond to, then that teacher must dedicate up to 150 minutes of preparation time for emailing. This does not include the other 20 or so emails sent each day by administrators, other teachers, and the district, all of which leave little time for essential lesson planning. I have read student files that included as many as a 100 emails from the parent to the school; I find it hard to imagine how teachers and administrators are able to keep up. While the advantage of email is that it is a quick and easy form of communication, it can become problematic when not used with discretion.

All emails related to a student should become part of that student's records. The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act allows parents access to their child's records, which include any information that is personally identifiable either by the child's name, the parent's or other family member's name, or any information that would make the student's identity easily traceable. Parents and teachers should be well aware of these facts in their email communications. As Peter and Pam Wright note in their book *From Emotions to Advocacy*, "Good records are essential to effective advocacy." Email can be an efficient way to build a

record of issues and to document concerns. However, those very records built on emails can also be condemning for both parents and professionals. I have seen myriad cases in which the sheer quantity of emails sent shed an unfavorable light on the parents, depicting them as having unreasonable expectations.

I remind clients in my practice that they have the right and responsibility to regularly review their child's records. In providing these records to parents, schools often need reminders to include emails with personally identifiable information. As a result, parents should always maintain copies of their communications with schools as part of their own records, to ensure this important documentation is not lost. My clients are often surprised to find that reviewing student records, including all pertinent emails, presents them with a more complete and vivid picture of their child's educational experience over time.

Email can become a very effective tool for parents, but it also can be a source of contention between parents and schools. In forming relationships with new teachers, it is imperative that parents are both savvy and mindful in their use of emails. As the 2008-2009 school year begins, I offer some guidelines for parents regarding emailing. In general, these were derived from lessons learned through my clients' experiences. They are offered in no particular order.

- Email is best used in moderation. It is human nature for people to begin to devalue the information they receive in a constant barrage, much like with the boy who cried wolf. Email should make communication between parents and schools more convenient and efficient, rather than more onerous. Choose wisely what you communicate and how much you communicate. Keep emails short and to the point.
- Ask your child's teacher and the principal if they have a policy on emailing. Some principals, in my experience, expect teachers to respond to emails within 24 hours, while others condone teachers never returning emails. It would be helpful to know your school's guidelines or policies regarding emails at the onset of the school year.
- Do use email to document your concerns with the school related to your child's needs. By addressing your issues early and in writing, you build a record of having expressed your concerns and the response you received. Additionally, using email to document a verbal exchange can both clarify your understanding and serve to document that exchange.
- Save all email communications between you and the school. While you may never need to refer to them again, it is important to have access to them in case the interactions are called into question. Be sure your emails are included in your child's records at school as well.
- Review your emails before sending them to be sure you are saying what you want to say in a way you want to say it. Keep in mind that your words may come back to haunt you. Be careful never to write an email in anger; allow yourself time to gain composure before writing an email to the school.
- Emails are great tools for clarifying vague issues that are not otherwise put into writing by the schools. Asking a teacher or administrator to provide a given policy in writing often fleshes out whether that is, indeed, a policy to which they can refer or simply a personal preference.