

## Has Technology Improved Your Home-to-School Connection?

### Yes

Educators have always brought work home. On a “normal” night, there are lesson plans to work on, papers to grade, instruction to differentiate, and parents to phone. Well, it used to be parents to phone. Now teachers may use any number of Web 2.0 applications for teacher-parent communication. Often many different applications are being used at once.

When I was young and my teacher needed to communicate with my parents, I would serve as messenger for any back-and-forth messages. As time went on, the telephone call, e-mail, text message, and cell phone or voice mail supplanted the

written note. All of these options worked perfectly well, at least some of the time. As educators, we naturally strive to do more. What could we do to reach more parents, more of the time? Of course, we just need to reach out and meet them online with blogs, wikis, and various other social networking sites.



**Meg Griffin**

### No

How many times do parents hear, “I left my homework at school” or “I don’t have any homework”? Probably as many times as teachers hear “That was due today?” or “I didn’t have the directions at home.” With the implementation of Blackboard at my school, those questions were supposed to be eliminated. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

Blackboard is a Web site that teachers, parents, and students have access to that hosts class schedules, assignments, resources, discussion forums, and other important links for each subject a student is enrolled in. Each week, I post the homework on the announcement board and this information is e-

mailed to each student. Every assignment is added to the unit’s page in case students lose or misplace the instruction sheet passed out during class. Parents have access to the site and can check if their child truly doesn’t have any homework. Helpful resources are available such as online dictionaries, visual thesaurus-



**Heidi Culea**

Although the advent of Web 2.0 has brought marvelous advances in applications and a myriad of options for reaching parents, it has unfortunately not brought today's teacher any more time. I regularly use a classroom blog, a classroom wiki, a class Web page with voki uploads as well as handwritten notes, e-mails, and telephone calls. I enjoy using these Web 2.0 tools and appreciate that I may be reaching someone that I would not have connected with otherwise. What I—and my family—do not appreciate is the time lost.

The classroom instruction time has not decreased; rather, if anything, it has increased. We educators and our students are going to school for more days than ever. Everyone seems to demand more and more pieces of our ever-fragmented time. How are we supposed to use all of these wonderful Web 2.0 tools? Would it not be won-

I regularly use a classroom blog, a classroom wiki, a class Web page with voki uploads as well as handwritten notes, e-mails, and telephone calls.

derful if we received some release time to work on these creative technology platforms?

Another concern I have, in the rapid inundation of Web 2.0 in the education world, is the rising level of expectations. Parents, students, and administrators are beginning to expect all teachers to interact collaboratively with parents, students, and colleagues. If a teacher is adept at using these technologies and is able to find the time to do so, that is wonderful. However, many teachers—especially young ones—are teaching, taking graduate level classes, and raising a family. They may not have time for the “extras” of Web 2.0. Are they to be penalized for an inability to manufacture extra time?

Don't get me wrong; Web 2.0 is great for some of the people, some of the time! We can no more make it a mandate than being attractive, athletic, or musically talented. If administrators want to encourage Web 2.0 collaboration in their schools (and I think they should!), they must become creative and generous with time management. The teachers need time if they are to do more than they are already doing now.

*After a successful career as a brain injury rehabilitation RN, Meg Griffin received her master's in Elementary Education in 2001. She currently teaches fourth grade in the Central Bucks School District in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.*

es, and information Web sites related to our current area of study. When I set up this program, I had high hopes for improved home-school connections. Evidence of high usage of the site has been minimal.

Students still come to school unprepared and act incredulous when they find out an assignment is due. One student even sheepishly said, “I forgot about Blackboard.” Two months into the school year during parent conferences, many parents didn't know about Blackboard or admitted to never using it. Part of this was because they need to use their child's username and password to access the site, and middle school students are somewhat reluctant to divulge this information. Others said they prefer to check the agendas that students use (often sporadically) to write down their homework assignments. It is not a requirement that students or parents use the system. Perhaps if it was, it would have greater success.

When I set up the Blackboard program, I had high hopes for improved home-school connections. Two months into the school year, many parents didn't know about Blackboard or admitted to never using it.

One pattern I have noticed is that the students who regularly use Blackboard are not the students who need to. They are the students who always come prepared to class and take responsibility for their learning. The students who inconsistently copy down homework in class and habitually turn assignments in late rarely use Blackboard. For these students, this is when Blackboard can best be used by the parents. It serves to clarify homework assignments, provide necessary resources, and provide parents with a look into our classroom activities. This will only increase as teachers, parents and students become more familiar with using the program.

For now, Blackboard has not improved the home-to-school connection. More is accomplished through an e-mail or telephone call. However, this is the first year that all teachers have been required to use Blackboard, so perhaps it is too early to draw conclusions. In the meantime, new technological excuses have been added to the perennial favorites such as “My dog ate my homework.” I now weekly hear “Our Internet was down” or “My printer malfunctioned.” My personal favorite is “I e-mailed you my assignment”—but the e-mail had no attachment.

*Heidi Culea has taught in California, Norway, France, and Belgium. She is currently teaching English, journalism, and multimedia design in middle school at the International School of Brussels.*