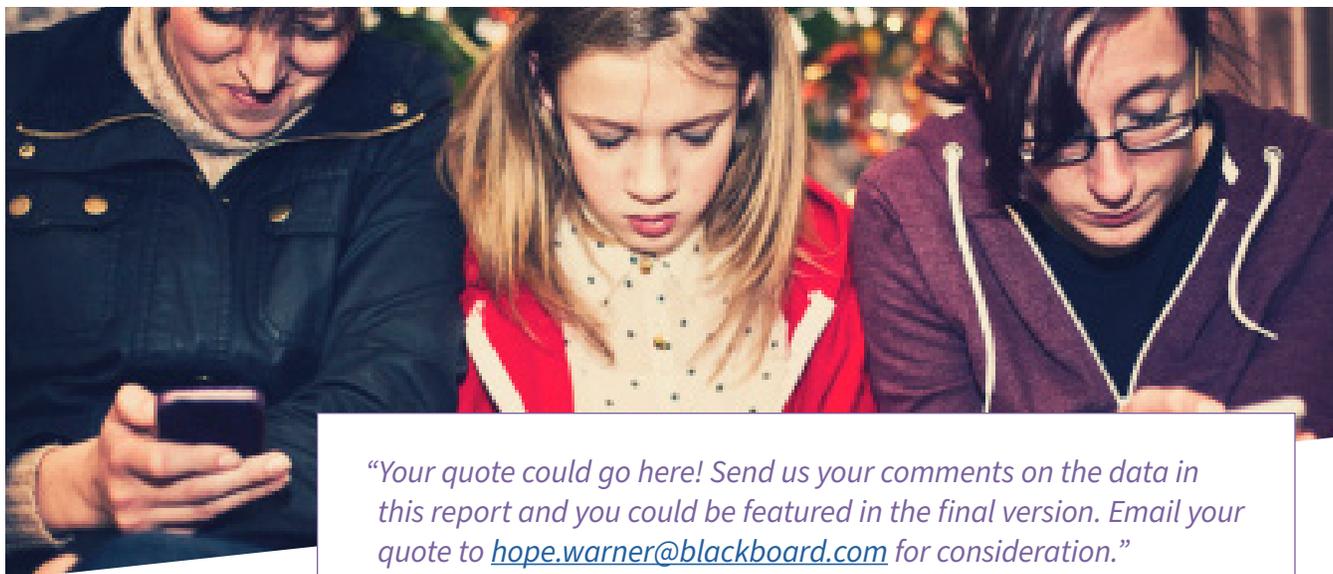




**90 DAYS
THAT CHANGED K-12
TEACHING & LEARNING:**
STRENGTHENING
THE BONDS OF
COMMUNICATIONS



Blackboard



“Your quote could go here! Send us your comments on the data in this report and you could be featured in the final version. Email your quote to hope.warner@blackboard.com for consideration.”

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2015, students across the country were asked to predict what learning would look like in 2020. Many of those responses collected through the annual Speak Up survey conducted by Project Tomorrow® seem astutely prophetic now. For example, a 6th grade girl from Maryland said that in 2020 there would be more “texting with teachers or other ways for students and teachers to communicate online” and that consequently, “everyone would learn more.” While this middle school student was obviously not predicting the pandemic, school closures or the sudden shift to digital learning, she was highlighting an emerging reality: the critical importance of effective student-teacher communications within learning and the immense potential of digital tools to support effective connections both in the classroom and beyond. Schools have long championed the importance of school-to-home communications and encouraged family engagement with their local schools. However, a lasting impact of the remote e-learning experiences in spring 2020 is a new awareness that effective two-way communications between students and teachers is not only a learning imperative now, but that technology can help to strengthen those bonds of communications, no matter whether the learning process is facilitated online or in a physical classroom.

While school closures in spring 2020 helped us gain a new appreciation for the value of student-teacher communications, it also accelerated the need for understanding the efficacy of certain digital tools as well as students' preferences around that tool use. But this is not a conversation about supplanting teachers' personal interactions with students with impersonal technological interfaces. As has been documented for many years in Speak Up reports, a majority of students say that their teachers are important for their learning, and in fact, they want to explore alongside with their teachers new ways to enhance those connections. Students' experiential understanding of how to use mobile-native and social media tools to develop and sustain communications and engagement in their personal lives could provide a new pathway for repurposing similar tools as learning support vehicles.

The sudden shift to digital learning opened the eyes of many educators, policymakers, business leaders, parents and students about the need to re-invent or re-imagine aspects of our K-12 education systems. To support critical discussions like those within schools and districts, Project Tomorrow® and Blackboard have collaborated on a new series of four executive briefs under the banner of *90 Days that Changed K-12 Teaching and Learning*. The series addresses four key considerations emerging from the spring virtual learning experiences:

- The changing views of digital learning because of the increased use of the technology tools during school closures.
- The increasingly critical nature of understanding and addressing equity considerations in K-12 learning.
- The importance of effective student–teacher communications to the learning process.
- The long overdue need to change our thinking about student ownership of learning.

Each executive brief in the series leverages new data findings from Project Tomorrow's Speak Up Research Project with a goal to not only inform but also to stimulate new local reflections and discussions on the experiences of K-12 stakeholders with remote e-learning and how to most effectively prepare for the uncertainty of the next school year and beyond. Consequently, each brief includes a short list of thought-provoking questions that school and district leaders can use to jumpstart these new conversations within their communities.

In this third executive brief in the series, we draw our attention to the critical importance of effective student-teacher communications and the emerging role of digital tools in strengthening those connections. Two key questions are discussed in this brief: (1) what digital tools do students and teachers use currently to communicate with each other, and (2) what do students say are the most effective digital tools for two-way communications with their teachers? With each discussion we explore the impact of the sudden shift to digital learning on both the modalities of communications and the expectations for the future. Additionally, we bring to this discussion some important considerations for education leaders in the use of these preferred digital tools for communications.



Highlights from this brief include:

- The move to virtual learning highlighted the criticality of effective channels for regular student-teacher communication. However, more importantly, we now see that increased student-teacher communication and effective virtual learning are explicitly intertwined. The sum result of that coupling is the opportunity for enhanced personal relationships and more effective instructional results.
- Text messaging between students and teachers is emerging as a highly effective tool for increased communications. The ease of use, timeliness and convenience of this modality appeals to both students and teachers. Significantly, given the pervasiveness of smartphones in the hands of students, this ever-expanding modality of communication does not appear to present any roadblocks due to community setting, family income, or demographic identity based upon race, ethnicity, or cultural background. Given our increased concern about equity in education, texting transcends those traditional barriers and provides a level playing field for enhanced student-teacher communication.
- Despite the increased popularity and usage of email, text and auto phone messages for student-teacher communication, it is also important to note that “one size does not fit all” with two-way communications. Just as with instructional approaches, it is imperative that teachers learn the best way to interact with each individual student. This is especially important when learning is happening online. Given that students have long endorsed the idea of peer-to-peer learning as an effective modality, educators may want to explore opportunities for effective communications to take place through new classroom networks that endorse student-to-student communications. This may result in not only more efficient communications but also greater student ownership of the entire learning enterprise in a classroom.



WHAT DIGITAL TOOLS DO STUDENTS AND TEACHERS USE TO COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER? AND HOW DID THE SUDDEN SHIFT TO DIGITAL LEARNING CHANGE THOSE COMMUNICATIONS PATTERNS?

According to Robert Marzano, an author and education thought leader, “Positive relationships between teachers and students are among the most commonly cited variables associated with effective instruction.”^{vi} Just as with any relationship, the establishment of a positive teacher-student connection is often predicated on a consistent and meaningful pattern of communication. During the school closures this spring, some students’ lack of engagement or participation in e-learning was cited as evidence of the ineffectiveness of the virtual learning model. It was more likely, however, that the sudden shift to digital learning forced both students and teachers to learn and adopt new modes of communications that were better suited for the online classroom. Whether facilitated through an online group chat or individual coaching via text, students and teachers are still learning how to leverage these new modalities to create the positive teacher-student connections that are imperative for effective learning.

The foundation for establishing solid communications via technology was already emerging prior to the school closures. Before the implementation of e-learning, many students, parents, and teachers were already espousing the value of digital tools as an efficient vehicle to increase student-teacher communications. Approximately one-third of students in grades 6-12, parents and teachers said that because of the use of technology in the classroom, students were communicating more with their teachers. The sudden shift to digital learning accelerated that value proposition (Table 1). As a result of increased usage of email, online school portals, automatic phone messaging services and texting, students as well as teachers and parents reported increased communications.

**Table 1: Technology-enhanced communications between students and teachers
—comparative views from before and during school closures**

K-12 STAKEHOLDER	STUDENTS ARE COMMUNICATING MORE WITH THEIR TEACHER(S) BECAUSE OF TECHNOLOGY USAGE IN THE CLASSROOM	
	% of agreement before school closures	% of agreement during school closures
Students in grades 6-12	35%	48%
Teachers	37%	52%
Parents	33%	53%

© Project Tomorrow 2020

As part of the shift to remote e-learning, many more students had access to a personally assigned laptop, tablet or Chromebook to use at home as documented in our first report in this series, *90 Days That Changed K-12 Teaching and Learning: The Shift to Digital Learning*. This increased access to a school-provided device correspondingly opened new opportunities for more students to regularly communicate with their teachers using email. Email communications with teachers and students in middle school, for example, increased 33% during school closures. The percentage of students in grades 3-5 who regularly email their teachers also increased from 8% to 16%. **Over three-quarters of students in grades 6-12 (77%) report that personal emails are now a standard mode of communications with their teachers.** Students are reporting that this new communications avenue provided more efficient and effective ways for them to get feedback from their teachers and to help them solve learning challenges with just-in-time support.

The new environment has also accelerated the adoption of text messaging between students and teachers as a communications modality. In 2015, only 14% of teachers said that they were using texting to communicate with students. Though teachers regularly report using text messages and other forms of social media to communicate with colleagues (57%) and even parents (28%), their adoption of this tool to communicate directly with students, either individually or as a class, has not increased in the past five years. However, the move to e-learning changed that situation as noted in Table 2. **For two-thirds of students in grades 6-12, texting is now a tool that they are using for two-way communications with their teachers.**

“... when I have a question to ask a teacher I can just email them and they respond quickly now.”

High school student during school closure (California)

“Technology has allowed me to communicate with others in a matter of seconds. For example, if I am doing my algebra homework online and I am struggling with a problem, I can screenshot it and send it to my teacher through his email so he can guide me in the right direction.”

High school student during school closure (Texas)

**Table 2: Texting as a student-teacher communications tool
—comparative views from before and during school closures**

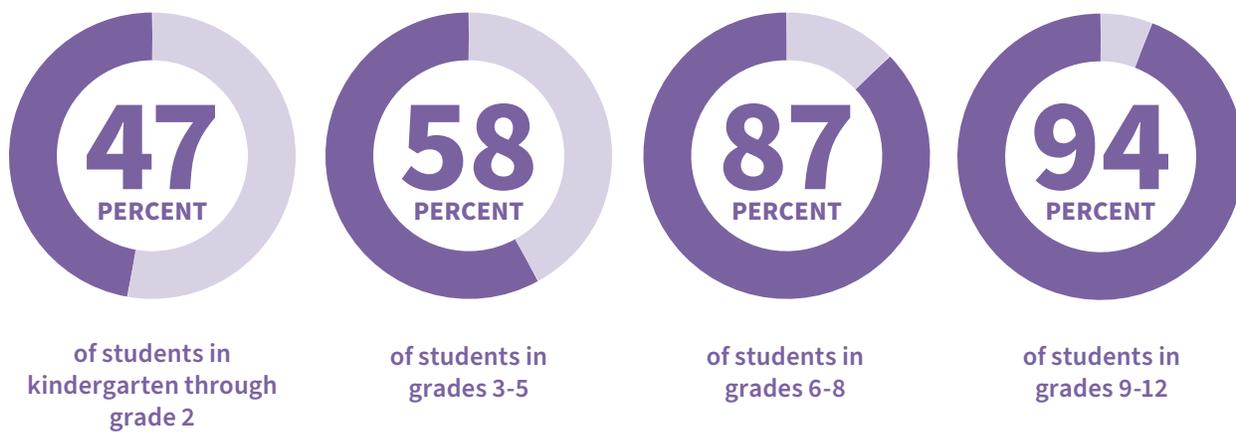
K-12 STUDENTS	I USE TEXTING TO COMMUNICATE WITH MY TEACHERS	
	% of agreement before school closures	% of agreement during school closures
Students in grades 6-8	25%	62%
Students in grades 9-12	38%	69%

© Project Tomorrow 2020

Through this process of re-thinking the value of different communications tools, teachers have also discovered some hidden benefits, especially related to increasing student engagement in the learning process during virtual classes. For example, a teacher in California noted, *“Texting allows students to ask me questions they’re too shy to ask in class. This tool has really opened up communication.”*

Whereas many students engaged with teachers over email using school provided devices like laptops or Chromebooks, the texting communication pathway is facilitated using students’ own mobile devices, most notably their smartphone. As long documented by the Speak Up results, student access to personal smartphones has increased steadily since 2007 when these tools first arrived in the marketplace.

Percentage of students reporting access to a personal smartphone in the 2019/20 school year



There is no meaningful difference in these percentages based upon whether the student lives in an urban, rural, or suburban community, comes from a low-income household or is a student of color. However, even with that high percentage of availability, some schools continue to be reticent to allow students to use personally owned devices to support learning at school. Using data collected prior to school closures, 38% of school principals said that student owned devices were never allowable on campus, and an additional 11% said they could only be used at lunchtime or outside of the classroom. Only 20% of middle school students say they can use their own smartphone at school. And while there has been concerns about the student misbehavior at school with these devices, the emergence of this new use case of texting as an effective mode of communications between students and teachers during the school closures, may help to change both perceptions and policies.

As indicated by Marzano, the efficacy of our instructional practices rest solidly on the shoulders of positive student-teacher relationships, relationships that rely upon regular and consistent communications to thrive and grow. The advent of new digital tools to support those communications patterns provides new avenues for supporting positive relationship building between students and teachers. Lucky for all of us our students have some ideas about the most effective tools for creating effective two-way teacher communications.



WHAT DO STUDENTS SAY ARE THE MOST EFFECTIVE TOOLS FOR TWO-WAY TEACHER COMMUNICATIONS? AND WHAT DO THESE PREFERENCES MEAN FOR FUTURE EXPECTATIONS FOR SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS ALSO?

In 2016, students told us via the Speak Up surveys that the most effective way for their teachers to communicate with them about their academic progress was to simply talk with them face-to-face in class. Those types of spontaneous, time-sensitive snippets of interactions between students and teachers happen regularly in most physical classrooms. It was the accepted practice prior to school closures. However, the sudden shift to digital learning in spring 2020 eliminated many of those types of informal, sporadic interactions. Teachers and students needed to rely upon other modes of communications, most of which were technology-enabled, to support effective communications as noted earlier in this brief. Those experiences during the spring and potentially extended into the fall are helping to reframe expectations and preferences for students in terms of their communications with their teachers.

While 57% of students in grades 6-12 say that they keep updated on school events or classroom news through school, class and teacher websites, students have also been tapping into other tools as well to keep informed. **Leveraging their own personal communications tools and networks established outside of school, 43% of students say they rely upon text messages from classmates to get information about school or class, and 34% say they regularly get updates from their classmates' social media accounts with school/class information.** Additionally, 53% of middle school students say they text classmates for help with their schoolwork as well. Students have a high degree of familiarity now with these tools within an academic context through their remote e-learning experiences. Additionally,



the efficiency and convenience of these push-type technologies which transfer highly relevant information directly to a students' personal smartphone is also very appealing. Students' preferences, therefore, for two-way communications with their teachers, and their expectations for more effective school communications in general are influenced by both students' personal experiences and their desire for increased effectiveness.

Relative to teacher communications, middle and high school students are united in their preference for three types of digital tools, personal emails (56%), text messages (55%) and auto phone messages (49%), as a result of their e-learning experiences as depicted in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Grade 6-12 students' preferences for digital tools for communications with teachers —comparative views from before and during school closures



© Project Tomorrow 2020

 Preference
- during school closures

 Preference
- before school closures

“Communication is a good example of the value of technology use for me personally. With technology, I can easily talk to my peers and teachers about assignments, homework, tests, etc. through social media, google classroom, google drive, and email. This helps me develop communication and teamwork skills that could be applied to my future career.”

High school student during school closure (Alabama)

“Technology has helped me prepare for the future by letting me email and communicate with my teachers, which can help me in the future with communicating with potential bosses.”

High school student during school closure (Texas)

From the student perspective, these preferences represent not only convenience value, but also the potential of these technology-enabled interactions with their teachers to help them prepare for the future workplace.

In many ways, just as schools and districts are starting to re-imagine their education delivery mechanisms because of the sudden shift to digital learning last spring, students are reframing their preferences and expectations for teacher communications through their own experiential lens as well. The same is true for the way students want to receive general school information also. Whereas a majority of students in grades 6-12 say that an updated school website is still a good source of general information, increasingly students want their school leadership to adopt the same social media tools they are using outside of school for the dissemination of school information or other general communications. Those preferences include the use of these tools:

Grade 6-12 students say their schools should use these social tools for communications



Instagram
(58%)



YouTube videos
(58%)



Snapchat
(53%)



Twitter
(56%)



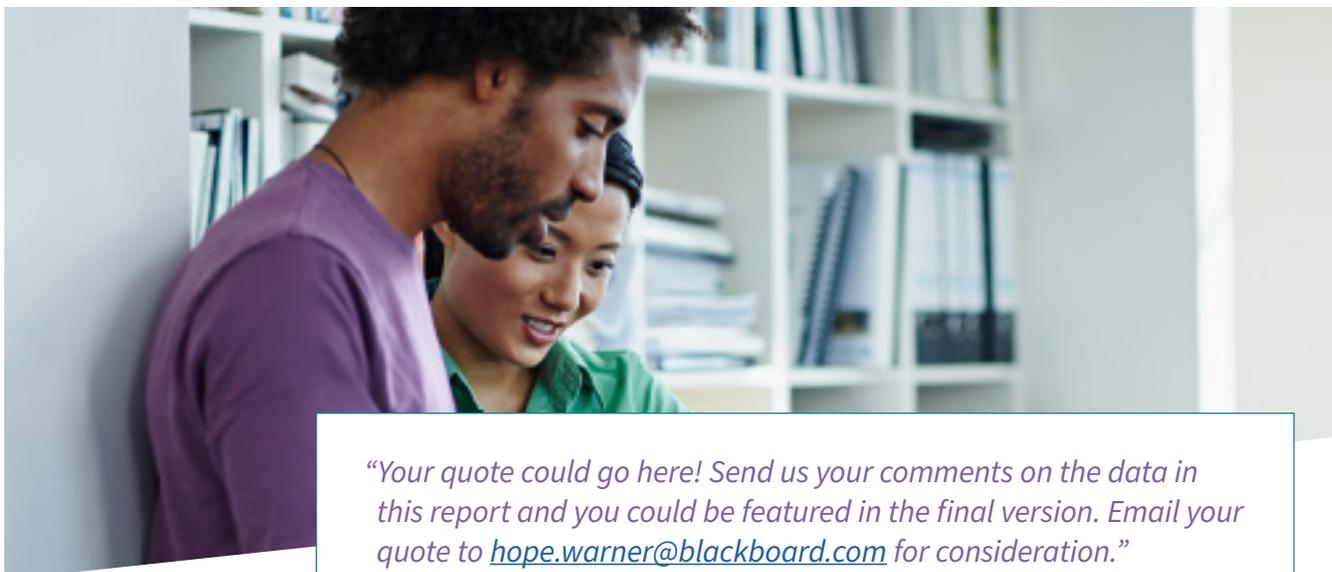
Text messages
(47%)

WHAT ARE SOME IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS FOR EDUCATION LEADERS IN THE USE OF THESE TYPES OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION TOOLS? *FOR BOTH VIRTUAL AS WELL AS IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION?*

The sudden shift to digital learning as a result of the pandemic-induced school closures required many school and district leaders to think differently about the purpose of school, new modalities for instruction, and how to effectively harness a wide range of digital tools to support learning continuity. In some cases, administrators relaxed district rules about the use of personal devices, mobile apps and social media accounts to help facilitate efficiency and effectiveness in this unprecedented time. For example, while most districts did not encourage teachers to text message with students prior to the school closures, the use of texting increased significantly during the school closure period as both students and teachers (as well as parents) found the usage to be highly effective. Given both the value of those enhanced communications channels, and the continued uncertainty in school formats for this academic year and beyond, it is most likely that more digital tools, even including new social media platforms, will emerge to support student-teacher communications.

The value of enhanced communications is well documented. However, school and district leaders still need to be cognizant of protecting student data and student safety when using these new online tools for communications, with peers and teachers. Additionally, as these tools become more pervasive, districts will want to fully understand their legal obligations in terms of retaining messages and their responsibility and accountability for staff usage of these tools. District technology leaders (54%) say they understand the importance of putting in place safeguards to protect student data when instituting a new digital initiative or adopting new technologies to support instruction. This ethos around student data privacy and confidentiality will need to be extended to communications tools as well. However, only 17% of school districts are currently using a risk dashboard to identify students in trouble or in need of adult intervention based upon their communications messages over the school network.

This issue of communications over the school or district network versus a student or teacher using a personal smartphone and their own data plan to transmit messages is also an important consideration. Efficiency of communications was a chief concern during the school closures, and thus as documented many students and teachers gravitated easily to their own personal accounts to help facilitate those interactions. However, 52% of district technology leaders say they encourage teachers and students not to mix personal and school accounts and applications in their communications. The new environments of fully online learning, hybrid learning or having some students opt out of face-to-face instruction for continued virtual learning requires districts to re-think existing policies and recommendations, and to explore new solutions that address both the convenience and ease of use value proposition as well as providing necessary safeguards and accountability.



“Your quote could go here! Send us your comments on the data in this report and you could be featured in the final version. Email your quote to hope.warner@blackboard.com for consideration.”

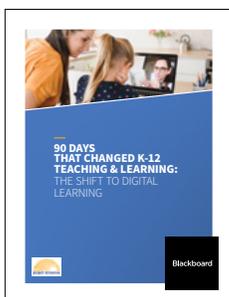
ENDING THOUGHTS

A 6th grader’s prophecy about enhanced digital student–teacher communications has come to reality during the pandemic and resulting school closures this spring. And while there is still more learning to be done about how to use tools such as email, texting, auto phone messages and social media to effectively build positive connections with students, our recent experiences are providing a new roadmap for all of us. The experiential knowledge of our students is another important input and asset. Students are already using these same tools to create connections and facilitate communications in their personal lives, and thus it makes sense they want to use the same tools to support teacher communications as well. Our school principals are already thinking ahead on this with 70% now saying that they would like new teachers to learn how to effectively leverage social media tools for student engagement and communications within their teacher preparation programs. With a new mindset about the value of technology to support enhanced student–teacher communications, the opportunity for effectively leveraging new tools in the classroom, whether that is an online classroom facilitated through Google or the physics lab on the second floor, appears promising.

As education leaders, parents and communities continue to reflect on the experiences from the spring, this series of executive briefs explores key takeaways from this shift to digital learning that we believe should be part of an ongoing reflection process in every school and district. It is our hope that the data-informed insights shared through these briefs will enlighten local discussions on these issues. In addition to this brief, Strengthening the Bonds of Communications, the other three briefs in the series include:

- **90 Days That Changed K-12 Teaching and Learning: The Shift to Digital Learning**

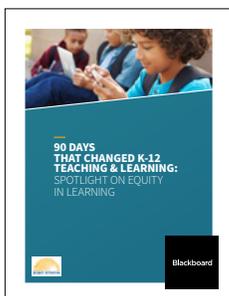
The cavalcade of school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the sudden and unplanned shift in the delivery mechanism for instruction, from primarily face-to-face, in-classroom instruction to digital learning facilitated over the Internet from home. Almost overnight, technology tools became the principal instrument for enabling the continuity of learning for students across the country. It also goes without saying that the roughly 90 days of school closures most likely forever changed our expectations for teaching and learning in K-12 education, and most certainly has shone a new spotlight on the role of digital tools, content and resources within the learning experience.



DOWNLOAD BRIEF 1

- **90 Days That Changed K-12 Teaching and Learning: Spotlight on Equity in Learning**

The sudden and unplanned move to remote e-learning resulted in a spotlight on the challenges to ensure that every student has appropriate, safe and consistent access to digital tools and resources to support learning outside of school. But creating equity in learning environments is about more than provisioning a Chromebook and a Wifi hotspot to a family. Equity in access to quality teaching and learning matters too.



DOWNLOAD BRIEF 2

- **90 Days That Changed K-12 Teaching and Learning:
Sponsoring Student Ownership of Learning**

School closures and remote e-learning has presented an unprecedented opportunity for education leaders to think constructively about the purpose of school and the role of the student in the learning process. These critical discussions have the potential to lead to new discoveries around student engagement, how to create contextually relevant learning experiences, and empowering greater student ownership of the learning process.

To support ongoing discussion around these critical issues, each executive brief in the series aims to provide research-based findings as a catalyst for new local discussions on the experiences of students, families and educators with remote e-learning and how to most effectively prepare for the uncertainty of the next school year and beyond. To assist education leaders with realizing that goal, here is a short list of thoughtful questions that can be used to jumpstart new conversations within your classrooms as well as school and district offices about the best ways to communicate with students, and the impact of effective communications on student engagement and learning efficacy. Share your thoughts on these questions or how you have used them to support your planning efforts with your stakeholders on Twitter using this hashtag: [#90DaysofK12Change](#)

1. Given what we have learned about the importance of student-teacher communication during the sudden shift to digital learning, what types of support do teachers and students need to ensure that they are optimizing their two-way communications? Besides identifying best tools, what are the proven best practices for effective communications that can lead to positive relationships and ultimately, to improved student outcomes? How should we measure this usage to ensure that these digital tools are meeting our expectations?
2. The next frontier in terms of student-teacher communications may be through social media applications and platforms. While your school or district may currently be using social media tools for one-way communications, the idea of using same or similar tools for two-way communications may not be readily apparent. How should your school or district engage with students to learn about their current ways of leveraging social media in their personal lives for communications as a learning process for potential teacher use?
3. Beyond the identification of appropriate tools for enhanced student-teacher communication, what are the other considerations that need to be explored to develop appropriate guidelines, policies, and procedures for effective use? What new recommendations should the central office offer to teachers as well as students and parents about effective usage of digital tools for communications?

ABOUT PROJECT TOMORROW

Project Tomorrow's nonprofit mission is to support the effective implementation of research-based learning experiences for students in K-12 schools. Project Tomorrow is particularly interested in the role of digital tools, content and resources in supporting students' development of college and career ready skills. The organization's landmark research is the Speak Up Research Project which annually polls K-12 students, parents, educators and community members about the impact of technology resources on learning experiences both in school and out of school, and represents the largest collection of authentic, unfiltered stakeholder voice on digital learning. Since 2003, almost 6 million K-12 students, parents, teachers, librarians, principals, technology leaders, district administrators and members of the community have shared their views and ideas through the Speak Up Project.

Learn more at www.tomorrow.org

ABOUT BLACKBOARD

Blackboard's unique approach to K-12 education focuses on creating a seamless and engaging experience for each learner. Our platform provides a way for students to learn in a safe, connected, and technologically savvy environment by focusing in advancing personalized learning and engaging and informing the entire community. For more information visit:

<https://www.blackboard.com/industries/k-12>

<https://twitter.com/BlackboardK12>

<https://www.facebook.com/BlackboardK12>

ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar11/vol68/num06/Relating-to-Students@-It%27s-What-You-Do-That-Counts.aspx>