



Update from the Superintendent

To: Parents and Guardians
From: Bill Husfelt, Superintendent
Date: February 28, 2021

We have more communication tools at our disposal than ever before and yet, frequently, we still struggle to share our message with community stakeholders.

Someone told me recently that communication doesn't always equal comprehension and I find that to be so true sometimes. We're committed to doing the very best we can to ensure that you're clearly comprehending the messages we are sending AND, equally importantly, that we're clearly comprehending the messages you are sending us. I think it's a work in progress sometimes as we all struggle to make sure we stop, in the middle of all of the craziness around us, to make sure we understand a message/email/social media post/phone call.

Currently, as a district, we operate four social media sites, a website, our Parent Portal system, an automated phone call system that we call LINK and an email system called PeachJar. I'd like to take a minute to talk about how we're using these systems and how you can use them to communicate with us! We want to make sure we're hearing from our stakeholders and that we're comprehending clearly your needs, wants and concerns.

Social Media

Social media is ubiquitous these days ... it seems that many of us get our news from social media frequently throughout the day. Just like any other form of communication, however, sources matter on social media and it's important that we check things out before we share them! We use the district's Facebook page to communicate important information to parents, to share great things happening in our schools and to keep our stakeholders updated during emergencies. Our Office of Communications does an amazing job of keeping the district's page updated and each school has one or two employees juggling regular job responsibilities and social media assignments.

Stakeholders can communicate with BDS via Facebook through the messenger function or by making comments but please note, social media is NOT the best way to communicate with us in an emergency because only one person has the authority to answer for the district and, obviously, that makes instant replies challenging.

You can also follow both BDS and myself on Twitter for updates about emergency situations like power outages and storms. I also often tweet from events involving our students or from community groups that have invited me to speak.

BDS is also on Instagram but, in true Instagram fashion, our presence mainly focuses on photos of student events. Instagram messenger is not a reliable way of communicating with us.

I also have a personal Facebook page so I can stay connected to my 11 grandchildren (who doesn't love a cute photo of their grandchild) but please know that I absolutely DO NOT answer BDS questions or address BDS issues on my personal page. As a public official, it's best for me to keep my personal business completely separate from my professional business and so I do not answer BDS queries on my personal page or via my personal email.

Website

You can find our website at www.bay.k12.fl.us and once online, you can connect to our district departments, directly to schools, to your School Board members or me and to important information like school calendars, school start times, dress code policies, Covid-19 updates etc. Under the "schools" tab on the website, you can click on the website of any school to see additional information.

Parent Portal

You can link to Parent Portal through our website or via our new smart phone app. Once logged in to Parent Portal, you have "real time" access to your student's grades, to attendance and to any other announcements coming directly from the school. We encourage ALL parents to connect to Parent Portal every week. The information you provide to us in Parent Portal is also the information we use to contact you in the event of an emergency. It's critical that we have accurate phone numbers and email addresses in the event of an emergency involving just your student or something that impacts the whole district. I am alarmed, on a somewhat regular basis, by the number of students for whom we have no accurate emergency contact information. This lack of information makes things VERY DIFFICULT for our teachers and school administrators in the event of an emergency. PLEASE take the time to keep that updated.

If you need help opening a Parent Portal account, or updating/accessing an account you already have, just call your student's school and someone there will be glad to help you.

LINK

A couple of years ago we switched from our old automated calling system to partner with Bay County on Everbridge which powers their AlertBay notifications. Our LINK (Learn, Inform, Notify, Know) phone calling system can be used by principals, or the district, to call you, to send you texts and to send emails about upcoming events. This system is critical during emergency situations and we depend upon you to keep your contact information as updated as possible.

PeachJar

PeachJar is a relatively new system for BDS but it's been a phenomenal help in creating new communication avenues for us. PeachJar enables us to send one email to all parents in our district for whom we have accurate email addresses or to target specific schools or even specific grade levels. Schools also use PeachJar to send home important information weekly and community members can access PeachJar to submit community news they'd like sent home to students. Those requests are reviewed by our Office of Communications to ensure they have educational value.

Most of these are ways in which we communicate with you but we also want to make sure you are aware of the ways by which you can communicate with us.

First of all, let's talk about a good old-fashioned phone call. If you have a concern you'd like to discuss with one of our school administrators, or your child's teacher, we encourage you to pick up the phone and just make a call. Rarely do I encounter an issue that can't be resolved by two respectful adults speaking to each other in a calm and rational manner.

If phone calls aren't convenient, you can always email us. You can use Parent Portal to email your child's teacher(s) directly and you can link to any school's website, and an online contact form, from our website. As an aside, our website can be automatically translated into six different languages including Chinese, Russian and Spanish.

Most schools also maintain a presence on Facebook and you can use the messenger function to send a direct message. You can also do the same from the district's Facebook page.

If all else fails, and you can't reach the person you need directly, you can always call the district at 850-767-4100 or email us at BDScomm@bay.k12.fl.us and we will do our best to connect you to the right person.

However you choose to communicate with us, please give us time to research your question or concern before we reply. You'd be surprised at the number of people who expect an almost instant reply to a complicated query. We want to get things right and we want to research before we answer.

In an upcoming column I'm going to go into a little more detail about which modes of communication we use in different situations and why we communicate the way that we do. I hope, for this week, you'll take a minute to establish a Parent Portal account, or make sure an existing account is up-to-date, follow your school and the district on social media and orient yourself to the district's website and the information there. You may also want to log in to your PeachJar dashboard to see all of the flyers that have been sent by the district and by your child's school ... you may find some really great information ☺

Stay safe and God Bless!