

# The Columbus Dispatch

## Schools let parents check on kids online Attendance, food choices, homework all on Web

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Forgot your poetry assignment? Bombed the chemistry test? Got a "tardy" in gym?

Mom and Dad already know.

They even know you bought an extra bag of chips at lunch, thanks to new communication tools giving parents instant access to what their kids are doing in school.

Newsletters and morning announcements arrive via e-mail. Teachers post homework assignments, class notes and videorecorded lessons on classroom portals, blogs and district Web sites.

Some school districts such as Canal Winchester, Upper Arlington and, most recently, Bexley, offer parents online access to attendance records and grades.

And now, parents can choose lunch plans, check quiz scores, monitor homework assignments and learn about school events before their kids get off the bus.

"It will take the pressure off the teacher in responding and explaining to parents about their child's grades," said Pam Moenter, who oversees the new student-information database at Bexley. "Parents now have that kind of detail."

Some parents worry whether schools can keep such information private. School officials say there are protections.

"With the Web, everything is a concern," said David Dewese, technology coordinator at Canal Winchester. "Like anything else, it's password-protected. It's a secure site."

Lee Tien, senior staff attorney with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, an Internet civil-liberties group in San Francisco, said improved access could be useful. But he said such tools might strain relationships.

"In parenting, there is this big tension all the time," Tien said. "You're protecting your child and at the same time allowing them to make decisions and trusting them to trust your judgment. Every parent faces these questions, whether or not they use this."

Bexley's Centerpoint program allows parents access to their child's grades and attendance and to receive e-mail updates if their kids are tardy or grades start to slip.

Vicki Dobkin, whose son and daughter attend Bexley High School, said she likes the program but thinks parents should already know how their children are doing in the classroom.

"Students have to have better communication with parents," Dobkin said. "I wouldn't want to be surprised by an unknown."

She said she visits teachers' Web sites once a week for homework assignments and class activities.

Parent groups say such programs are necessary.

"Students are not old enough to make decisions for themselves," said John Wherry, president of the Parent Institute in Virginia, which publishes materials that encourage parental involvement in schools. "Parents not only have the right, but the responsibility to monitor their child's progress in school."

That includes in the lunchroom.

A handful of central Ohio districts have adopted a system that lets parents track everything their kids buy at school.

Hilliard, Pickerington and Jonathan Alder use the Mealpay program, which has a "history" feature that stores kids' food choices for 30 days.

Students say they like the computerized lunch system because it can make the lunch line go faster — kids punch their personal ID numbers into a keypad, and when they reach the cashier, their picture, any food restrictions or allergies and the amount in their account pops up.

It may not force them to take a vegetable, but they might have to explain themselves when they get home.

Debbie Brown said teacher Web sites and e-mailed newsletters have given her an easy discussion starter with her daughter, an eighth-grader at Hilliard Memorial Middle School.

"I always start the conversation with, 'Did you have any homework?' " she said. "If she says 'no,' then I ask her, 'Did you do section 8.4?' or whatever is on the Web site.

"At this juncture, they should be responsible about what they are doing," said Brown, who also has a son who is a junior at Hilliard Davidson High School. "But I still like being able to check on it."

Her daughter's math teacher, Heather McClincy, posts recorded lessons on her Web site. Watching the lessons has given mother and daughter a chance to review.

"The way they solve problems was different when I went to school," Brown said. "I haven't been able to be as helpful because that was not the way I learned how to do it. But now, I can figure it out with the lessons."

Third-grade teacher Jim Meta said communication with parents has improved greatly since he started teaching nine years ago. His blog lets parents know what happened in his class at Scioto Ridge Elementary in Olentangy, and he checks and replies to e-mail throughout the day.

"It keeps the communication lines open a lot more than calling or writing notes," Meta said. "It's much easier to get hold of a parent than by a phone call. You're not playing phone tag, and you don't want to leave anything on the machine."