**How to Improve Your School Staff’s Communication: Tips and Tricks from the Classroom**

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Professional collaboration is at the very heart of education. In essence, we are a community of professionals all sharing best practices and encouraging the growth of children. In an age where the education system is under pressure of standardization and skills assessments, the educators need to come together to support one another. We need communication and collaboration now more than ever before.

Inspired by this article? Want to learn more about how educators are putting Slack into practice? Check out this EdSurge article: [No Slacking Off! How Savvy Teachers Are Turning to Trello and Slack](https://www.edsurge.com/news/2015-07-28-no-slacking-off-how-savvy-teachers-are-turning-to-trello-and-slack).

When I do have a chance to chat with other teachers in my school, the conversations are amazing. Over the years, these conversations have without a doubt made me a better and more reflective teacher. In fact, there is a [growing body of evidence](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/09/10/do-students-learn-more-when-their-teachers-work-well-together/) that suggests student learning improves significantly when teachers collaborate. Collaboration depends on clear, consistent, and open lines of communication

Therefore, our question is simple: how can we improve communication then between staff members in a school?

**Is Twitter the Only Way To Improve?**

ASCD [compiled a list](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar11/vol68/num06/How-Can-We-Promote-Teacher-Collaboration%C2%A2.aspx) a couple of years ago that can give us a direction. Their suggestions included harnessing the voices of educators and leaders to find greater ways of collaborating. Ideas included videotaping and discussing lessons, offering choices of PLCs, and promoting use of the staff/faculty room.

How common in collaboration in schools? According to the [Teachers Know Best survey](https://s3.amazonaws.com/edtech-production/reports/Gates-PDMarketResearch-Dec5.pdf), only 7 percent of teachers surveyed report that their schools have strong collaboration models.

In essence, their list was all based around getting teachers together to talk.

In February 2014, I was first introduced to Twitter chats. There, thousands of educators self-organize into dozens of hashtag discussions. Here was the single best professional development I have ever experienced. Any of my possible questions or curiosities could be addressed by passionate teachers. Every day of the week has [multiple chats around topics](http://cybraryman.com/chats.html), ranging from Education Technology (#edtech) to Social Studies (#sschat). It is amazing.

This year, I wanted to repeat that same experience with my own colleagues. But there was a problem--only a few of the staff members had Twitter accounts. Additionally, none of them had participated in a hashtag chat before. Yet, there were many in the building who, like me, wanted to have more great collaborative discussions.

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**Why Email & Social Media Aren’t the Be-All, End-All**

I tried starting a number of these conversations by email but it just didn’t work. Initially, email was setup to mimic the existing physical mail service. Therefore, it serves the same purpose; to send a one-way message. Sometimes, our email can get quick responses, but then we just carry on an “email chat”. This option is slow, clunky. What is worse, having to file all of those messages is a nightmare. The conversations turned out to be choppy, inconsistent, and exclusionary.

Email still serves a role in education. Yet, we need to move beyond email. We need to look for other tools that can help foster ongoing conversations with our colleagues.

There are plenty of social media options available like Twitter or Facebook, but there is a fundamental problem with any of those services. It requires educators to invest their time or energy into a new social network simply for the sake of workplace communication. Moreover, educators are often nervous or prohibited from those public networks because of concerns of student-teacher communications. We need a place where just school staff live.

We need a tool that allows us to collaborate quickly and inclusively without forcing the enrollment in “just another” social network.

**A New Communication Standard: Possible Tools for Consideration**

When I wanted to have more and better conversations with the staff in my own building, I tested many different tools. I was explicitly looking for these features:

* Ease of signing up
* Ease of use
* Topic specific conversations
* Private conversations
* Sending/sharing of files
* Integration with Google Apps
* Send messages when receiver is offline

In my searches, here’s what popped up (and I do include Twitter, to explain more of its nuances):

[**Google Hangouts**](http://hangouts.google.com) **[Level of Difficulty: Easy]** Everyone in a Google Apps school has access to Hangouts if allowed by the school administrator.

* Pros: It is great for quick conversations and can be a faster tool than email. It requires no processing of messages. It is a great tool for just a quick question-answer or one-on-one conversation.
* Cons: Is limited to Google Apps schools. Also, it is hard for others to join a conversation already in progress. In fact, without notice, others won’t even know the chat is happening at all.

[**Twitter**](https://twitter.com/?lang=en) **[Level of Difficulty: Moderate]** Twitter was a career changer for me. For the first time, I was able to connect instantly with many passionate educators around the world. However, there are some challenges that come with it.

* Pros: It is good for organizing chats around similar topics using hashtags. Conversations can include many different participants. Conversation is on-going and Tweets can be saved.
* Cons: Group conversations are public. Because the chat is public, many educators might immediately discard this option. All staff members need to commit to registering a Twitter account. Tweets are saved under individual profiles instead of a group feed. Users need another technology tool to save the actual hashtag chat.

[**Today’s Meet**](http://www.todaysmeet.com) **[Level of Difficulty: Easy]** A great chat program that can organize chats with customizable time lengths.

* Pros: Very easy to use. One staff member can create a meeting room. Others can join without even signing up.
* Cons: Synergy. The chat rooms can exist for months or even up to a year. The problem is that each chat room is separate. Staff members would have to keep track of multiple chat rooms for each possible conversation. File-sharing could also be smoother.

[**Hipchat**](https://www.hipchat.com/) **and** [**Slack**](https://slack.com/) **[Level of Difficulty: Moderate]** I put these two together because they are so similar. Both are full chat programs with file-sharing, separate chat topics, private messaging, and great search features.

* Pros: A lot of the features I just mentioned. It is a great program that can be used for all staff communication, both formal and informal.
* Cons: Members have to create accounts.

**Why Slack Reigned Supreme (Especially on Snow Days)**

Out of all the tools, Slack was the best option for mimicking the great chats on Twitter while offering the privacy needed for staff discussions. I started using it with some of my closest colleagues and realized its potential. The result was that it spread like wildfire. The reason? Snow days! New England had a string of severe snowstorms in February 2015. On the night before one of the storms, 10 of us spontaneously chatted using Slack. After each new local school closure, we would lobby guesses of whether or not our school would be next.

"The difference here between Slack and email? Engagement."

Here was a great example of a practical, if not inconsequential, use of this tool. In the coming weeks, there were 66% voluntary sign-ups from faculty in both the high school and junior high school.

Conversations ranged from homework best practices to sharing technology tools. One faculty member even “live-streamed” the school committee meeting to keep everyone updated. The difference here between Slack and email? Engagement. Faculty members were not just receiving the report but had a chance to be a part of the discussion as it unfolded.

Staff communication can improve a school culture and learning outcomes. Our current use of email and casual faculty room conversations are not sufficient any longer. For our collaborative efforts to have lasting impacts, we need conversations that are open, ongoing, and complex. For that reason, school communication tools should be as advanced as the technology educators are expect to use the classrooms--and in my school, I’m choosing Slack.