



Choosing a K-12 Notification and Communication Provider: 11 Questions to Consider



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Introduction

School communication systems offer emergency alerts, paperless permission forms, attendance management, parental engagement tools, and more—even in multiple languages—but it can be a challenge to choose a provider. Not all systems are built the same, so it helps to consider which provider offers the qualities or features that best suit your needs.

In the following pages, you'll discover 11 important questions to consider as you evaluate K-12 notification and communication providers.

11 Questions to Consider When Choosing a K-12 Messaging Platform



- 1 Is it time-tested?
- 2 Is it reliable?
- 3 Does it integrate with current systems?
- 4 What are its broadcasting capabilities?
- 5 What are its classroom messaging capabilities?
- 6 Does it have advanced messaging capabilities?
- 7 Does it offer a full suite of solutions?
- 8 Is it easy to use?
- 9 Will you have end-to-end support?
- 10 Does it handle data security and privacy?
- 11 Is it a leader in the K-12 ecosystem?

Question 1

Is the platform time-tested and experienced?

When it comes to K-12 school notification platforms and providers, experience is one of the most important aspects to consider. Why? Put simply, a reliable system uses proven, time-tested technology and processes. An untested system or provider is one that you cannot trust to perform in a critical situation.

Both the system and the vendor are important in this case. A new vendor without an established track record can be too "green" to handle unpredictable situations. They could even be working out kinks in their systems at the same time that you encounter an urgent challenge.

One way to learn more about a vendor is to peruse their client list. Without a stable client base, you run a greater risk of adopting a system that doesn't have staying power. If a vendor has tens of thousands of K-12 schools scattered across the globe, it is an indicator that a provider has many years of experience serving education organizations.

If a provider is well-established, there are still other aspects to consider. A high number of years in business doesn't guarantee that a firm's messaging platform is top-quality. A vendor can be great at sales and marketing, but if your school needs to communicate an urgent situation to families, you need solid product performance.

Providers often quantify their services, which may help you compare them. For example, you can read how many messages they have successfully delivered in a year. You can see how many schools and districts use their systems, along with their sizes.

Besides overall number of messages, the fact that a provider can successfully send and deliver multiple kinds of messages (e.g. phone, text, email) is another indicator of service quality.



To deliver all kinds of messages reliably and in large volumes, a provider must maintain a robust and sophisticated technical infrastructure. Watch out for providers who suggest that certain kinds of messages aren't important or who shy away from tough questions about their infrastructure.

As a rule of thumb, keep in mind that the best providers have worked with schools, districts, and boards of every type and size, and thus are better equipped to understand and meet the unique needs of your organization.

The most reliable K-12 messaging systems meet 3 key criteria.



They broadcast across multiple channels.



Messages are sent quickly and accurately.



They have a vast infrastructure to ensure delivery.



Question 2

Is it reliable?

School notification system reliability is measured by three key criteria: message distribution, message delivery, and system infrastructure. Your notification system should send messages rapidly during peak times, it should deliver messages accurately, and it should have no single point of failure.

Consider weather-related emergencies and national disasters. Every year, events like winter storms, flash flooding, hurricanes, and tornadoes force many K-12 schools to temporarily close. These events are notable because they are often regional in nature. In such scenarios, the local telecommunications infrastructure in many places can become overwhelmed as scores of people try to communicate with each other about the situation. This is not the time you should be dealing with a possible failure of your K-12 messaging system.

Not all systems are built to handle these kinds of "peak volume" situations. Your notifications may have to "wait in line" behind other schools and organizations during peak times; they may be distributed slowly and unevenly among your audience; or they may not be delivered at all if the provider's technology gets overwhelmed.

With this in mind, it's important to look for school notification platforms that have been built to handle the most intense situations. Typically, these systems call upon multiple telecom partners, a national network of physical data centers, multiple methods of message distribution to avoid any single point of failure, and message distribution technology which helps ensure that no message is delayed or unsent.



Question 3

Does it integrate with our current systems?

To get the maximum value out of your school notification and messaging platform, it should integrate effortlessly with all of your school software programs and automate common tasks. Unfortunately, many providers lack integration expertise, and many platforms don't integrate well with other systems.

When evaluating a provider's integration capabilities, you should look for established partnerships. If you choose the right school notification platform provider, it can work seamlessly with your other school software, like your SIS (student information system), lunch program software, transportation management system, library software, and other relevant systems.

Integrations like these enable the messaging platform provider to send automated notifications about student absences, low lunch balances, bus route changes, and library fines, among other needs. This frees up administrative staff to spend less time on time-consuming manual tasks and refocus on higher-value tasks.

In some cases, the notification software's tools can be securely embedded within the interface of another familiar software

system, enabling staff members to use both systems on the same screen. In short, the best notification providers simplify the ways that their system works with others.

If some services tell you that they are integrated, make sure you ask for examples or see how long they have been working together with these systems. Here are a few ways you can help ensure seamless integration:

- Ask about their integrations with the specific software programs your organization uses. Ideally, they will have established partnerships with the providers of your systems, or they will have years of experience integrating with those systems.
- Ask the provider how they respond to security and feature updates from other providers. Does a significant update of the other provider's software break the integration with their notification system? Ideally, your notification provider should be using "future proof" integration methods as much as possible.



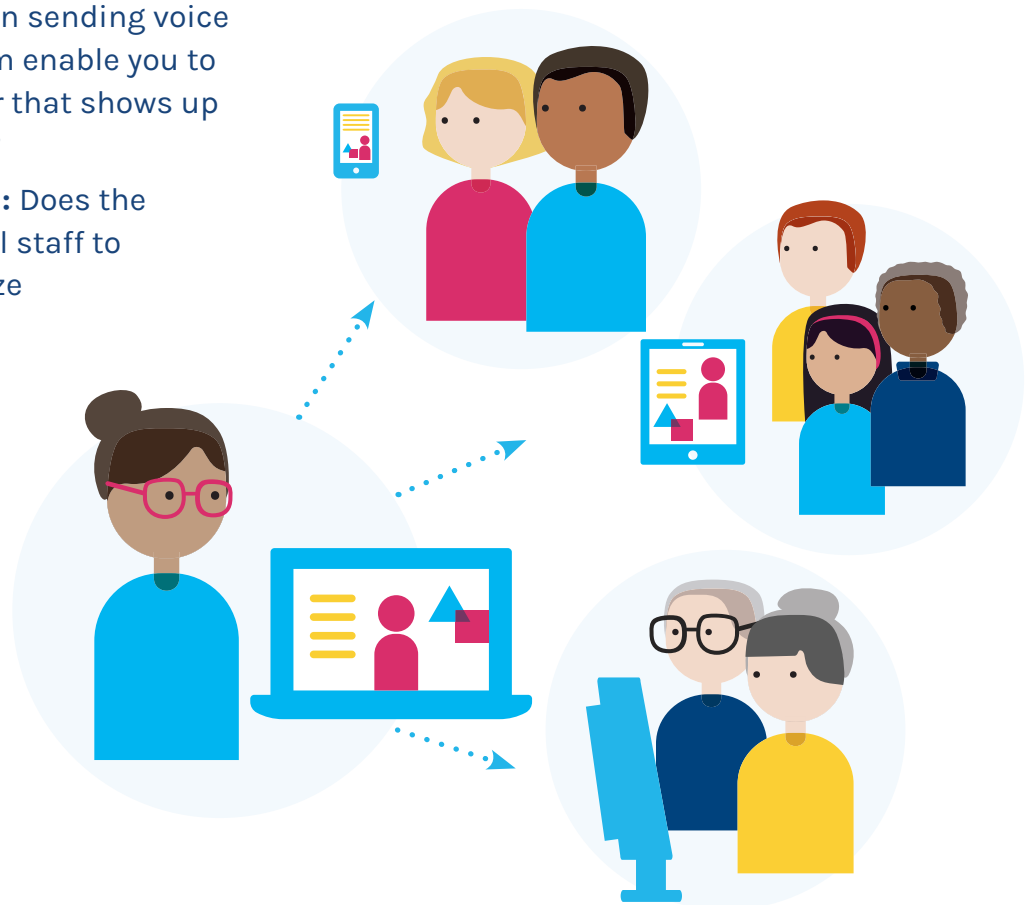
Question 4

What are the broadcast capabilities of their K-12 messaging system?

Traditionally, K-12 notification and messaging platforms send voice, text, and email messages. Note, however, that K-12 schools need messaging platforms that do much more than that. When evaluating a platform's broadcast messaging capabilities, be sure to consider the following:

- **Message Types:** Does the platform allow you to send voice calls, SMS text, and email messages? Are there other ways to communicate?
- **Multichannel Messaging:** Does the platform enable you to create one message and publish it across multiple channels in the same broadcast?
- **Other Types of Messaging:** Does the platform enable you to push broadcasts and notifications to other services such as parent portals or social media?
- **Website & App Publishing:** Does the platform enable you to push updates to your school website and mobile app?
- **Mobile Broadcast App:** Does the provider offer a mobile app that school leaders can use to send broadcasts from their phones? Is the app available for Android and Apple phones?
- **Contact Lists:** Does the platform enable you to easily create and maintain lists of contacts? Can users create an unlimited number of lists? Is it easy to search for contact lists within the platform's interface? Can you easily send notifications to tightly-defined groups of parents (i.e. parents whose students ride a certain bus or all parents of students in a particular class)?
- **Guardian Data:** Does the platform enable you to send messages to a child's parents, guardians, and/or contacts differently (i.e. ensure that non-custodial parents are set up to receive the correct notifications)?
- **Language Translation:** Does the platform enable users to automatically translate messages into languages you need? How many languages? How many message types?

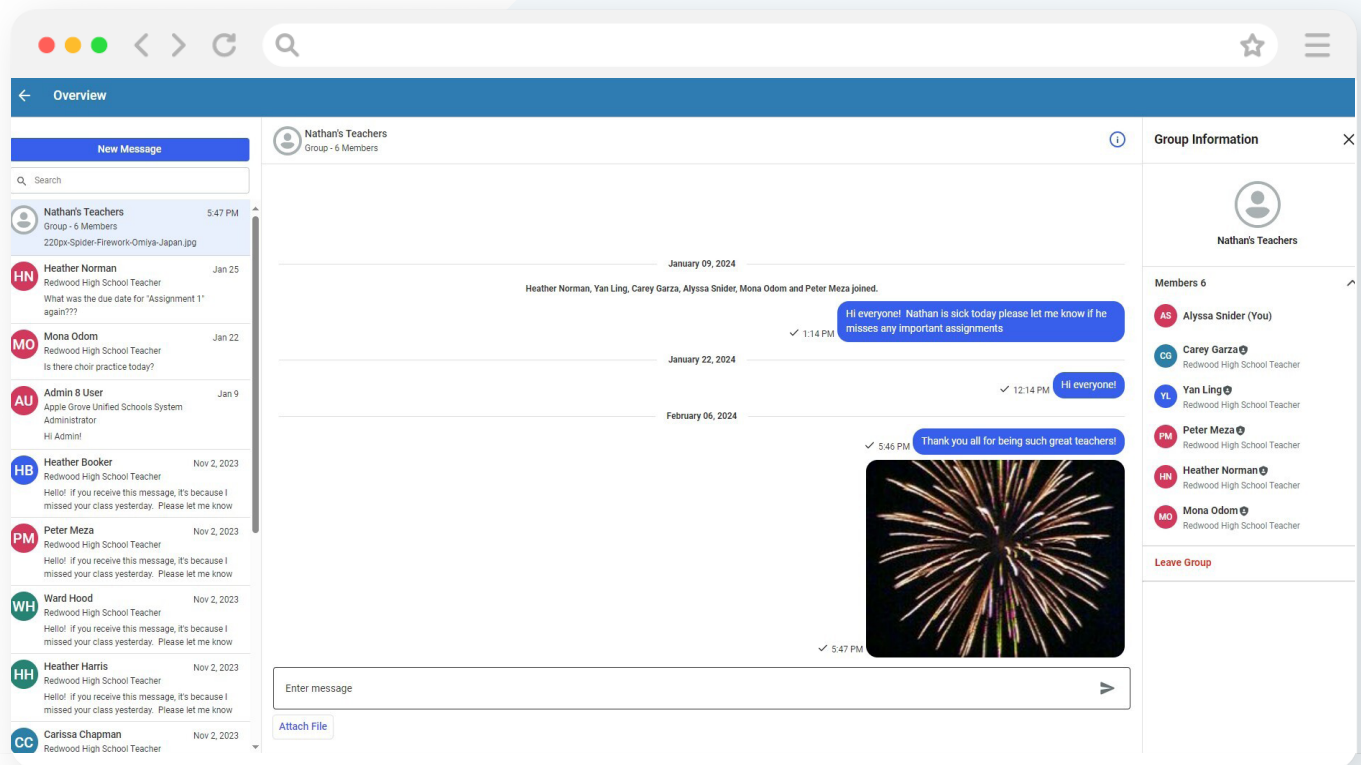
- **Attendance Notification:** Does the platform send automated alerts to parents about student absences? Can the platform send alerts about period-specific absences? Do attendance calls allow parents to submit a response?
- **Lunch Balance Notification:** Can the platform send automated alerts to parents about low lunch account balances?
- **Complex Scenario Handling:** Does the platform allow users to control how messages are delivered based on notification type (i.e. early school cancellation notices going to home/personal contacts and late dismissal notices going to parents' work contacts)?
- **Caller ID Control:** When sending voice calls, does the platform enable you to customize the number that shows up on recipients' phones?
- **"Bad Contact" Control:** Does the platform enable school staff to automatically recognize and clean up phone numbers and email addresses that fail to receive messages?
- **Parent Preferences:** Are parents able to customize how different types of messages (i.e. attendance alerts) are sent? Does the provider offer parents multiple ways to receive messages (i.e. mobile app, web portal, etc.)?
- **Reporting:** What analytics reports are available? Does the platform provide simple dashboards that show how recent broadcasts performed? Do these reports show how successful your broadcasts are? Do reports make it easy to understand how to improve messaging performance? Is it possible to build your own custom reports? Can reports be scheduled and automatically sent to certain contacts at pre-defined times?



Question 5

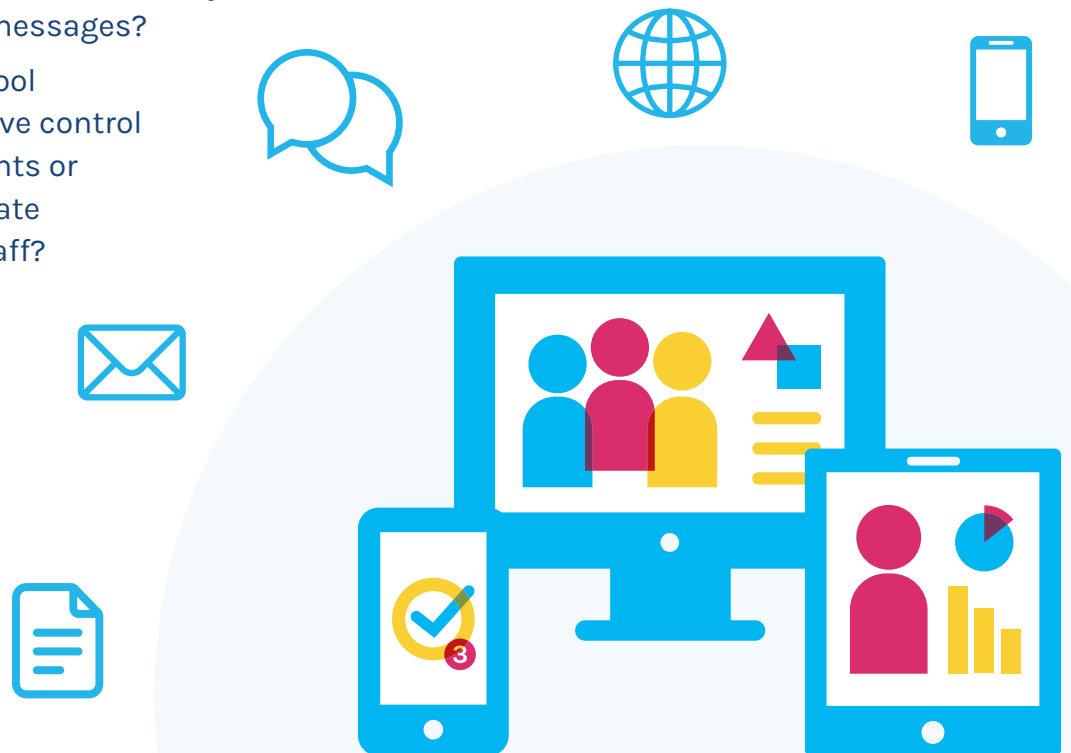
What are its classroom messaging capabilities?

In addition to schoolwide broadcast messaging, many schools also need tools for classroom communications. This change has largely been driven by teachers adopting third-party teacher messaging apps.



To avoid message fatigue, too many parent logins, data privacy concerns, or erroneous messages, K-12 administrators realize that they need control over classroom messaging as well. When evaluating a platform's classroom messaging capabilities, consider the following:

- **Messaging Options:** Does the platform offer two-way messaging? Does the platform enable 1-1 messaging, classroom messaging, and ad-hoc group messaging?
- **Integrated Messaging:** Are the provider's classroom messaging capabilities fully integrated to enable staff to manage all school communications from one interface? Ideally, the vendor's solution can allow schools to retire third-party classroom messaging apps.
- **User Types:** Is it possible to create accounts for staff? Parents? Students?
- **Language Translation:** Does the platform offer automatic two-way translation of all messages?
- **Initiation:** Do school administrators have control over whether parents or students can initiate messages with staff?
- **Data Protection:** Are all users able to access the platform without exposing their personal phone numbers or other personal details?
- **Message Content:** Can users communicate with text, audio, images, and emojis? Can users upload and share files?
- **Integrated Platform:** Does the web or mobile app where messages are sent and receive, also allow for viewing of other types of content such as grades, assignments, calendars and provide access to other systems in one seamless portal?



Question 6

Does the platform have advanced messaging capabilities?

Well-established platforms offer multiple ways to communicate with parents and stakeholders. Here are some advanced features to consider when evaluating a K-12 notification and messaging platform:

- **Email Newsletters:** Does the platform provide templates to create email newsletters with drag-and-drop content creation, so no coding is required? Can you also write newsletters from scratch? Are email newsletters mobile-friendly by default so recipients can read them on any device?
- **Email Attachments:** Does the platform enable you to include attachments in email notifications? Can you easily attach and send flyers? What kinds of files can you attach? Are there limits to the quantity or size of these attachments?
- **Secure Document Delivery:** Does the provider enable you to send sensitive documents like report cards, test scores, or class schedules to parents electronically? Can the platform take a large data file export from other school software programs (i.e. a file containing report cards for all students), automatically split the large file into separate files, and send them to the correct parents? What kind of security measures does the provider employ to ensure that documents are sent securely and accessed by the correct recipients? Does the system offer tracking?
- **Extended-Character SMS Texting:** Does the provider enable you to go beyond the standard 160-character limit when sending text messages?
- **Desktop Alerts:** Does the notification platform enable you to send urgent alerts to the computers of school staff members?
- **Phone Surveys:** Does the system enable you to deliver surveys via phone? Are you able to capture touch tone and voice responses with this feature? Can you send surveys with any number of questions?





Question 7

Does the provider offer a full suite of solutions?

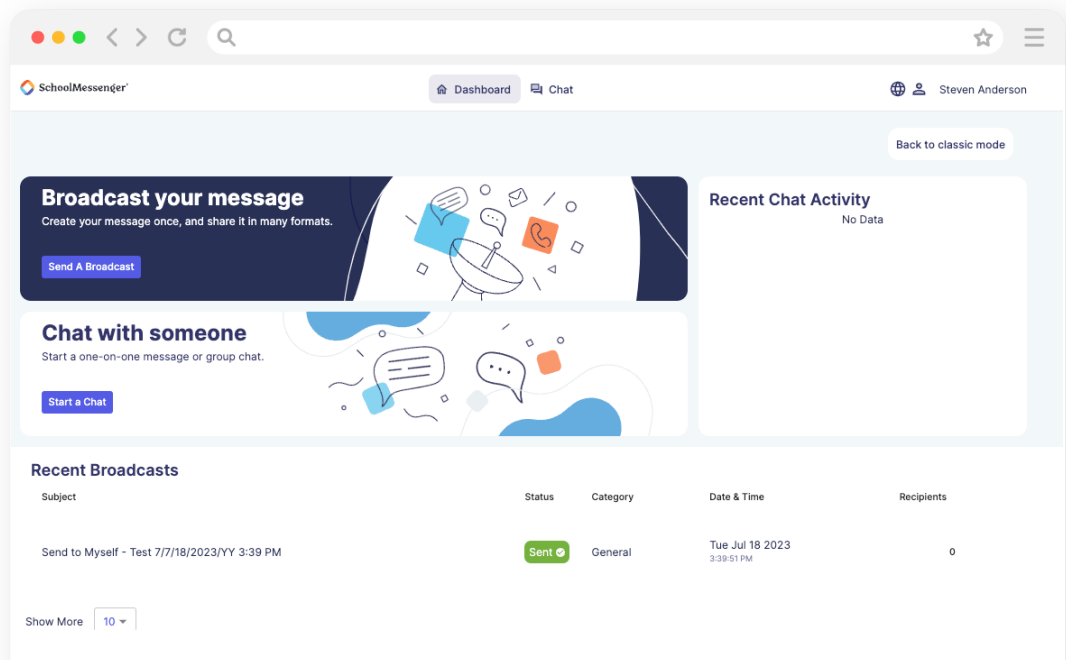
Your notification and messaging platform is an important communications tool, but it's just one piece of a larger puzzle. The best vendors offer a full suite of K-12 solutions that decrease the workload for all users.

Besides a strong notification and messaging platform, your provider should offer school websites, school mobile apps, K-12 attendance management tools, digital forms, and policy compliance tools, among other applications.

In addition to classroom-level, school-level, and district-level messaging, providers should offer a central hub that manages assignments, grades, attendance, and fee payments. An interface with this kind of functionality can engage parents and students, which has been shown to reduce absenteeism and boost academic success, among other benefits.

Ideally, all the solutions in the provider's product suite are well-established and have been enhanced over time with customer feedback. Your chosen provider's platform has ideally been utilized by thousands of top schools and districts.

Don't forget about service and consultation. The best vendors can assist your school with integrating all of these cross-platform capabilities.



Question 8

Is it easy to use?

Users of school notification systems have varying levels of technical skill or access to tools. This makes ease of use a key point to consider when evaluating products. When considering your messaging platform, remember that many systems show well in a demo situation, but they must be able to meet your real-life needs.

To assess each system, think broadly about ease of use. The following points and ideas can help you do that. Keep them in mind as you compare systems.

- **Product Interface:** When users log in to the system, is the home screen simple and well-organized? Is it modern and attractive? Are the various sections of the application easy to navigate?
- **Message Creation:** When users create a message, is the process simple and intuitive? Are in-app help resources available?
- **Message Launch:** Is it easy to search/select individual contacts and contact lists? Can users create new contact lists on the fly? What is the process for creating broadcasts in multiple languages?
- **Student Information System (SIS) Integration:** Can users create and launch messages inside their SIS interface? If not, what is the process for pulling in contact data? Is it automatic or manual process?
- **Mobile Considerations:** Does the vendor's mobile app quickly and simply send broadcasts when employees are away from campus?
- **Parent Considerations:** Can all parents access messaging, regardless of the language they speak or their access to technology? Do parents have the ability to retrieve and review messages that were previously sent? Do parents have multiple means of accessing messages? What is the process for parents to opt-in?
- **Internal Support Considerations:** Think about how initial training and day-to-day support around the notification system will be handled



internally. Large districts and boards with many campuses will need to think about how they will provide training and support to hundreds of users. Even smaller schools should train multiple people on the system. What will be the workload for your communications or technology department in terms of support and training?

- **Worst-Case Scenarios:** Imagine that an emergency situation takes place on one of your campuses. Parents need to be notified immediately, but the

person who usually sends messages is unavailable. Can another employee with minimal training navigate the platform and successfully send an urgent message? This is why ease of use is a significant factor: it can save time and possibly save lives.



Question 9

Will you have end-to-end support?

From initial implementation, to training, to ongoing technical assistance, look for providers who back up their product offerings with the support you need to be successful. Consider the following areas when assessing the level of support you will receive from a provider:

- **Implementation Support:** How does the provider handle account setup? Does the provider have an established process for integrating with your SIS? If not, how does the provider handle data integration? Does the provider assist with creating contact lists? Does the provider have established integrations with other software you use? How does the provider set up automated notifications (i.e. attendance calls, lunch balance alerts)?
- **Training:** Does the vendor provide on-site training, live web-based training, or pre-recorded training? Are there any limitations on who can be trained or for how many sessions? Are refresher trainings offered? Can employees access on-demand resources like product guides, tutorials, and manuals?
- **Rollout Support:** How does the provider make parents aware of the platform and teach them how to receive notifications?
- **Ongoing Technical Support:** What types of technical support does the provider offer (i.e. phone-based support, online chat, web portals)? When is technical support available? Does the provider place limits on support tickets or calls to technical support? What third-party proof can the provider offer on support quality (i.e. client satisfaction survey data or industry awards)?
- **Ongoing Product Support:** How does the provider handle security updates and bug fixes? On what cadence does the provider release new features? What is their process for accepting customer feedback and requests?



Question 10

How does the vendor handle data security and privacy?

Nowadays, concerns around cybersecurity and student data privacy are top-of-mind. For this reason, you'll want to make sure that your school notification system provider is committed to protecting your data and equipped to do so.

To minimize the risks of cyberattacks and data breaches, your school messaging system provider must protect its platforms. Consider both application security and physical security.

Application security refers to the measures taken to protect the system's software, including firewalls, data encryption methods, password protections, and privacy policies.

Physical security is about the measures a company takes to secure its data centers and servers. This includes building security measures at data centers, backup security systems, and business continuity protections. Be sure to ask for detailed information on a provider's efforts in these areas.

Protecting student privacy is not a new requirement for K-12 schools; regulations like FERPA in the U.S. demand it. Historically, however, education technology companies have not always maintained strict standards around data privacy. One way to check if your school messaging platform has pledged to maintain student privacy is to check the Student Privacy Pledge website (studentprivacypledge.org).

Another such pledge is the K-12 Education Technology Secure by Design Pledge, developed by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and the U.S. Department of Education. The initiative was announced in 2023 at the White House during First Lady Jill Biden's Cybersecurity Summit. PowerSchool has signed the pledge and continues to safeguard over 45 million students.



Question 11

Is the vendor a leader in the K-12 ecosystem?

Technology changes quickly, and these fast-moving developments impact K-12 schools and districts. To understand how technological changes impact your communication with parents and stakeholders, you need a partner who is at the forefront of these issues.

When evaluating communications providers, look for partners that are known for their leadership in the K-12 ecosystem. Here are a few ways to assess industry leadership:

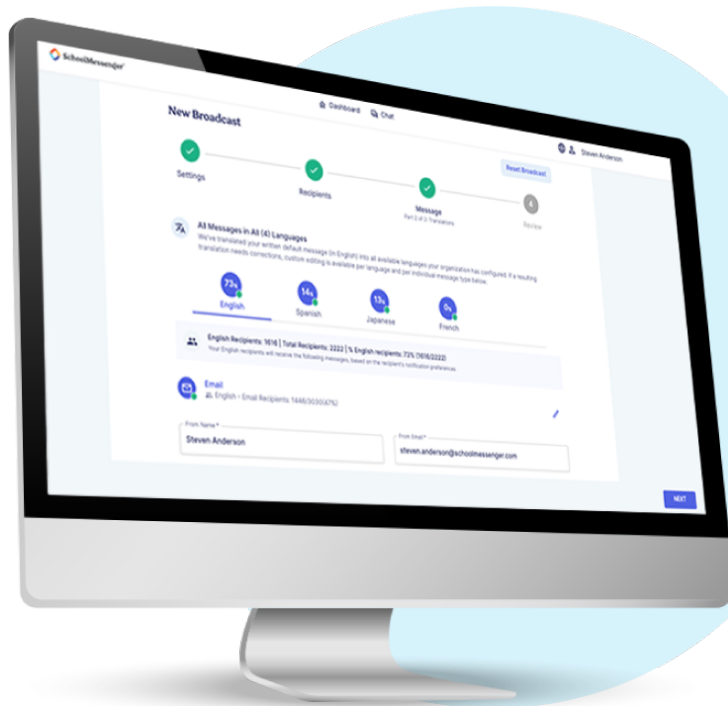
- **People:** Does the provider employ former K-12 leaders who understand the unique needs of schools?
- **Thought Leadership:** What expert insights does the provider offer around K-12 engagement? What is the provider's expertise on other current K-12 issues such as artificial intelligence, data management, personalized learning, and cybersecurity? Does the provider offer free resources like webinars and best-practice guides to help customers stay ahead of these evolving issues?
- **Product Leadership:** What innovative solutions and features has the provider released to help K-12 leaders address today's challenges?
- **Community & Society:** What relationships does the provider maintain with leading education associations, government groups, and other organizations? Does the provider help connect K-12 leaders across districts?
- **Third-Party Recognition:** What do customers say about the provider? What external industry awards has the provider received?



How PowerSchool SchoolMessenger Can Help

PowerSchool SchoolMessenger provides over 63,000 schools in North America with cybersecure tools to reach every parent or guardian across voice, text, email, and social media messaging—with automatic translations for over 100 languages.

Our tested and proven platform supports emergency alerts, paperless permission forms and waivers—and it integrates with over 130 established systems, all through a simple interface. In particular, SchoolMessenger is integrated with PowerSchool SIS, making it easily accessible within the tools you already use in your daily workflow.



Centralize Access to Communication and Emergency Messaging Tools



Increase Efficiency and Security with Trusted, Time-Saving Integrations



Elevate Family Engagement with Two-Way Messaging

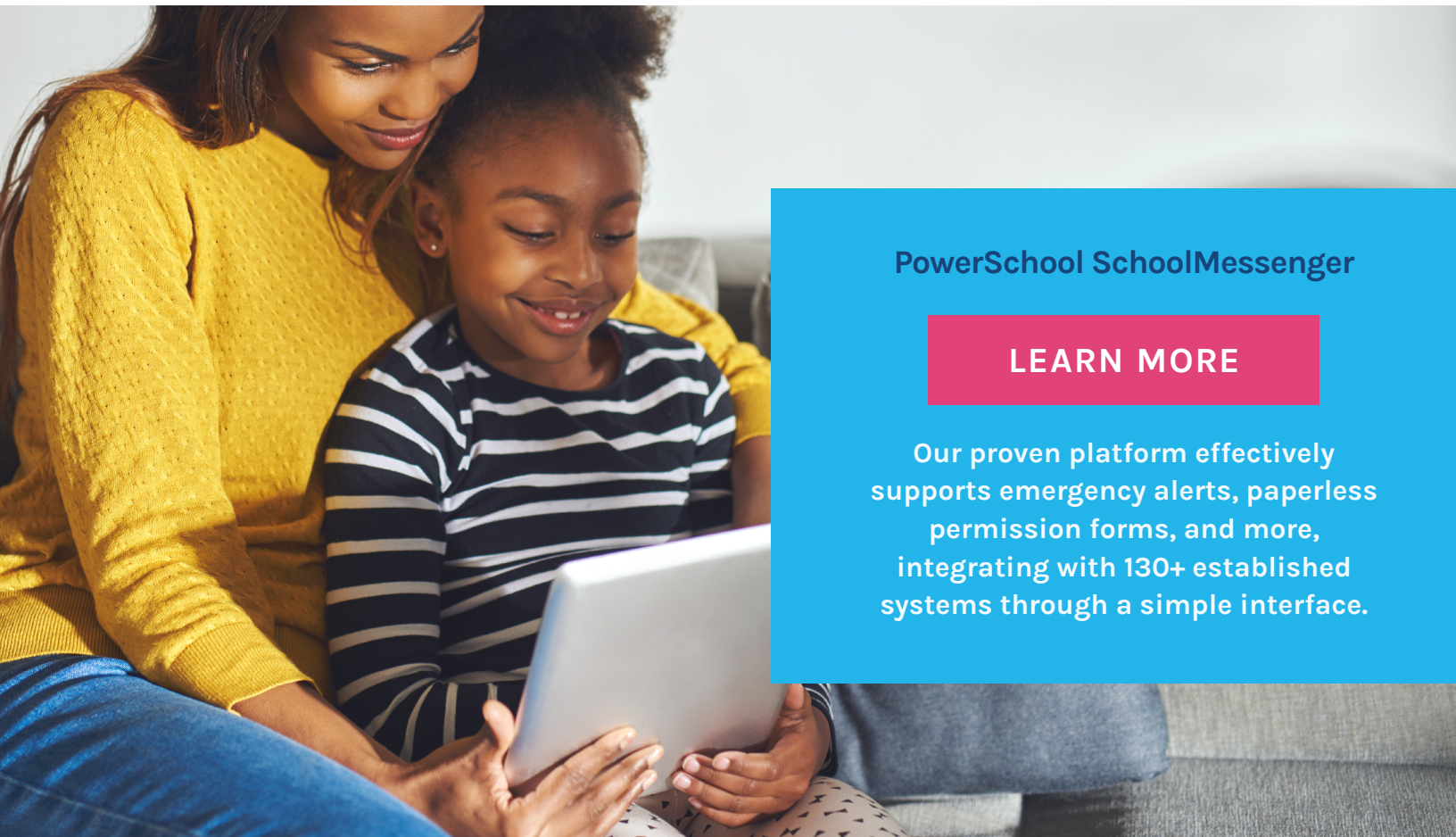


Conclusion

Choosing a K-12 notification and communication provider is an important decision. Schools need simple-to-use interfaces, reliable customer support, and a vendor that offers multiple ways to broadcast messages.

Keep in mind that the best messaging software for your school or district is the one that you can use exclusively, so that contact with families is streamlined and student data is protected.

PowerSchool SchoolMessenger is a communications platform that is seamlessly integrated into PowerSchool's SIS—the #1 selling K-12 student information system. This keeps SchoolMessenger secure and readily accessible for users across your school and district.



PowerSchool SchoolMessenger

LEARN MORE

Our proven platform effectively supports emergency alerts, paperless permission forms, and more, integrating with 130+ established systems through a simple interface.



PowerSchool

Personalized Education for Every Journey

www.PowerSchool.com