

# PARENT CONTACT LISTS: A PERENNIAL HEADACHE

Could pioneering platform Classlist solve your school's parent communication problems, asks Judith Keeling

It's a perennial headache faced by school heads everywhere. Parents clamour for contact details of other families at the school – but data protection laws make it too complicated and time-consuming for the school to draw up a list.

Some parent Class Reps still toil laboriously to provide a class contact list – often involving hours of work gathering details from parents – only to find they immediately need updating because families have moved house or changed their emails. To communicate with parents PTAs often rely on the school to send out messages on their behalf using ParentMail, placing an administrative burden on the school.

At other schools, parents try to adapt existing social media platforms to help out – typically setting up WhatsApp groups or Facebook pages for their class, year group or school.

But now Classlist – a new free platform pioneered at a leading school – is also being championed by a rapidly-growing number of schools.

By the end of the last academic year more than 150 schools nationwide had adopted Classlist as a more secure solution to the need for parents to exchange contact details.

## FACEBOOK

Given the ubiquity of Facebook, it's hardly surprising that some parents and schools have tried to use it for group school parent communications.

But despite Facebook's universal popularity, it appears many parents worry about using the site to share private data

because they have to rely on the group administrator to navigate the privacy settings correctly, and they don't want notifications for school-related matters mixed in with their personal notifications, as they may miss a message.

And schools themselves have severe reservations about PTAs and parents using social media for school-related communications because of the uninhibited way many parents are used to engaging with each other on Facebook.

## CRITICISMS

This can lead to the school or PTA Facebook page being used for malicious criticisms of the school or individual members of staff or to the entire group receiving spam about subjects unrelated to school.

“We have had a problem with Facebook with people putting inappropriate posts publicly and in private class groups. People wouldn't put this stuff in an email, but when they are in 'social and share' mode on Facebook they can lose their inhibitions,” says Louise Evans, a parent governor at Hungerford Primary School in Berkshire.

The school has now stopped using Facebook groups and has instead adopted the Classlist platform, pioneered at the Dragon School in Oxford and launched nationally a year ago.

Classlist is now operating in schools in locations ranging from Scotland to Somerset and in both the independent and state sectors.

“I don't think we will have the same problems with Classlist as we did with Facebook as I can already see that people

treat it completely differently. It is a separate school-based service and not mixed in with social media usage,” says Louise Evans.

## MODERATED

Indeed, one of Classlist's conditions of use is that content can be moderated by a school lead who will take down posts that complain about a school or school-related matter.

Classlist was created as a 'virtual schoolgate' by two busy Oxford mothers as a way of helping parents to contact each other and to take some of the hassle out of running their children's school lives.

“We just tried to create something that we – and other parents – would find useful,” says Susan Burton, creator and CEO of Classlist (and a mother of three).

Classlist is data protection registered and an approved supplier to PTA UK, the national body for parent associations.

Many schools have adopted Classlist because it offers a free and secure way to outsource their PTA and parent communications – and mindful, no doubt, that parental engagement is now an OFSTED metric.

Parents sign up to Classlist – and can choose how much information they share with other parents. They can also edit or update their information at any time. This means that – unlike the excel spreadsheets drawn up by class reps – Classlist is never inaccurate or out-of-date.

“We used to have a paper-based list of parents' details but that got out of date quickly and there were data protection issues,” says Matthew Godfrey, deputy head at Caterham School, in Surrey.



## SOPHISTICATED

“Classlist is a much more sophisticated tool and in our experience has helped parents link up. Our parents use it to ask about lost property and to arrange Parents’ Association events,” he adds.

Parents can contact other parents in their class or year group but no third parties have access to any parent data, including the local businesses whose advertisements finance the site.

Of course, some schools already have their own parent portals – but these offer limited functionality, and generally don’t offer parent contact details or the ability for the PTA to communicate with parents. With Classlist parent members choose exactly what information to share and can even be contacted directly on the platform itself. All group messages are copied to

named parent association representatives, who have moderation rights and approve all parents to join Classlist.

Jane Jarrett, registrar at Reading Blue Coat School, which recently adopted Classlist says: “We are getting the feedback that parents want to be able to contact each other with an up-to-date contact list.

“Some of the parents have started using WhatsApp groups, but that doesn’t work for us. Not everyone is on WhatsApp, and not everyone likes it. We think Classlist is a better alternative for the parents and the school.”

## COMMUNICATE

Clare Wright, Co-Founder of Classlist says “We are increasingly finding that Heads want parents at their school to use Classlist to communicate, rather than

using social media sites such as Facebook and WhatsApp. With Classlist, PTA representatives have full control and visibility of who can join, and all content can be monitored centrally across all class groups. Our user guidelines make it clear to parents that Classlist is a tool to aid PTA and parent communication and should not be used to complain about the school or individuals. “

It’s clear that the way that parents communicate with each other is constantly evolving – and the future seems to lie with flexible, secure digital platforms such as Classlist.

For more information:  
[www.classlist.com](http://www.classlist.com)