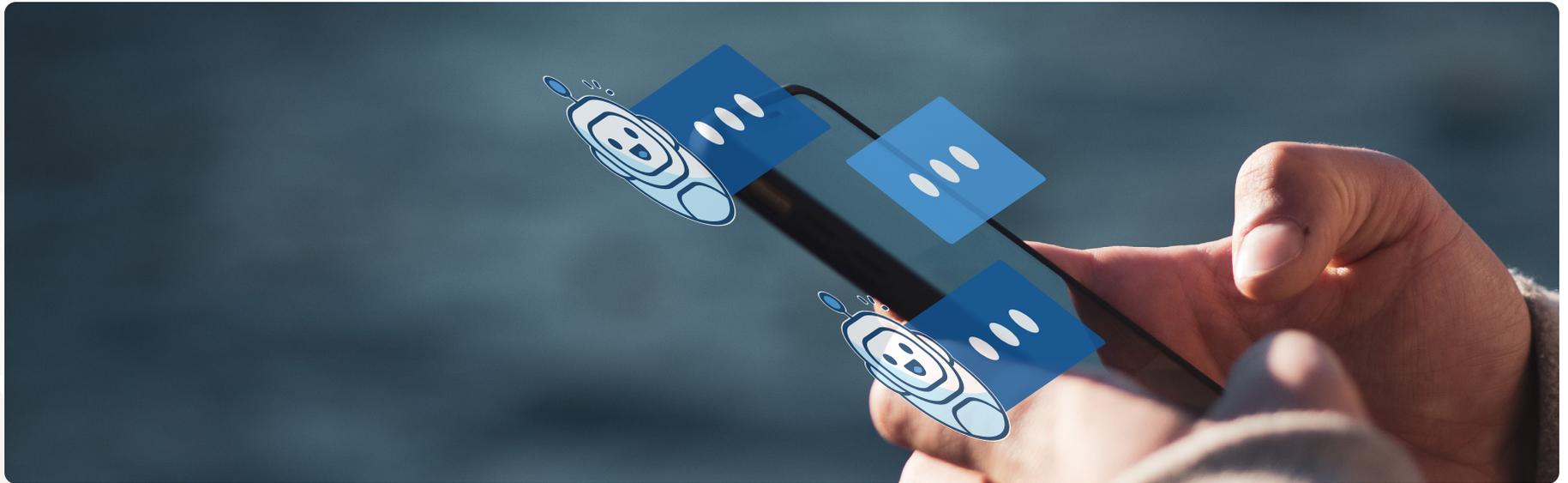




The Wise of the Machines

The promise of integrating chatbot
technology into your school district



School districts have always faced challenges to ensuring every student receives a high-quality, fair education. In recent years, it has become even more difficult for districts to achieve that goal without adequate funding and support.

The pandemic also accelerated an already concerning trend for school districts: dwindling enrollment as families shift to competing options, such as home schooling, school choice, virtual learning, and private schools.¹

As competition increases, it's become critical for school districts to prioritize customer service to better engage families, create opportunities for listening, and open the door for change that makes a difference for students.

Families and community members have a lot of questions and concerns regarding the school experience, and historically, when those questions arise, they go straight to the superintendent or other district administrators. This creates a bottleneck for community engagement and an environment where school administrators and staff are simply overwhelmed.

Education technology has rapidly evolved in recent years to help school districts navigate the influx of communications. One of those solutions are chatbots. While chatbots have typically been used in the business world, school districts are now adopting chatbots to address key customer service challenges, such as answering questions quickly and helping stakeholders connect with the right person in their district.

¹New York Times: [With Plunging Enrollment, a 'Seismic Hit' to Public Schools](#)

Customer service is the solution. The chatbot is a channel.

School district leadership across the United States has largely come to terms with the new paradigm: competition is real, and it's not going away. Arguments can be made as to the drivers of student churn, but there is no denying the math. Enrollment is down practically everywhere you look. Many consider much of that decline to be irreversible. As much as 2% of the student population is, in fact, unaccounted for. ²

Applying the simple formula of per-pupil government funding, it's easy to see there is much more than school pride at stake. As few as four to six lost students can account for enough per-pupil funding to pay a starting teacher's salary. ³

When those numbers start to add up, as they have been, the financial duress that results is tangible and demonstrable. Already stretched to their limits, administrative and educational staff have limited resources, exacerbating an already challenging environment for those educating our children. For our schools and districts to survive and thrive into the future, something simply must be done to slow and reverse this negative student enrollment trend.

Increasingly, school districts are finding customer service to be the most effective means of keeping student families engaged, informed, and enriched.

²[Return 2 Learn Tracker](#)

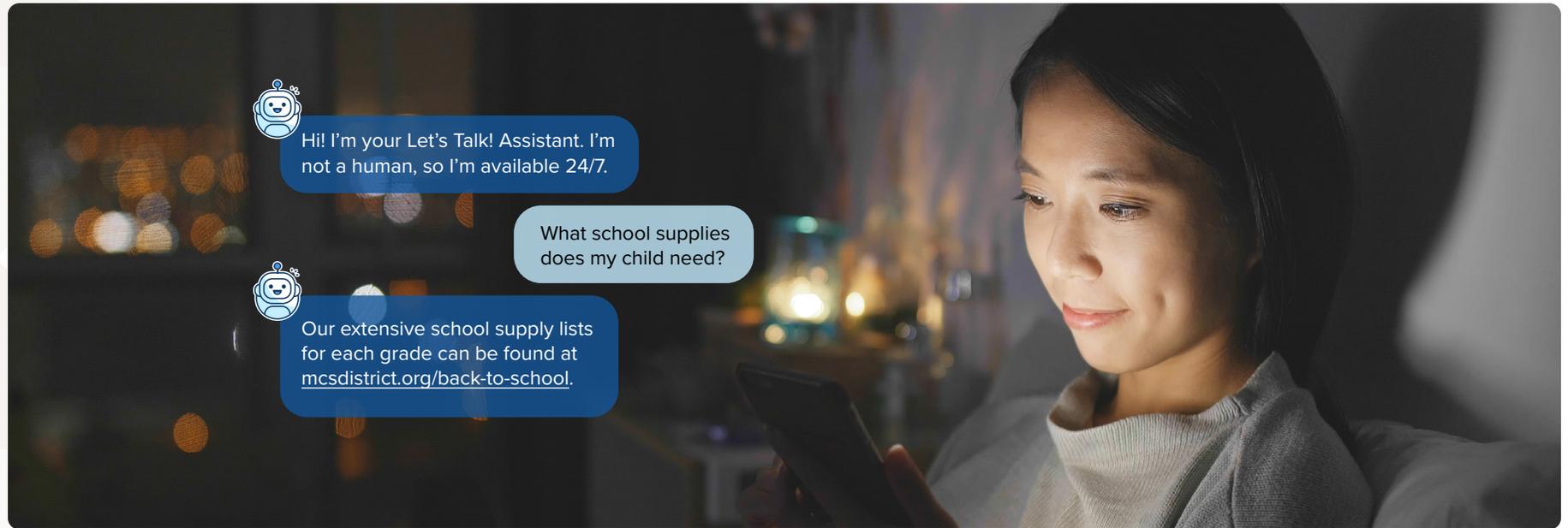
³World Population Review: [Average Teacher Salary, National Average Per Pupil Spending](#)

The idea our school districts are in the business of “customer service” is still largely foreign to many educators and school administrators. Their passions and training have been focused on educating children and enriching their lives as learners.

But when students and their parents seek alternatives to public education, we have to ask and examine why? And when we know why, we must act purposefully to remedy the drivers of student churn.



How to effectively implement a chatbot



Great caution must be taken when exploring options for chatbots. In addition to the increased competition in K-12 education and the urgency to deliver superior customer service, there is history and assumptions working against the adoption of chatbots.

If you've ever had a poor experience with a chatbot, you've likely banked that negative perception in your mind's hard wiring, as have millions of others. You understand and appreciate that, yes, there most certainly is a wrong way to execute chatbot customer service. And some chatbots have done more harm than good in their well-intentioned design to serve the customer.

There is also conventional wisdom that should now be considered fallacy: "People won't use chatbots, especially older generations." That myth is being disproved and debunked in real time every day. User adoption is up, and we would caution against assumptions that this increased adoption overlays neatly against age demographics of the population.

What drives dissatisfaction and perpetuates negative perceptions is poor chatbot design, integration, implementation, and administrator training. When executed well, chatbots can increase customer satisfaction and dramatically decrease time and expense of rote customer service models of the past.

There are seven critical considerations to keep in mind when beginning a chatbot implementation:

1

Maintain your commitment to education.

We must never lose sight of the role schools play in providing students with high-quality educational experiences while bringing communities together. It's critical that any technology helps you and your staff focus on what matters most: student success.

Email is labor-intensive and cumbersome, and staff are busier than ever. A chatbot, which can accurately and reliably answer 80% of questions, can serve as an extension of your school staff — available to answer questions 24/7 to improve the school experience.⁴

Rather than merely finding a chatbot provider and plugging it into your website, find first an education partner who understands the relationship between district and child, educator and parent, school and community at large. That organization will share your commitment to education and community, and will bring necessary experiences, parallel case studies, and proven knowledge that will be invaluable assets to the chatbot design process.

2

Start with a library of the most common questions.

For chatbots to work, they need to be connected to the right information and powered by a database of commonly asked questions within your district. In our experience working with districts across the country, there are 48 common questions asked by students, parents, family members, prospective student families, or simply members of the community at large.

Once these are introduced into the chatbot, they can be built upon and customized. Starting with these frequently asked questions will help the chatbot immediately start recognizing important issues. We've seen districts build this content library to include as many as 400 to 500 questions, but these first 48 give many districts enough to start with, and sometimes enough to keep them going for a considerable amount of time before they need to be bolstered.

There is no need to start building a content library from scratch. Rely on a past-proven knowledge base to stock your library of the content that most parents come to a website looking for but find difficult to easily and quickly access.

⁴IBM Watson Blog: [How chatbots can help reduce customer service costs by 30%](#)



70%

of questions coming into school districts are repetitive

Consider adding these common FAQs to your chatbot library:

When are report cards distributed?

How can I access my child's grades?

Is school closed?

How do I contact my child's school or teacher?

When are parent teacher conferences?

When is the first day of school?

What school supplies does my child need?

What will happen if someone in my child's school tests positive for COVID-19?

What is the mask policy?

Do you have any job openings?

How do I update my W-2?

How can I add funds to my child's lunch account?

How can I get a copy of my transcript?

How do I withdraw my student from school/district?

How do I register my child?

What school am I zoned for?

How do I reset my password?

Where is my bus stop?

When are school pictures?

Who is eligible for Pre-K?

3

Commit to continuing education.

With the use of Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Artificial Intelligence (AI), effective chatbot tools have the ability to learn over time, and even to recognize patterns or connect dots.

Once you've trained the chatbot to identify and answer the most common questions, remember the chatbot will benefit from its own "continuing education." Seasonal changes or unexpected events (such as the pandemic) require the district revisit the content library periodically to update and acclimate the chatbot to new, changing or seasonal realities of the moment.

Every six months, review past chatbot interactions along with district priorities and key messaging to identify content that needs to be updated, changed, deleted, or added to the knowledge base.



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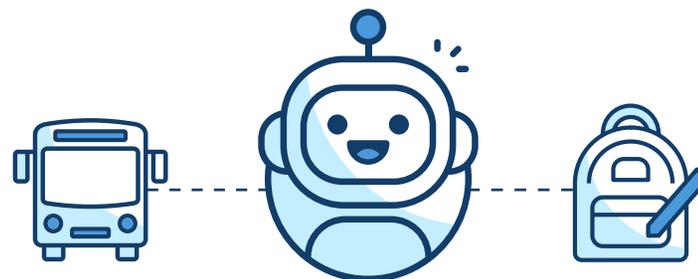
Use the chatbot to support equitable access to communications.

In all likelihood, the demographics in your school district have evolved over the years, and your district has articulated a commitment to equity.

Some families slip through the cracks and don't receive critical information because of inequities and barriers to communication. Some parents might not speak fluent English or may have a disability that impacts their ability to communicate with the front office with confidence. Others might not have easy access to the web. Even today, a quarter of low income adults don't own a smartphone and around 40% don't have a home computer or internet access.⁵

In addition, the average parent and staff member in their early to mid 30s, known as digital natives, are often more comfortable typing a question than picking up the phone to ask one. Providing the option for digital self-service lets the stakeholder communicate in the manner they most prefer — giving staff more time to serve the stakeholders who have nuanced requests or prefer the in-person experience.⁶

A chatbot can help your district meet families where they are with communications and eliminate barriers that cause inequities. While a chatbot does not replace other forms of communication, it does open a new, modern channel of customer service that some in your district will self-select and prefer, while others will continue to pursue other modes of communication. Make sure your chatbot technology can accommodate users in as many ways as possible.



5

Integrate your chatbot with your student information system.

The most effective chatbot platform is one that can integrate and learn from your school or district's student information system (SIS). We know it takes as much as six times longer to gather information to understand a question or concern than it does to answer or address the concern. This creates a further strain on an already thinly stretched workforce and budget.

By integrating your chatbot with your SIS, your staff can begin interacting with parents with knowledge of who the student is, prior interactions with the district, language preferences, and more. This allows staff to skip past the onerous fact finding steps and get right to the heart of the matter.

Make sure the chatbot is both learning from and reporting back to the district's SIS in real time, so your district can make the most of every possible stakeholder interaction and elevate both the customer experience and the public perception of the district.

⁵Pew Research Center: [Digital divide persists even as Americans with lower incomes make gains in tech adoption](#)

⁶Forbes: [Phone Calls, Texts Or Email? Here's How Millennials Prefer To Communicate](#)

6

Enable the chatbot to serve as customer concierge.

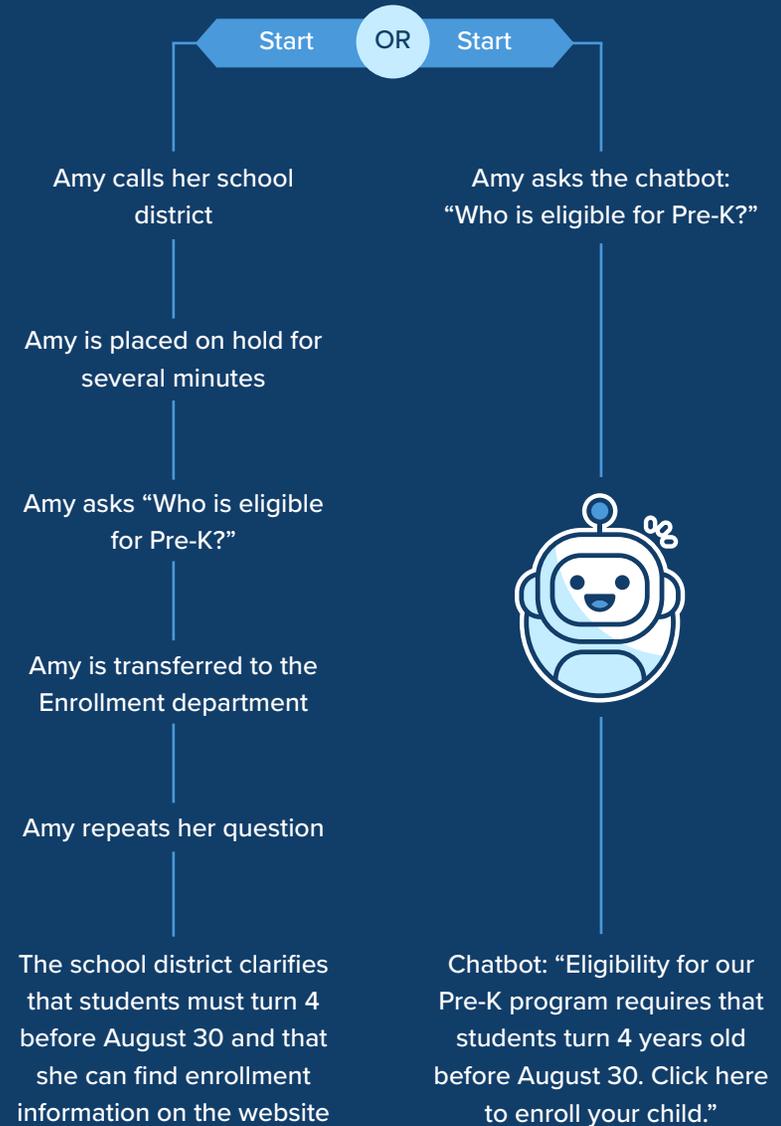
Not every question a chatbot will field will be as simple to answer as “What is my school’s bus schedule?”

Some matters will need to be elevated to the proper human for remediation and personal care. For others, a short video will most completely address the matter at hand. The ability for the chatbot to seamlessly escalate a concern to the most appropriate and available person, is critical.

You never want the chatbot to be perceived as a barrier to dialogue, but rather a concierge to customer satisfaction — whatever that might look like in each discrete interaction with the district.

Map your chatbot strategy along each predictable customer journey, so the chatbot is either addressing the inbound request immediately, mapping the customer to the appropriate resource, or connecting the user seamlessly to a live agent who has access to the chat transcript and SIS information so they don’t have to start back at square one.

How a chatbot can save families and staff time in your school district



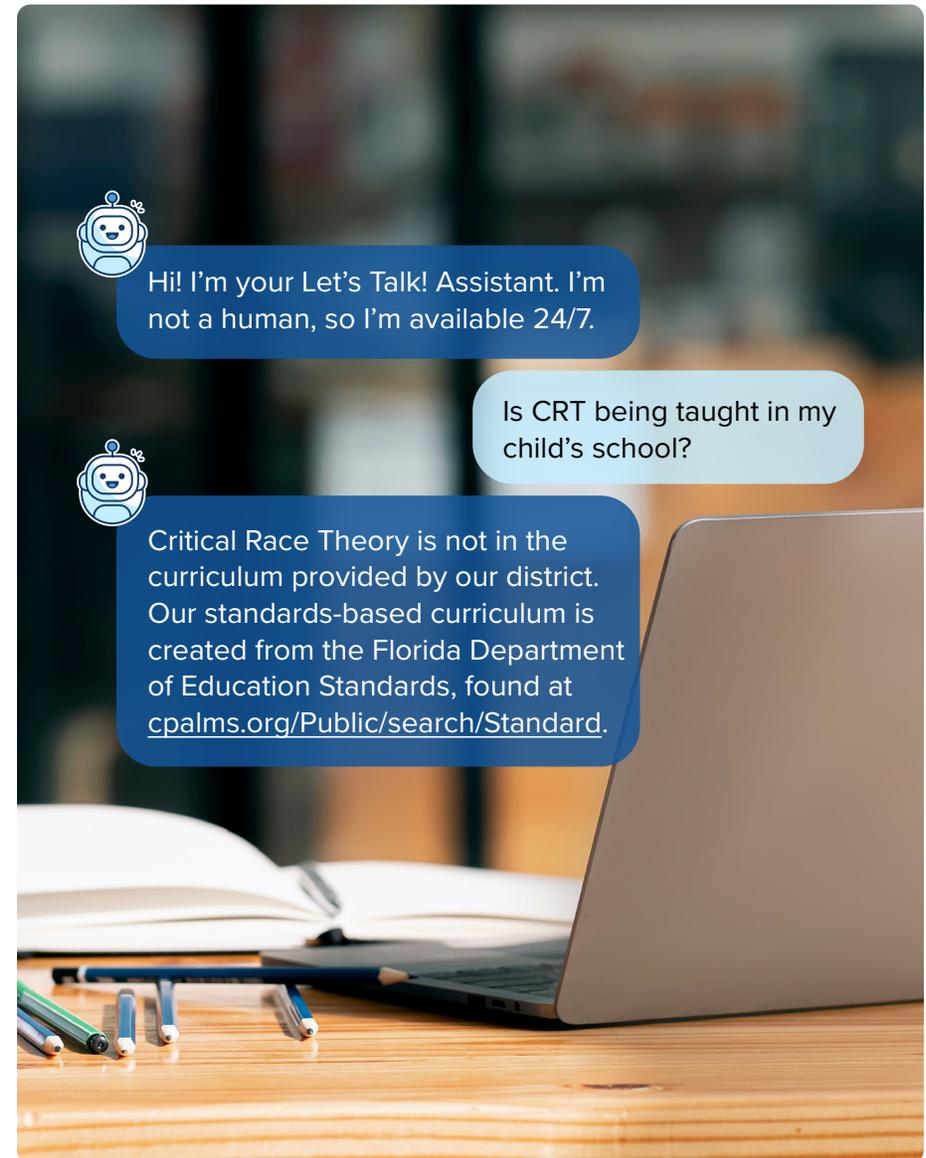
7

Harness the ability to provide clear, consistent, careful communication...even in a crisis.

Some inbound information requests might touch on controversial or “hot-button” issues. How that issue is being addressed can vary according to the person fielding the concern, the temperament of the concerned party, or simply how and when the question was posed and to whom.

Training chatbots to recognize concerns and questions, then mapping them to carefully prepared remarks and talking points can eliminate or alleviate miscommunicated responses to sensitive matters. Messaging can be carefully crafted and presented with uniformity to anyone asking questions that even well-intentioned humans might otherwise fumble or misrepresent the district’s position on.

Use the chatbot as a tool to develop and deliver messaging consistency on matters of high concern or sensitivity to avoid personal communications missteps. When a question or concern calls for a measured response, with pre-approved language that represents the established position of the school or district, allow the chatbot to be a conduit to correct, clear and consistent talking points.



The power of chatbots

Chatbots must be implemented with purpose, foresight, strategy, and a rigid commitment to serving the customer.

Your chatbot will become a representative of the school and district itself — just like the school receptionist in a school lobby. The entire district will be judged through the stakeholder's experience.



You will not be forgiven for a poor customer service experience, even if it is with a bot that the user knows isn't a real person. In fact, the experience may be judged more harshly because the user knows it is a machine on the other end of the conversation.

And the customer experience is more critical than ever. Student attrition impacts more than school pride — it affects funding and the overall success of our districts. We simply must do everything within our means and ability to combat and reverse the trend of negative enrollment growth.

And something can be done. Yes, excellence in education is paramount; but so is customer service. For, without the customers to serve, the excellence in education becomes of diminishing value to shrinking numbers of stakeholders.

By and large, schools and districts have mastered “outbound” communications. Schools have become quite adept at broadcasting information, in the form of websites, emails, text messages, and other messaging platforms.

Now, it's time to master inbound communications. We know many people will prefer inbound communications platforms, such as chatbots. Many times, they do so while ignoring or missing our outbound communications efforts that address the very question or concern they are coming to a school website or making a phone call to get answered.

School districts can no longer assume as an article of faith that our dogged efforts at outbound communication are serving the customer or informing all stakeholders. Phone calls are labor-intensive. Email is clunky, increasingly ignored, and toilsome. Even mass text messaging and other reminder services only work as one-way channels of outbound communication.



What people want is a dialogue, not a broadcast. They want personal attention, not mass communication. They want to be seen, heard and served. They want to be treated like customers. Because, in reality, they are.

“Shoppers” of education have options. And the pandemic clearly demonstrated that, given a choice, many will explore alternatives to the public K-12 system. Every interaction is an opportunity to create superior customer experiences with families in your district.

Can a chatbot by itself counteract recent trends and save public education? Certainly not. But a recognition of new realities and an authentic commitment to customer service can.

The chatbot is merely a channel. It’s a step in the right direction. It will meet many stakeholders “in the moment,” as they say. Its time has come for school districts, just as text messaging, email and Zoom have before it. Not every channel is right for every encounter with a community member, which is why districts need to diversify and modernize the channels they make available to stakeholders.

If there’s a lesson school districts can and should learn from the business world, it’s this: When you can’t provide the experience and preferred modality of the modern consumer, that customer just might find a provider that can.

Why customer service matters

Most school districts receive endless questions, concerns, and requests from every channel. The influx emails, tweets, phone calls, and text messages have become unmanageable.

Responses are slow, siloed, and inefficient. Forwarded emails are buried in inboxes. Post-it messages from a phone call become lost. And with muddled accountability, it's hard to know if issues have truly been resolved.

Because of this, student and staff problems escalate. Crises bubble up and begin to impact the district's reputation. And community trust and engagement suffers.

And the complexity of managing communications leaves both staff and families exhausted and frustrated. The top districts that keep their students, staff, and funding have one thing in common: They deliver a superior customer experience.

Superior customer experiences are not about one school staff member or one department. Everyone has to work together to deliver a positive experience for every stakeholder, at every touchpoint.



About K12 *Insight*



K12 Insight partners with school districts to provide better experiences, engagement, and education using a powerful customer experience platform and chatbot, research, and professional development.

As a leading innovator of customer intelligence solutions for schools, we've helped over 400 districts across the nation adapt to the digital transformation and deliver superior customer experiences — which builds trust, promotes family and community engagement, and fosters a positive school environment.

K12 Insight offers the only all-in-one, enterprise-wide customer experience and intelligence platform built for education.

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 703-542-9600

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