

In our Customers' Words...



Thomas Willingale
School & Nursery



Deer Park
Primary School



ConnectUs works with schools across the country to help them improve parental engagement. We spoke to several customer schools in England to find out what they think about our products and the service we provide them.

Many thanks to our featured schools for contributing to this article.

A Cornerstone for School Home Communications

School App for Parents is available on any smartphone or tablet and helps schools communicate simply and effectively.

In the words of Jodie Erics, Business Manager at Thomas Willingale in Essex: *"School App for Parents is our communication guru. It's a really, really easy system to help us touch base with the parents whenever we need to – from home, or from school."*

Simon Beardall, Headteacher at Deer Park Primary School in Derbyshire considers School App for Parents to be *"a highly effective communications tool"*, adding that it *"works well for any school that needs to get communication out to parents very quickly in a form that is useful to them."*

Many schools are still reliant on paper communications or sending e-mails home despite being aware how ineffective these methods can be at reaching parents.

Jodie reflects on life before School App for Parents and how things are today: *"We were sending paper letters, sending e-mails, and paying for expensive text messages. We have staff here who are not tech savvy so we were looking for something quick, easy, simple that everyone could use. Now we have nearly 3,000 subscribers and we get a lot of compliments on our communication, which is fantastic because it's the biggest let down at most schools."*

Wendy Scott is the Business Manager at Felbridge County Primary School in Surrey: *"Previously our communication tended to be via e-mail and paper copy for some parents who didn't have access to e-mail. We felt that an app for the school might be a better way of communicating. And in fact, School App for Parents has now been our main communication tool for a number of years."*

Emma Warland works alongside Wendy at Felbridge as the School's Administrator. She adds: "Most people have a mobile phone, so if you need to send a message, they receive it wherever they are. You have the peace of mind that when you've sent something, parents will get a notification on their phone. It's been delivered. It's made us more communicative with our parents, because it's simply easier to tell them everything that's going on."

In terms of how Emma uses the app, she comments: "Our newsletter and all our letters go via the app, I simply attach the files that I need to. We use the calendar for any trips we have coming up. Day to day we send notifications to parents of ad hoc things to remind them of something that's happening that day or during the week. So, if we have a dress down day during the week, I'll set a reminder so that we jog parents' memories the night before while they're sat down watching TV."

Joanne Garnett is Administrator at Grange CofE Primary School in Cumbria. She also appreciates the fact that there's one place for all school information: "The great thing about the app is that all the messages are in there. We're also using the dates functionality so there's a weekly timetable, the parents just have to look at their app to see what's going on in school. The parents don't have to look through all the paperwork on their sideboard at home trying to find that newsletter they know came home. Just the simplicity of it all is really good."

School App for Parents is appreciated by primary schools of all shapes and sizes, but is also perfect for nurseries, as Kathy Hay the Owner of Bees Knees

Day Nursery in Hertfordshire comments: "School App for parents is simply a really good way of communicating with parents. Covid proved that. It's always been brilliant for us, but during Covid for us it's been the best thing ever. Every nursery should have it I say!"

Simplicity and Immediacy are Key

Two factors come up time and time again about school home communications: ease of use, and how quickly the system facilitates communications.

Simplicity is imperative for two main reasons. Firstly, we're all aware of the workload pressure on school staff, so anything we want them to use has to make their lives easier – not more complicated. Secondly, you want your communication tool to be adopted by as many parents as possible and ease of use is the single most important factor in ensuring this is the case.

Joanne from Grange CofE Primary School says: "It's just really simple, not at all fussy, there's not too much there. We're all busy, we don't need to be working our way around websites and apps, we just need to action what we need to. As a result, it cuts down lots of admin time. If someone comes in and says: "We need to get a message out about such and such you can just do it there and then, it's easy, you don't have to think about it, it's just like sending an e-mail, it's just gone."

Wendy from Felbridge Primary School has been most impressed with how easy to use the app is: "It's very straightforward. We didn't even need the training, because it was just so intuitive. We have a number of groups set up, such as the PTA for example, so it's extremely easy to send messages just to those individuals."

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Jodie from Thomas Willingale also appreciates the app's simplicity which help make the tool accessible to more staff: *“The admin staff are really confident with using it, it's very, very quick. The key stage lead teachers are able to use the app as well and they do, when they need to send out messages to their classes.”*

Simon from Deer Park agrees: *“My staff use the app a great deal, we're sending messages out daily to jog memories and encourage parents to do something. And it's not just the leadership team or admin, everyone has found it a really useful tool to get messages across.”*

Simon goes on to stress the importance of the communications tool you use being appreciated and valued by the parents if you want them to start, and continue, using it: *“I have to say that our parents really love the app, from those dark and distant days of letters and phone trees, what I have to say is that parents don't miss anything, it's been worth its weight in gold,*

because of the speed with which we can get that communication out. Particularly over the past year, the speed at which we can update or inform parents of developments or updates, it takes seconds.”

The second recurring factor is the speed with which messages can be sent – and received. This is clearly functionality that all schools found invaluable during the Covid pandemic.

Wendy from Felbridge Primary School comments: *“It's exceptionally useful for emergency communications as well, being able to get a message to the whole school community really quickly is particularly important. The culture these days is that most people have a smart phone with them continuously. So it's instant.”*

Simon from Deer Park can often see parents consuming his communications moments after he's broadcast a message: *“It's interesting, my office faces the school drive where the parents meet to pick their children up. I can send a message out and immediately see them going into their phones. For some that's prompted them to come straight into the office as they've needed to action something, or have a word with the teacher at the classroom door. That immediacy is powerful.”*

Push Notifications Eradicate Text Messaging Costs

The widespread adoption of mobile phones and their associated SMS messages led to companies developing and selling text messaging systems to schools. These were lucrative ventures that led to many commercial entities growing multi-million-pound businesses. They made money from a recurring software subscription as well as significant revenues from marking up text message costs.

Wendy from Felbridge Primary School appreciates that the service from ConnectUs doesn't force schools to invest in functionality they don't necessarily need: *“School App most definitely offers good value for money. Some of the other options available to schools have functionality where you must have everything, and the subscriptions to those are huge. By being more efficient and taking less time to do things, you can be more productive in other ways, so by default you're saving money.”* Emma adds: *“Not to mention the fact that we're not spending as much on printing, copying and paper.”*

Simon at Deer Park says that School App for Parents has saved them money in a couple of ways: *"We're not having to put out the same number of letters or slips, so it makes a difference in terms of the amount of printing and paper. In terms of getting a message out, if you think about using a text messaging system, you're paying for those text messages each time and that can quickly mount up."*

Joanne from Grange CofE Primary School adds: *"What we're spending with ConnectUs and what we were previously spending on text messaging are along similar lines, but we're obviously getting a lot more from ConnectUs, so that's really good."*

“ We've saved £17,500 versus sending messages by other means, so it's amazingly cost-effective. I'm so glad that we got it, it's really helping our school. ”

This sentiment is echoed by Jodie at Thomas Willingale: *"The app is so cost effective; it offers amazing value for money. We've saved £17,500 versus sending messages by other means, so it's amazingly cost-effective. I'm so glad that we got it, it's really helping our school."*

But the advantages of a school app over a text messaging system are not just monetary, as Simon highlights: *"Messages in the app don't get mixed up with any other text messages. And some of the text messaging systems we looked at had a limit on the number of characters. With School App I can compose a message with almost limitless number of characters, certainly enough to get the message across. School App has been worth its weight in gold, believe me."*

Additional Services Slash Admin Time

School App for Parents becomes even more powerful when used in conjunction with the parents' evening and website services available from ConnectUs.

The parent meeting service is one of Joanne's favourite tools at Grange CofE simply because it slashes the administrative burden of organising these important events: *"Previously I might spend a whole afternoon making appointments for parents. This service puts the onus on them to make their appointments in good time, so that they get the slots they want and it's working really well. It cuts down lots of admin time. It's just a click of a button for the parents to make their appointments, so it's actually quicker for them too!"*

And a school website from ConnectUs interfaces seamlessly with your School App. Grange CofE were initially interested in a new website rather than an app, as Joanne comments: *"ConnectUs were offering us a website alongside an app, and it was very reasonably priced, so we decided to see how that worked for us. And it works really well because the app and the website feed into one another so I'm not having to do two jobs."*

Excellent Support from a Caring Company

ConnectUs prides itself on the level of support it provides its customers and thrives on the

Highly recommended

“ The biggest bonus by far has been for parents to receive important information and updates as swiftly as possible and to have them to refer to by having them on their phone. I'm not quite sure how we could've got through the last few months without it! ”

positive feedback it receives. It's one of the key motivators for the business and a key point of differentiation from the competition. This includes free, unlimited training, which Deer Park Headteacher, Simon Beardall, considers to be “extremely useful and very straightforward”.

Joanne from Grange CofE comments: “In terms of customer service and responsiveness ConnectUs are great. I don't normally have a problem that lasts more than a day, it's usually sorted there and then.”

Simon agrees: “In terms of the technical support we've received, it's always been excellent, there's always somebody on the end of the phone when you need them or even via the message system within the app itself. Any issues or questions we've ever had have always been rectified or answered straightaway or within a matter of hours.”

ConnectUs regularly checks in with customers, just to ensure that they are getting the most out of the system. Kathy at Bees Knees Day Nursery says: “Even though I've got the app and I don't need the same level of help any more, ConnectUs still do keep in touch, but not in an annoying way, in a good way.”

And Simon appreciates regular updates relating to product enhancements and developments: “Any updates to the app have always been communicated to us very well indeed and instructions have always been easy and straightforward to follow.”

ConnectUs appreciates the importance of maximising parental adoption of the app, and the key is getting parents on board with the new system quickly. The company therefore also supports customers by providing promotional materials to help. Joanne from Grange CofE concludes: “We launched the app using all of the publicity materials provided and pushed it all of the time. Anytime anyone new comes to the school, we give them a flier, we send them an e-mail. And we've got the big poster outside the school, which is still there to this day!”

If you would like to see how the ConnectUs School App for Parents can transform your parent communications, simply contact us to request a free demo