

TIP SHEET

Five Tips to Become a Connected K–12 School

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Does your school function at its optimal level? To honestly say “yes” to this question, your school must connect efficiently and effectively everywhere that matters—from software functionality to family communication, teacher and student processes, and financial management. Getting to that yes is challenging for most schools. While Blackbaud’s K–12 school solutions can connect your school from a software functionality perspective, that is just one aspect of connection between the people and systems that make up a school. Here are the top five action items to take to truly become a connected school.

1

Avoid software silos.

Instead of purchasing different software for each school department or office, choose the integrated software solution that comes as close to doing it all as possible. Find one that connects strong enrollment, student information, learning management, tuition, financial aid, fundraising, and accounting solutions so that data can flow seamlessly between the systems. Integrated solutions provide great functionality to improve efficiency and process.

2

Ensure your software plays well with others.

One essential feature you should require from your school’s primary software provider is a great partner network for individual yet complex items like lunch ordering, summer camps, visitor management, and payroll. These are areas where specialized software excels at providing a great end-user experience and the functionality a school needs to manage its day-to-day operations.

You also want your primary software provider to have an open API—an Application Programming Interface made publicly available to software developers. This allows other software to securely communicate with your primary solution and gives your school the flexibility to merge and connect data with specialized software providers as needed.

3

Work towards a single source of truth.

A school environment becomes disconnected when it has multiple sources of conflicting data and various systems used to communicate. This can be incredibly frustrating for families who want one place to find all the information they need from a school. It can also create confusion regarding which system school staff can trust to have the most accurate reports and up-to-date contact information for its families.

The goal of any school should be a Student Information System that houses what we call the “single source of truth” for a family. A single source of truth means that communications come from one place, no matter which school department is involved. The family should be able to easily find teacher notes, grades, assignments, class and sports schedules, attendance records, and other essential information, and to update their contact information in one place for all school departments. Ideally, that one login would also be where they can pay tuition, make donations to the school, and collaborate with other families on extracurricular activities.

4

Evaluate cross-functional process flow.

A connected school means having a seamless experience for students moving through the school and the best cross-functional workflow between the different departments. For instance, if the admissions team has a smooth process but the business office needs to do things manually to make contract billing work, is the process genuinely smooth? When a child moves from elementary to middle school, if the teachers must work harder to explain technology uses to the children, is the lower school process working well?

A school is a living organism that requires a lot of care and consideration. There must be give-and-take from every area of the school for the overall benefit of the students, families, faculty, and staff. In a connected school, processes must be continuously evaluated and modified for the best outcome for the greater good.

5

Find the balance between flexibility and structure.

No two schools operate precisely the same way. Departments must be flexible to do the work; software must be customizable to manage the work. However, being flexible and customizable doesn't always equal a more connected school. The more flexible you make a process, the more room there is for error. The more customizable you make a system, the more complex you make it to understand and the easier it breaks when the software needs to be updated.

Ease of use usually comes by having standard criteria for a process or software system. We want students to do things in a structured way, which is how we teach them. The same should be applied to any process or software solution. Structure is essential when you want a process or software to be adopted easily and quickly. If every teacher did things differently and every department, too, it would be impossible to be a connected school. The idea is to find a balance between flexibility and structure. Find your non-negotiables and stick to them.

Education is a human-centric endeavor and connecting K–12 school software systems is ultimately an investment in the teachers, staff, students, and families who make up your school community. A connected school is one in which processes flow naturally, data flows seamlessly between software systems, and the entire school community is empowered with valuable communication tools, accurate information, and a unified experience.

For more tips on researching, selecting, and implementing software solutions, check out our [K–12 School SIS and LMS Transition Toolkit](#). You'll find a software buyer's guide, a vendor comparison scorecard, and other helpful information from thought leaders throughout education.

Contact us today to learn more about Blackbaud's K–12 solutions and how our customer success team can help your school drive efficiencies, increase engagement, and improve outcomes.

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