

Illustration by Chris Campbell / Scripps Howard News Service

# Schoolwork **CHECK-UP**

# Web sites give parents a look at their child's progress in class and other peeks at school information

By Kavita Kumer

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Remember when you could stash those not-so-stellar algebra tests in the bottom of your locker and pray that your parents would never find out? When you could play hooky and intercept the school's call to your parents? Or when you could swear you had no homework (when, of course, you really did) and spend the night watching "must-see" TV?

Those days are becoming a thing of the past. Now many parents have been given the tools to fight back — to the chagrin of some students.

With the click of a mouse, a username and password, parents in some school districts can access their children's grades, homework assignments, attendance records, disciplinary problems and even their lunch account balance.

Officials in Minneapolis-St. Paul-area districts hope the Web sites will help parents get more involved and, by extension, bolster student achievement.

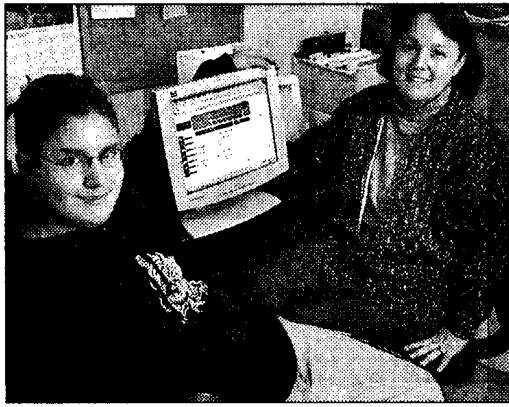
"It was really the cattle prod that he needed," said Robin Miller about her 15-year-old son Bobby, a 10th-grader at Robbinsdale Cooper High School in New Hope, Minn., where an online system called ParentConnect began as a pilot program last year. This year, it is being used in all of the district's junior and senior high schools.

Getting Bobby to turn in his assignments on time had been a constant challenge, Miller said. "My son is very bright, but lazy," she said.

ParentConnect was just the tool she needs to monitor his assignments — and to make sure they are getting done on time. Now any claims that he has no homework and thus should be allowed to play computer games fall on deaf ears.

Bobby wasn't happy when he learned of his mother's new tracking tool. The first thought that came to his mind: "Uh-oh."

To him, "it was just one more conspiracy against kids," Miller deadpanned.



Richard Sennott / Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune

Robin Miller sits with her 10th-grade son, Bobby. He was not so excited at first when he learned of his school's Web site. But Robin said it has given her another tool to make sure her son, who doesn't always do his homework, get his work done.

But once Miller began using the system, Bobby started getting more of his work done. She saw improvement. Now she browses the site only every other week or so to make sure he's on track in his classes.

"By the time you get the report card, it's too late," she said. "But now you can do damage control. And it's hard for your kid to argue against (the final grade), because here it is in black and white."

No more lame excuses about the teacher's grading techniques, she said, because parents can view all of the assignments and scores that led to the final grade.

The sort of information available on the Web sites varies by district. Most provide up-to-date attendance records, transcripts and course schedules. Some also include disciplinary actions and meal-plan balances, and include assignments and grades throughout a quarter.

In addition to improving student performance and communicating more timely information to parents, the online information systems also could help many financially strapped

districts cut printing and paper expenses.

In Eden Prairie, Minn., schools, for example, the district rolled out its EP Schools Portal this year as a budget-saving initiative.

"We won't be mailing out report cards this year," said Steve Simon, the district's director of operational technology. Paper will still be used for those parents who don't have Internet access, he said.

Parents say with such information just a click away, they don't have to wait until parent-teacher conferences or report cards to discover something amiss. Teachers vary in how frequently they update the online information, but most parents said the immediacy is getting better.

Also, they can check it at any time of day or night, a big plus for working parents. It also has cut down on phone calls to check on attendance or other questions, although more personal school-parent interactions certainly haven't been phased out. And no more relying on taciturn, forgetful teenagers for information.

"The communication (between students and parents) becomes less and less once you get to junior high," said Michael Burke, media and technology director for Edina, Minn., schools. "Junior high students have a tendency to forget to bring things home — to forget it in their locker. My son had a memory lapse as soon as he left school."

The online information systems have not meant more work for most teachers and administrators, officials said. Teachers input the grades for quizzes and reports in their electronic gradebooks, which are translated onto the Web sites.

For Miller's other son, Bobby's younger brother, who is a seventh-grader at Technology and Language Campus in Robbinsdale, Minn., it's been a smoother transition.

"The thing about being the younger kid, you often don't know any different," she said. "So it's just kind of a way of life now. It's not going to cramp his lifestyle as much as it has the other guy."