# Schoolcomms

# 20 Questions Every School Should be Asking Their Parent App Provider

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Selecting a parent app is a big decision. You want to ensure that your investment meets the needs of your school as well as your parents, and can best facilitate your parental engagement strategy.

Finding your way through the maze of different providers and what they offer can be overwhelming. To help guide you through the process, we've put together some key questions that you should be asking.

## How long has the company been providing parent communication?

Understanding how long a company has been in the school communication market will give you a good insight into the company's ethos and longevity. The longer they've been around, the more experienced and knowledgeable they will be, which will reflect in their products and development.

## How much do they know about parental engagement in education?

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Ask them to demonstrate their expertise and understanding of the wider impact parental involvement can have. Look out for whether their technology has formed part of a research study or whether they have affiliations with education industry bodies.

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## Do the developers have experience in the educational industry?

A good development team will have had direct experience with schools and parents. Understanding how schools use technology, and what their requirements are will result in useful functionality, instead of clunky workarounds.

## Is training provided and how is it done?

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Good training is key to the success of any parental engagement system. Ideally, your staff will receive one-to-one training on your own system which meets the needs of their role. For example, not all staff will require training on cashless payments, but everyone will need to know how to use the school messaging service in an emergency. Don't forget to ask about their provisions for new staff joining and refresher training.

## What support is available and how responsive are they?

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It's good to check out how any problems or issues you may encounter are managed. Ask for stats relating to their call answer times and satisfaction rates. If their support is as good as they say it is, they should be able to provide you with testimonials to support this.

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## How is data managed and protected?

You will want to be sure that your data is secure and complies with legislation. Ask to see their Data Processing Agreement and GDPR, as well as Privacy Notice and Terms and Conditions. For online payments, look for PCI DSS (Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard) compliance.

## Will the products continue to be developed?

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You don't want to invest in stagnant technology. Ask about the history of their development, as well as what plans they have for the future. Their history will let you know whether future developments are likely to happen. This is particularly important with school apps, as education technology is ever-evolving.

## How long is the contract term and how will I be invoiced?

Make sure you have a practical understanding of how long your contract will run for and what your termination notice period is. Also, if you're on a 3-year contract, check whether this is paid annually or all in one go.

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## Will the cost of the product increase when my contract comes up for renewal?

The answer is probably yes, your contract may be more expensive, especially if it's been 3 years. What you're looking for here is transparency and honesty from your parent app provider, and some assurances that this won't be a wildly disproportionate increase.

## Is there flexibility to build my own package of products?

A good parent app provider will have a suite of integrated products. For now, you may just be looking for a school app with parent communication and club management. But you may want to add cashless payments and meal management later.

Be sure to check that you're able to build a bespoke package that's best designed to suit your needs and help you stay on top of your budget.

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## Does the app facilitate system permissions?

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You'll probably want to restrict some staff access for things like financial information or changing settings of what parents can view on the parent app. Ask about whether the system allows a hierarchal structure of permissions to be set and what these are.

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## Will it integrate with my school MIS?

Your parental communication system should be an extension of your school MIS. Make sure the data can be imported easily, or even better, automatically. Ask how the system handles things like attendance information, and whether there is a 2-way flow between your school MIS and the parent communication system. The more integration you see, the easier your parental engagement tasks will be to manage, saving your staff valuable time.

## Will it integrate with my financial software and cashless caterers?

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If you're looking for online payments as part of your parental engagement system, look for integrations with your financial software and cashless caterers. You don't want a manual process happening between these, and a good provider should be able to integrate with them.

## What level of reporting will be available?

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If you've put data in, you should be able to extract information out. If you're using online payments and text credit usage with your parent communication, financial reconciliation reports should be standard. Look for additional reporting for things like parent app sign-up which will help you manage and reduce text costs.

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## Can the information parents see on the school app be controlled?

If your parental engagement system allows you to share things like achievements and behaviours, there could be some behaviours that you don't want to share on the parent app, for instance, a bullying incident. Ask whether what you share with parents is controllable and can be aligned with your school policies.

## How are parents supported?

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You'll be working hard to get parents signed up to the app so you can send messages for free and reduce text costs. Find out what provisions are made for helping you to get parents on board. Do they have example emails and social media posts you can use or other creative ideas? Is there support for parents to help them download the app and explain how to use it?

## Can the parent app be customised?

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As a school, you'll want your app to be instantly recognisable as your own when a parent logs in. Things like adding your logo and using your school colours are what you're looking for here. Also being able to add a banner image can be really useful when it comes to promoting things like parents' evenings.

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## Does the system know if a parent doesn't have internet access?

Whilst most parents will have internet access, there may be some who don't. Find out how the system handles these. Can it identify those parents easily, so you know who you'll need to call or send a paper copy of the parent communication to?

## What payment methods are supported?

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For an online payments system to be fully inclusive, you need to look for all major payment methods. Credit and debit cards should be standard, but what about those parents without a bank account? A credible payments provider will also have something like PayPoint available.

# What functionality is included?

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Think about the functionality that will be key for your school. So, for cashless payments, it could be the ability to set up low balance reminders for parents or different payment types for things like one-off payments or instalments. For club management, maybe being able to limit places or take online registers will be important for you. For meal management, you may want parents to be able to book and pay for meals in advance or want to ensure that those qualifying for FSM or UIFSM are not charged.

Preparing a list of key functionalities will speed up the process of shortlisting providers and ensure that you select a parent app that works for you.

# Interested in finding out more?

If you'd like to find out more about the Schoolcomms parent app and how we can help you achieve your parental engagement goals, request more information today.

**Find out more**
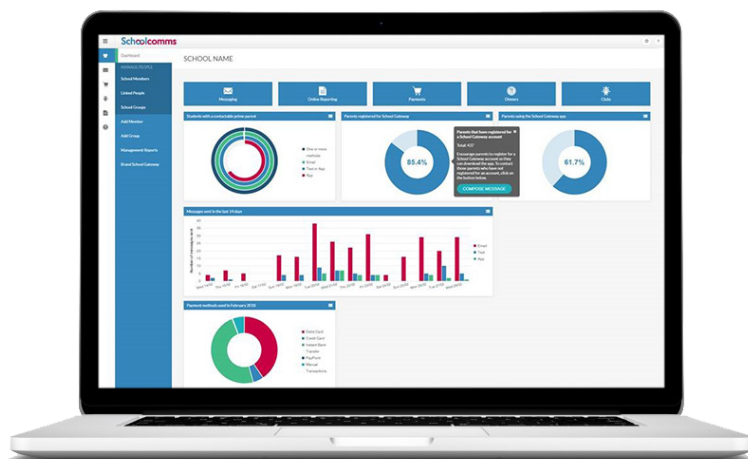
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