

90%

parents connected

McDowell High School

Challenge

Families at [McDowell High School](#) wanted consistent communication, but the scale of a 1,400-student campus made it hard to keep everyone informed.

Solution

Principal Tracey Widmann set clear engagement goals, streamlined all updates through a single platform, and motivated teachers with simple incentives to post daily.

Results

Parents feel more connected, participation rises to daily schoolwide updates, and families say communication now exceeds anything they received in prior years.

When Principal Tracey Widmann took the helm at McDowell High School—a 1,400-student campus in Marion, North Carolina—her goal was clear: build a stronger, more consistent line of communication with families.

With a large, diverse student body and a significant number of families who speak Spanish at home, staying connected wasn't always easy. Parents wanted updates they could trust, in a format that felt accessible. Teachers needed a simple way to share classroom insights and schoolwide news.

Widmann made a bold choice: every school communication would go through one trusted platform—ClassDojo.

That decision paid off faster than she expected. Early in the year, a Snapchat hoax about an ominous threat—originally from another state—began spreading through social media and reached the local community. Families were understandably anxious. Widmann acted quickly. She posted a clear, calm update on ClassDojo that explained the situation and promised more information. Soon, she confirmed the rumor was false. One parent summed up the impact: "Thank y'all for posting this. I couldn't comment until after work, but this helped ease my mind during the day."

"That moment really showed me what this tool can do," Widmann says. "It gave us a way to cut through the noise and speak directly to families. We earned their trust that day."

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Tracey Widmann
Principal of McDowell High School



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Making high school feel smaller

McDowell High School has been using ClassDojo as its primary family communication tool since 2025. Now in her 14th year as a principal, Widmann has guided alternative schools, early colleges, and a large middle school. Each experience reinforced how anxious families can feel during transitions, especially when their children move up a level.

"The families of rising sixth graders are terrified about middle school," she recalls. "They need something familiar that makes the shift feel less overwhelming."

This year brought a new challenge: her first year at McDowell High School. The comprehensive high school is much larger than the district's middle schools, and the scale can feel intimidating to both students and parents. "Transitions are hard," Widmann explains. "The word 'change' gets everyone worried. High school is bigger, scarier, and less familiar."

Families wanted to know their child wouldn't get lost in the crowd. They also wanted to feel like someone was paying attention and would respond to their questions. And with its large Hispanic population, many of McDowell's families don't speak English at home. "Reading English can be a struggle," she says. "So, the fact that they can translate is a game changer."

Growing up, not grown up

High schoolers may look independent, but families still need a clear line of communication. "People assume that once kids hit high school, they don't need that connection anymore," Widmann says. "The truth is, they're growing up, not grown up. They still need their parents to remind them of things."

To keep that connection strong, she pushes teachers to use ClassDojo for more than logistics. "I have some rockstar teachers who post every class period about what students learned and how families can support them at home," she says.

Widmann sets clear goals for engagement. "My immediate goal has been 90% parent connection on Dojo," she says. "That was easy to measure at the middle school level, but with so many students on a block schedule, it takes much more time." Instead, she focuses on schoolwide visibility. "My Story goal is at least one post a day about school events. Right now, we're averaging five daily."

Motivating with donuts and daily wins

Widmann also motivates teachers with small rewards. "We give donuts to the class with the most ClassDojo activity," she says.



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"It shows teachers how easy and effective the platform is."

Parents like the familiar, text-like messaging. "That's where people are right now," Widmann explains. "ClassDojo makes it simple."

Even new teachers benefit from the built-in AI tool Sidekick. "Sometimes parents send worried messages," she says. "Beginning teachers don't always know how to respond. The AI helps them frame a reply, which is excellent support."

Keeping parents in the loop

Widmann knows that parents want to be involved but often hesitate because they're unsure how to help. Clear requests make a difference. "If I just say we need volunteers, people hold back," she explains. "But if I post that I need someone to shovel mulch or chaperone homecoming, parents respond." During homecoming week, one parent signed up immediately after seeing her post. Clear, direct asks get results.

Widmann also uses ClassDojo to post daily bus schedule updates. With McDowell's buses shared between middle and high schools—and driver shortages creating delays—she uses the app to post morning changes, so families know what to expect. "Parents no longer wait in the dark or sit on hold with busy phone lines," she explains. "Timely updates reduce stress and keep schedules on track."

Beyond logistics, ClassDojo helps elevate the school's reputation. "Sometimes middle and high schools get a bad rap," Widmann says. "But when I share real stories—like our culinary arts students designing their own dessert recipes—it changes perceptions." These posts let families see students actively engaged in hands-on learning and foster greater trust in the school's mission.

She's also worked to shift how teachers perceive the platform. "Some thought it was only about giving kids a point or a monster," she says. "I told them to move past that part and use ClassDojo as a comprehensive communication and engagement tool. It doesn't cost families anything, and with smartphones and free Wi-Fi, everyone has access."

From the first day of school, Widmann made it clear that all communication would go through one channel. Families received automated reminders, and she personally offered to walk anyone through setup—even sharing her phone number for help. A little competition and a few donuts encouraged staff to chase parent connections. "And that helped us reach our goal," Widmann says. "Every parent, every day, stays in the loop."

