# MAKING YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT WEBSITE MORE THAN AN INFORMATION DUMPING GROUND

## Building Value that Builds Effective Relationships

Position Paper
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## Introduction

This paper examines what a web site should be achieving for your school district. We spare the details on webcasts, blogs, podcasting, permission email, RSS feeds, html newsletters, and Survey Monkey for another day. The important thing to understand right now is that these are the communication tools that can and will affect how you build and maintain relationships with a generation that is under 40 years of age.  Many of your students, parents and younger staff already know how to use these digital tools. So how do you rise to the challenge of meeting their communication expectations?

This publication was written for School Superintendents, Boards of Education members, Principals, Senior Administrators and anyone with a vested interest in building relationships with school district constituencies.

## The Challenge: Reaching Your Various Constituencies

School districts today face the challenge of building relationships with students, young parents, and community members who are media savvy, technology savvy and want to be kept informed.  Like it or not, most parents under 40 do not have the blind faith and loyalty of their predecessors to the public school system. Long before their child reaches kindergarten age, parents are in the marketplace researching their educational options. Between magnet and charter schools, home schooling and school voucher system alternatives, competition for students and the state funding that supports their education is keen. For example one community in CT has 20% of all its school-age children attending private schools.

Communication matters ... to parents, students, teachers and the surrounding community.  Effective communication is fundamental to building strong relationships between schools and their constituencies. The primary challenge schools face in today's information-overloaded society is to break through the clutter to give people the information they want at a time when they can pay attention to it. Human beings aren't necessarily changing what they want to hear and talk about. They just need a more direct, relevant message delivery system.

## The Solution

For students and young parents under 40, the website is fast becoming an electronic version of the old town crier. School districts need to engage in successful web communication strategy versus informational data dumping. This publication builds on the communication issue that was introduced in an earlier FEC position paper entitled "Public Education in America: The Tide is Turning … Is Your District Prepared?"

Successful organizations are using their websites to form the relationships they need to establish credibility, increase participation, build trust and support. They treat it more as a publishing vehicle, with a cohesive message or theme versus a dumping ground for information.

## Why the Web is a Critical Means of Communication for Public Schools

A well-designed, well-maintained district web site is one of the most effective means of communicating school issues. Given the current population's increasing dependence on the web for information, a poor district site will lead users to sources (i.e. newspapers and word of mouth), which are less likely to reflect the true intentions of the Board and the Superintendent. A good site establishes a primary source of information about the district and offers a way to control the agenda when complicated issues such as crises or capital improvements face the school community.

## General Trends

- In 2001, 54% of the population was on-line. Approximately two million people become users every month.

- 1/3 of Americans use the Internet to search for product and service information. This use is second only to e-mail (45%).

- 65% of Americans aged 30 to 45 (most likely parents of school children) are Internet users.

- The least traditional users (lower income & education, elderly) are among the fastest adopters.

- On average, users spend approximately 11.1 hours on-line per week. (Up from 9.8 in 2000)

- 46% of users agreed or strongly agreed that the Internet helps them better understand politics.

"No Child Left Behind is a noble idea, but implementation leaves a lot to be desired. It's a public relations problem, an instructional problem and a fiscal problem."
– Superintendent

| Myth | REALITY |
|---|---|
| My district has a lower average income than others, so they probably don't have access to our web site. | Internet use among people who live in lower income households has increased more rapidly than in higher income brackets.<br>• Under $15,000, 25% growth rate.<br>• $15-25K, 24% growth rate. |
| Messaging through the web and email won't reach the older people in our community. | Ages 55 and older show equally strong email use as any other adult age group. 55+ are also among the fastest adopters. |
| The internet is not a reliable source of information. | 60.5% of users consider it to be a very important or extremely important source. Among very experienced users, it ranks higher than books, tv, radio, newspapers and magazines. |
| Email already takes up too much of people's time. | 2/3 of users disagreed. More than 3/4 of users said it was a way to communicate with people that they could not ordinarily. |

## Superintendent Case Study

Thirty superintendents responded to a communication survey FEC sent out prior to a web workshop. The purpose of this survey was to gauge the effectiveness of their web sites and email systems to communicate the most important issues to the community. These key findings were reported back to superintendents:

- The top issues that you are confronting in your communications strategy are budget referendums (83%), capital projects (59%), student test scores (59%), and No Child Left Behind (45%). You don't anticipate that these priorities will differ much in the near future.

- Parents (62%) and Boards (48%) are the main groups pressuring you to improve communication.

- Overwhelmingly, you did not feel that your web sites provided useful information on the following issues:
  - Budget issues (69%)
  - State test scores (55%)

- You believe that most people get their information from secondary sources like newspapers (97%), friends and neighbors (83%), PTO (76%), school employees (76%) word of mouth (59%). The web is a source of information (72%), but it does not have as strong a following as sources that are re-worded and re-interpreted by others.

- Few offer district newsletters via email (21%). And of those that do, only 1/3 of you subscribe to it.

- A wide range of personnel maintain the content - tech teachers, student clubs, webmasters - even though the message of a district web site is that of the Board and the Superintendent.

- Only about 1/3 of you use your website as a marketing tool.

Clearly, the majority of superintendents in this group are a long way from turning their district websites into relationship building assets. On the upside, awareness is the first step toward getting there.

## How to Turn a Website into a Relationship-Building Communication Asset

Until a few years ago, most people relied on the media, friends and other third-party sources to get their information about schools. On the flip side, the very people schools needed to hear from, never had an easy outlet to share, vent or express their views about what was happening in schools and their districts. Today, technology and personal publishing are changing the relationship between schools and their communities.

The shift is a good one. Moving beyond communication filtered by news media, editorial boards and word of mouth messengers, schools can now directly engage people on their time at their convenience. Today's technologies, such as web logs or "blogs", are designed to be interactive, encouraging open dialogue. Engaging people in the ups and downs of a superintendent's job or a school board's decision-making process humanizes the positions, which builds understanding. Taking it a step farther, people are more likely to support and get involved in areas that are familiar to them. In this current day of dwindling volunteers and human resources, schools have a vested interest in familiarizing the public with their board of education activity if they want to fill those positions with quality candidates in the future.

Websites, webcasts, podcasting, RSS "Really Simple Syndication" feeds and permission email are all publishing mediums that can provide first-hand information on school issues and initiatives. They establish streams of information people come to rely on. Time sensitive subjects such as school board decisions, construction updates and news events lend themselves to proactive information feeds coming directly from the school. More importantly, proactively communicating your school district's message in a real-time forum creates a balance to third-party sources that may bungle the story or miss the point.

The first step in planning any internal or external web communication strategy is to listen to your audience through research. Communication audit surveys of the entire community or a subset of the population give the big picture on communication preferences and help prioritize topics of interest. Facilitated focus groups allow you to probe deeper into areas that need clarification or issues of concern that need to be understood before moving forward.

## Connecticut School District Case Studies:
### Madison Public Schools: Measuring and Determining Internal Communication

Madison, a highly involved, well-off school district where 95% of its graduates pursue higher education and high school test scores and participation levels often exceed those of the state and comparable high schools, was committed to improving communication. The board of education focused on communication gaps between the guidance department and parents, and between the principal and parents. To determine parents' preferences and perspectives on the communication they receive, Madison retained First Experience Communications to conduct a focus group and communication audit in 2005.

A communication audit survey was sent to all 1,009 households with Madison Public School students currently enrolled in grades 8-12. A focus group was conducted with approximately 20 parents whose children ranged from 8th to 11th grade.

Communication questions were structured in the survey to distinguish between where people get their information about the High School and how they would prefer to get it. Questions also explored topics of interest and preferences on communication frequency. The survey realized a significantly high 23.8% response rate. Unprompted write-in comments primarily focused on dissatisfaction with communication

*"Superintendents today are doing more with more kids, more challenges, less money and eroding populace support for public education. Our overriding issue is: How are we going to support public education in the future?"*

*– Superintendent*

from and accessibility to the guidance department and lack of relevant, updated information on the high school website. Parents' expectations of guidance echoed focus group sentiment to establish a line of communication with students and parents earlier in the child's high school career. Other comments applauded the concept of e-mail communications, encouraged teachers to post current curriculum and assignments on the web and thanked the school for addressing the issue of communication.

Focus group responses and parent audit data both showed a high demand for direct, often personal communication from the high school. Parents want a lot of information and they want it frequently. To meet these demands, FEC recommended a technology focused communications plan to achieve the following goals:

- Parents are frequently notified of opportunities for their child's advancement.
- Website is perceived as a high quality source of information.
- Parents clearly understand the role of the guidance department.

## Weston Public Schools: Evaluating and Recommending their Website

Weston is a highly educated, affluent school district that has invested in significant construction and renovation projects to accommodate changes in curriculum and a growing student population. The Board recognizes the importance of the community and wants to keep them continually informed of the school's progress and its critical issues. In 2005, the Board hired First Experience Communications to help them fully understand the different communication issues and preferences of each segment of the community.

A survey was distributed to all community members in the Weston Public School District. Its purpose was to better understand three basic communications factors in the community:

1. The quality of the information available from different sources
2. How people currently get their information
3. How people would prefer to get their information

Specific questions about the district web site were included in order to guide the district in prioritizing information available on it as they begin redesigning and repopulating it.

The key finding in this survey was that community member preferences for district information did not match with the way that they were receiving that information. Relative to other sources, they rated the quality of the information on the web low. Meanwhile, relative to other sources, the web site was the second most favored source.

Community members also perceived that good or satisfactory information could be found in secondary sources. These sources (i.e. friends/neighbors and local news publications), are edited by individuals whose main focus is most likely not the district. Therefore, the school information they provide may be incomplete or biased. The school website and the Board Newsletter are primary sources, published by the leaders of the district, yet respondents perceived that the quality of information in them was lower than what could be found in secondary sources.

Upon reviewing the survey responses, FEC recommended the following improvements to bring district information to community members in a way that more closely meets their preferences.

1. Redesign and reorganize the district website.
2. Regularly update the district site and make your audience aware of the updates.

3. Use local news publications and all other opportunities to drive readers to the district website.

4. Set goals to measure community confidence in primary information channels.

## South Windsor Public Schools:
### Improving Communication and Staff Productivity

South Windsor's school district could boast of having three of its schools receive national recognition in as many years; having one of the top 100 music programs in the country; and students who consistently outperformed their peers on state and national tests. Yet, its central office was consistently bogged down in responding to calls from parents and residents looking for information. A website audit performed by First Experience Communications in 2004 revealed a confusing navigation structure, portals that didn't link to anything, and outdated information throughout the site. FEC was retained to design a new website that projected a positive image of the school district while simplifying web use and making information easy to find. The redesigned site significantly reduced the number of calls to the central office, creating more staff efficiency by freeing them up to address other needs.

## Region 15: Engaging the Community

The Region 15 Board of Education has a strong commitment to providing comparable district resources within the unique needs of the school. In sustaining its community relations program, it was important to survey the community every 3 to 4 years to determine if the school district's informational goals are effective. By using this instrument, the Region 15 district hoped to learn more about the perceptions and expectations of its Middlebury and Southbury citizens.

The Board retained First Experience Communications to conduct primary research to:

- Identify the communities' perception of challenges and issues facing the district;

- Identify perceptions that may be corrected or addressed as part of subsequent public information efforts.

- Determine how much, when and what type of information the district should be conveying to the residents of both communities.

A key finding related to an electronic newsletter that had been launched as a result of a prior communications audit of the population. While pleased with a subscriber list of over 1,100 people, the survey uncovered that more than half the respondents (56.4%) were not aware that they could sign up for the monthly electronic newsletter. Of the respondents who said they were aware of Region 15's e-newsletter, nearly one in three had subscribed to receive it. This provided FEC with a baseline to measure future subscriber growth to the e-newsletter. FEC also recommended a high visibility campaign to boost community awareness on the electronic newsletter in order to significantly enhance future communications with Middlebury and Southbury residents.

"Superintendents who are successful in dealing with today's parents realize that communication skills are really key and know they need a savvy understanding of the job."

– Superintendent

## Conclusion: Being Your own Publisher is the Solution

Relative to other ways of conveying information to the community, the web site and emerging technology publishing mediums have several distinct advantages. First, information provided directly by the school is not subject to editorial interpretation, as is the case with news media. Second, the volume of information is not limited by available space, time or cost limitations. Third, a school district can quickly shift its focus to a timely issue and directly convey an important message to their audience.

If you have questions about this paper or want to discuss an issue related to public education, feel free to contact us:

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