

## GET A GRIP ON SOCIAL MEDIA

### Adding Your Voice to Web Conversation

You just can't afford to ignore what is going on in social media.

—Jill Kurtz

**I**magine this: in less than half a second, over 500,000 pieces of information are at your fingertips chronicling every facet of a single incident happening at your school. Want to try? Fire up Google and type in “Jena Six.” There you’ll find all the information (and disinformation) that’s out there about a school confrontation that went national all through the power of social media.

What started as a group of black students in Jena, Louisiana, asking permission from a school leader to sit under a tree usually occupied by white students, turned into a series of racially charged incidents that resulted in radically different punishments for the white students and the black students. Initially, most mainstream media ignored the story.

Social media did not. Hundreds of interlinked bloggers told the story of the Jena Six to thousands of readers. Blogs helped raised over \$200,000 in legal defense funds for the students. Online petitions were circulated, and over 10,000 supporters rallied in support of the Jena Six.

James Rucker, executive director of the Internet-based civil right group Color of Change, believes this story took hold in the blogosphere because that medium has no reluctance in tackling thorny issues. The lack of filters and gatekeepers allows for free-flowing discussion.

“At its core, it’s citizen journalism,” Rucker said. “As a blogger you can communicate easily and rapidly. Social media pushes mainstream media to take notice” (Allen, 2007). Take notice they did, and the national and international mainstream media played catch-up with social media first responders.

### CONVERSATION IS HERE TO STAY

Today, everyone is a potential publisher. Established media used to be the lens through which we all consumed news and then talked about it with others. That filter is off in a world now powered by Google making it easy and quick to find anything. Type in “competent school administrator” and you’ve got over 6 million hits (bad news: “incompetent school administrator” over 7 million). Add to the power of Google the fact that anyone can create a Facebook page, start a blog, tweet a picture. What you’ve got is enough to scare the bejeezus out of the most confident school leader.

But look at it another way. Google, social media and Web 2.0 present a set of tools; tools that offer the ability to reach stakeholders and influence community discussion like never before. Social media can become another way for schools to communicate, like a newsletter, an email or a website.

New tools offer new opportunities to do what we do, better. Without them, we not only appear clueless about what's being said, but powerless to impact it. Not every conversation requires a response, but it is crucial that the leader be aware of what's being said, to be able to put it in context and to have the means to join the discussion. The risk of inaction (the new ROI) is great.

Is a community group challenging your new math curriculum? Rather than lurking on the sidelines of the group's online petition and internet discussion group, champion and establish a dialogue with these stakeholders that is relevant, authentic and engaging. Establish the context for the decisions.

Test scores, suspension rates, demographics and other pieces of content are an easy click away—if not on your website, on someone else's. Your parents know how to find them. But, along with information, parents and community members seek context to make informed decisions. What is being done about the teacher who was arrested for child pornography? Why are calculators and not memorization used in teaching math? Why is the school serving vegetarian lunches?

Answers to these questions will be created either by people who are conjecturing or by a school leader who takes charge of the issue and provides a social media platform for addressing the issue in context. We think you will be a lot happier if you take the lead.

Those in schools who are over forty are all learning together. As fast as we get one new skill under our belt, another new tool appears. It's about attitude: we have to see this as an adventure, not a crushing sentence. No matter how daunting it may seem, we have to move forward, if not, we and our schools will be left way behind. The worst thing to do is to say—it doesn't matter. It does.

## **THE BIG THREE**

Many social media tools are out there and many more are on the horizon. As we write, three of these tools—Facebook, Twitter, and blogs—have moved to the top for use by school leaders. They are beyond just being trendy; they've gained acceptance and are successful implementation tools to connect schools with their communities. Let's look at each.

### **Facebook**

The benefits of establishing a Facebook presence for your school community both in expanding your audience and in providing a platform for meaningful conversation are hard to ignore. It makes sense then that Facebook, the world's largest social networking site, is becoming more and more widespread for school communication.

School leaders use Facebook for many reasons including to

- share and receive feedback on school news,
- post a schedule school events,
- share photos and videos,
- ask and answer questions and
- build school community.

Every Wednesday, the Papillion LaVista School District (Nebraska) features “Where Are We Wednesday,” when they post a picture from somewhere in the schools and ask people to identify it. The correct answer is posted the next day.

Many districts honor their history by posting pictures of past events like a 1952 sports banquet or a 1960 state debating champion. Fort Worth (Texas) ISD recently featured a picture from fifty years ago showing a group of high school students who were saluted by President Kennedy, just hours before his fateful trip to Dallas.

Other districts, like Arlington (Va.), organize Facebook messaging around themes, such as reading, teacher appreciation, or graduation. During the first week of school, they invited users to upload their own first day of school pictures.

Content ideas for your Facebook posts are endless and the more creative the more engaging your page will be.

Before you move to setting up a page, which can be quickly and easily accomplished (there are plenty of web resources to show you how), ask and answer these considerations:

- How will you adjust the privacy settings?
- What will be your social media policy for the page?
- Who will manage and monitor your page?
- Who will have permission to post on your page?
- How will you let your community know you have a page?

Start with small steps—understanding of the risks—and apply some common sense to develop a page that will meet the objectives of your school communication plan.

## Twitter

When Twitter came on the scene in 2006, the microblogging tool of 140 character messages was often derided as a nonsense form of communication. How could such short messages be functional? Oh, were those critics wrong. As of September 2013, the company’s data showed that 200 million users send over 400 million tweets daily, with nearly 60 percent of tweets sent from mobile devices.

Indeed, part of Twitter’s appeal is the forced brevity of messages. The short message form is a great help especially for those pressed for time and for those who may get sidelined if asked to write a multi-paragraph blog post. An added bonus of Twitter: it’s much easier to get followers to a Twitter feed than to a blog post. The public has a strong appetite for brevity.

Many schools and districts set up a central account. As part of an overall communication strategy, Twitter is an important way to drive traffic to your website. Add pictures and video to your Tweet using them as teasers to the expanded content, context and explanation on your site.

School leaders often set up individual professional accounts under their name and tweet about everything from school news to accolades to helpful hints. A word of caution: personal information is best kept on a separate account for a select audience. Mixing the personal and the professional on one account is rarely a good idea. (In fact, it's better not to venture into a personal account without great facility in using social media.)

Superintendent Christopher Brown from West Genesee (NY) Schools has effectively used Twitter to engage and build trust with his community, and he has a wide audience (including media, parents, students, and local business leaders) following his Twitter feed. The communication component of his school district's crisis plan calls for Dr. Brown to provide real time updates to the community via Twitter.

On a recent winter day, when a bomb threat resulted in a school evacuation, Dr. Brown used the Twitter app on his smart phone to alert the community, keep them informed and provide follow-up when the event was over. The community's confidence in his leadership was witnessed by neither media trucks nor panicked parents rushing to the school.

Used effectively and consistently, Twitter can have impact and establish a trusted line of communication between leader and community.

## Blog

It's fairly easy to create a blog (YouTube offers basic how-to videos on the topic), yet it's challenging to sustain a blog over time that develops a devoted and engaged audience. Yet, many school leaders have been both successful and creative in tailoring a blog presence to establish strong connections with their community. Here's some insight into what they do.

First question: do you need to be a great writer to write a successful blog? No, not in the conventional sense of writing classics or prize-winning essays. Instead, you need to be a good conversational writer, one who can write to the reader as if they're having a chat. If you can build rapport and relationships in conversations, you can learn to develop that style in writing a blog post. Readers of blogs expect a more conversational, less formal tone.

So, do you have to be a writer at all to publish a blog? No way. Blogging is the platform and writing is just one form of putting your message out there. If you're more comfortable with speaking, then use audio and do a podcast. Video is another option. Or, use both. Whatever format, it seems that successful bloggers tend to approach their topics using storytelling, persuading, and teaching. They're optimistic. Sometimes they point out challenges their students are facing. They rally the community to act and get involved, to learn, and to listen.

Superintendent Chris Kennedy (West Vancouver, British Columbia) publishes a multimedia blog called, "Culture of Yes." Visit (<http://cultureofyes.ca>), and you'll find a compelling approach to connecting with his local community and beyond. He writes about big issues ("BYOD and equity"), everyday happenings ("physical activity and action breaks") and

inspirational topics (“Hopes and Dreams for My Kids’ Schooling”). You’ll also find Wiki presentations, YouTube videos and media clippings about his schools.

Principal Eric Sheninger (New Milford HS, NJ) is another school leader whose blog demonstrates the powerful connection this social media tool can produce. “A Principal’s Reflections,” (<http://esheninger.blogspot.com/>) describes the foundation for all of his blog content: “Education is a reflective Practice. This blog provides my views on educational leadership, effective technology integration, best practices and creating a student-centered learning culture” (Sheninger, 2013).

Do some Googling and you’ll find many other school leader blogs to get you thinking about fits your particular communication style. Identifying your blogging goal and figuring out what niche suits your personal style of leadership are key decisions before you begin.

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## **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Social media are firmly entrenched, and the dynamic back and forth shapes public opinion in ways never thought possible. Their power is multiplied with the convergence of blogs, wikis, video, and social networking, all working in tandem. Add traditional media to the mix, and we’ve got a whole new way of expression. Used strategically, social media provide the platform school leaders need to develop deeper bonds with their communities. The need for schools to get on board is clear. To be part of the conversation, leaders need to go where the action is—social media.