

K12 Online Communications Report

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Build Community Support Online

Background

In the last decade, the Internet has become an increasingly important tool to enable K12 education to meet challenges of information sharing, productivity improvement and collaboration. Its use in classroom instruction is extending the ability of schools to provide more advanced curriculum to their students and to reach students outside the conventional classroom environment. The Internet's application for back office functions has helped save time and money for educational organizations short of both.

At the same time, a shift in demographics toward more two-income and single-parent households from traditional two-parent, single-income families; has pushed schools into using the Internet as a communications channel to keep parents informed about and involved in their child's education. Parenthetically, this survey and our experience demonstrate a reluctance in some districts to use online communications because of a perceived lack of residential Internet access in their community.

However, a study by the Pew Internet and American Life project published in May 2006 shows that 42% of United States households now have broadband Internet access, while overall connectivity has reached 73%. For those without home access, there are an increasing number of alternatives, including workplace computers, public and school libraries, Internet cafes in many urban settings, and wireless devices that are web and e-mail enabled.

While the Internet is not a substitute for face-to-face or phone communications (one-to-one communications), it does share two characteristics with this channel. First, communications can be personalized, so that parents and community members are individually addressed and can receive information based on their specific preferences. Second, unlike print and broadcast media channels, one-to-one and Internet channels provide a feedback mechanism to help assure effective communications.

Often overlooked is the Internet's ability to 'disintermediate'. This term came to prominence in the late 1990's in reference to eCommerce web sites that removed the "middle-man" retailer from the consumer purchasing experience. In the case of K12 communication, the middle man is often the news media itself. Nationwide, on average, more than seventy percent of residents in a school district do not have children attending the public school system; and yet these voters form their opinion about public education from the stories they watch on TV or read in the newspaper. The Internet provides a means of getting a school district's perspective on any news story directly to its parents and community members, often before the next media publication or broadcast.

Many districts realize the benefits of Internet communications, but have taken a piecemeal approach to deploying online communication systems. As each new feature is added, this has resulted in web sites becoming difficult to navigate and find information. It has also resulted in a data integrity problem, as information is often duplicated in multiple single-function applications, and becomes impossible to keep synchronized and up-to-date.

Therefore, for districts who are not widely utilizing the Internet as part of their communications function, this report may provide useful data to start their implementation process, while learning from the experience of others. For those districts that do use the Internet extensively for communications, there may be some findings that can help improve current practices, and re-think how the Internet could become an even more effective part of their overall communications strategy.

Survey Methodology

The K12 Online Communications survey was executed using the Relatrix EZCommunicator system, which includes a web-survey module. The sample population was drawn from COSPRA's and Relatrix' members and contact list, respectively. Eight-hundred sixty-three e-mails were sent to school district contacts across the country; 115, or 13.3%, of these contacts submitted answers to the survey. The survey was initially published via e-mail on November 26, 2006 and a reminder e-mail was sent one week later to those contacts who had not responded.

Survey Objectives

The survey was designed to gather data on current usage of and opinions about the Internet as a communications channel at public school districts, outside of the classroom environment. The survey contained 60 questions and was divided into six sections. These included –

- 1 – Respondent Details
- 2 – School District Background
- 3 – Online Communication Priorities & Objectives
- 4 – Personnel & Organizational Structure
- 5 – Policies & Procedures
- 6 – Systems & Technology

From this survey we hope to increase our understanding of how our members and the K12 marketplace apply Internet technology to their communications and community relations functions. We also want this research to help public school districts improve their application of online communication tools, by providing comparative data on how their peers use these technologies.

Survey Findings – Respondent Details & School District Background

Almost sixty percent (59.48%) of respondents were Communication Directors, which is consistent with the make-up of the contact lists for both COSPRA and Relatrix. Responses came from districts in 26 states with the largest number (29) coming from Texas. Fifty percent (50.00%) described their community as Suburban, while thirty-five percent (35.09%) described themselves as rural/small town. The remainder (14.91%) said their districts were in urban communities.

Of those who responded to the Student enrollment question forty-percent (40.54%) had an enrollment of less than 5,000 students, and more than sixty-percent (61.26%) had less than 10,000 students. More than seventy percent (70.43%) of districts had fifty-percent or less of their student population on the Free and Reduced Lunch program. In answering the question of Internet Access in their community, almost three-quarters (74.14%) of respondents said that one-half, or more of their community had Internet access. When describing the volume of e-mails they handled, more than ninety percent (91.37%) said they received in excess of one-hundred e-mails at their district offices each week, excluding spam.

Survey Findings – Online Communication Priorities & Objectives

When responding to use of online communications to achieve various communication objectives, the most cited objective was 'Informing the Community about District Successes', with more than fifty percent (53.04%) saying they used online extensively to meet this objective. The least cited objective was 'Seeking Community Feedback', with less than twenty percent (18.97%) saying they used online extensively to meet this objective.

Almost seventy percent (68.83%) of districts have a communications plan, and of those who do almost two-thirds (65.35%) include a section addressing online communications. The majority of districts (60.98%) update their communications plan every two years or less frequently. Only about one-quarter of districts (25.61%) use quantitative feedback methods to measure the effectiveness of their communications plan. The most common method of gathering community input about communications priorities was through School Board meetings, followed by surveys and one-on-one meetings, while the least common method was campus meetings (such as back-to-school nights).

When finishing the phrase, "My school board/trustees consider online communications to be..." more than eighty percent (82.61%) said it was the same or higher priority than other channels of communication. When completing the phrase, "In our district online communications is..." over ninety percent (92.99%) answered that it was important with 48.25% stating that online was

being used to meet their needs and 44.74% stating that they were not adequately addressing online communications.

Survey Findings – Personnel & Organizational Structure

In more than eighty percent (83.48%) of districts there is a dedicated communications director or public information officer. Of those districts with dedicated communications staff nearly ninety percent (89.80%) reported directly to the district superintendent.

All respondents had a district web site and for the majority (50.88%) the content of the district site was managed by multiple people in different departments. The other respondents' web sites were managed by either a full-time (24.56%) or part-time (24.56%) webmaster. In almost half these cases (49.51%) the district webmaster reported to the Technology Director, while less than one quarter of the time (24.27%) the webmaster reported to the Communications Director.

The vast majority of districts (88.79%) had web sites for each school, campus or location. Of those that did have campus web sites more than two-thirds (71.71%) of the sites were managed by volunteer or part-time campus webmasters. In approximately one-quarter (25.25%) of the cases these sites were managed by the district webmaster.

Survey Findings – Policies & Procedures

In approximately three-quarters of districts (74.78%) some level of standards for content and layout was enforced on school and department web sites. Furthermore, almost two-thirds (64.66%) of districts said that they track and review web site activity as part of their communications strategy.

On the question of who receives e-mails submitted through the web site the majority (54.78%) had a single person handling this task, either in the communications or other department. The remainder (45.22%) had multiple people in different departments receiving web site e-mail.

However, only about twenty-eight percent (27.83%) of districts tracked the responses to incoming e-mail. Furthermore, less than thirty-five percent (34.21%) provided online feedback forms for suggestions or change requests to their district web site.

Survey Findings – Systems & Technology

Most districts in the survey (72.81%) hosted their district web site internally, rather than with an external, third-party. This number was slightly lower (64.60%) for school web site hosting.

Nearly two-thirds (65.49%) of districts use an online student information system to keep parents informed, while a little more than half (51.30%) deployed an online parent notification system for critical communications. Less than half (42.61%) used a content management system to manage their district web site, and only 16.96% stated that they used the same content management system for their school web sites as they used at the district level.

The most widely implemented online communications capability was 'Staff web mail access with more than ninety percent (90.52%) of districts responding that they implemented this feature last year or before. This was followed by downloadable forms at 78.95% and a secure staff portal with 60.53% of districts having implemented these capabilities.

The least widely implemented capability was community discussion forums with only 2.65% having implemented this function. This was followed by Web logs (Blogs) and Podcasts, with only 8.77% and 9.65%, respectively, having implemented these online communication capabilities.

Observations –

Internet grows in priority and application as a communications channel

Question 35 showed that 100% of school districts now have a district web site for their parents and community and Question 37 stated 89% of school districts also have school web sites. In addition, Question 54 indicated more than 90% of respondents offered web mail access for their staff members. Furthermore, Question 30 implied that school boards consider the Internet an important channel of communication with 82.61% stating that online communications had the same or higher priority than other communications channels. .

Recent studies show that residential Internet access now exceeds 70% of U.S. households, and use of broadband connectivity increased at a rate of 40% from 2005 to 2006 to more than 42% of U.S. households. Parents and community members have growing experience using the Internet for personal and business functions, and are rapidly coming to expect similar levels of information, accessibility and responsiveness from the educational system.

Online communications predominantly used for outbound messages

From Question 22 we find that only 18.97% of districts use online communications for community feedback, and from Question 44 we learn that only 34.21% have a feedback form for web site change requests.

Effective communication requires a two-way exchange of information and ideas. While many districts apply other methods of gathering feedback from their parents and community members, there appears to be a proportionately lower use of the Internet for this purpose. With the benefits of faster turn around and substantially lower costs for online surveys, polls and other feedback tools, there appears to be substantial room for improvement in applying the Internet to increase communication effectiveness.

Limited data utilization to improve responsiveness and accountability

From Question 42 we find that 45.22% of districts have different people in different departments receiving and responding to e-mail. At the same time Question 43 shows that only 27.83% track responses to incoming e-mails through their web sites.

Decentralized responsibility for answering e-mails tends to make more efficient use of staff time and speed up response time. However, without tracking who receives e-mails and making sure they're answered in a timely manner, districts may find themselves blind-sided by claims of 'lack of responsiveness' from their community. Additionally, data from online communication systems can be used for developing process improvement metrics. Technologies like e-mail response management and dynamic, searchable knowledgebases can dramatically enhance the district's ability to track and consistently respond to inbound e-mails and reuse frequently-answered-questions as a 'self-service' function on their web site.

District web site management still largely a technical function

Question 36 shows that in 49.51% of cases the district webmaster reports to the IT or Technology director. This was not a surprising finding, and matched much of our anecdotal experience in dealing with school districts. As a matter of historical precedence the web site has been perceived as an extension of the district's internal network. This is particularly true in the 72.81% of districts that internally host their web sites.

However, as more districts use their web site as a key communications platform, an accommodation will have to be reached between the communications and IT departments. The webmaster will come to operate as an adjunct to the

communications department or become a full-fledged communication department staff member.

Limited focus on content standardization across school web sites

Out of Question 38 we find that 71.71% of school web sites are managed by part-time or volunteer webmasters. In Question 50 we learned that only 42.61% of districts use a Content Management System for their district web site, while in Question 51 we learn that 56.25% of districts use different content management for schools than their district site, or don't know what content management tools are used.

While 74.78% of districts apply some level of content and layout standards on school and department web sites, our experience shows that there is limited effort to align the navigation, content areas and online communication functions between the district and school web sites. As online communication plays a larger role in the channel mix, this lack of coordination can lead to duplication of staff effort and inconsistent messages being received by stakeholders that visit different web sites across the district.

Community members are coming to expect an increasing level of reliability from the information they find at educational web sites. Furthermore, certain information may have legal and regulatory implications if it does not appear on all district web sites or is not accurately represented on every site. Additionally, as part of a district's marketing and customer service effort, there should be greater use of all district web sites to communicate with stakeholders.

Community-oriented technologies are slow to be embraced

Questions 63, 66, and 67 show that there is very limited adoption of Podcasts, Blogs, and Community forums as online communications functions in K12 education. This is not surprising given the relative 'newness' of these technologies and the fact that they represent a different approach to online communications.

Most other technologies referenced in the K12 Online Communications survey are designed around a model where the communications process is controlled by the school district. Whether a message originates from the district or a community member, it is ultimately the decision of a district staff member to make the information publicly available. With Blogs, community forums, and a new technology called Wiki's, which was not addressed in the survey, the communications model is turned on its head and the community controls the process. This new model may represent a scary prospect for many K12 communications and technology professionals. However, it is a growing trend

across the Internet. There can be actual benefits to the district in using these Internet tools to channel stakeholder preferences to interact as a community, and in so doing help support and reinforce their district's strategic goals and objectives.

Conclusion

School districts across the United States are increasing their use of the Internet as a communications channel. Educational organizations like the National School Board Association and the National School Public Relations Association provide research showing how communications can expand community involvement in schools and consequently improve student achievement. They also refer to the Internet as an enabling technology to increase this involvement. Because of public schools' primary mission of providing educational services, it is not surprising that the most widely deployed applications are student information systems, which focus on communicating with parents about their children's performance and behavior in the classroom.

However, with the increase in residential Internet access; changing demographics; and the experience that parents and community members have developed with the Internet, there is a growing expectation of more timely, relevant and personalized communications from K12 organizations. This survey showed that most districts respond to this demand with a broad, if somewhat piecemeal deployment of Internet services through their web site. In most districts, this response coincides with a greater strategic emphasis on communications, where communications directors have direct access to superintendents, and school boards recognize the importance of online communications.

While district web sites are now pervasive, the unique characteristics of the Internet that enhance personalization, two-way communication and performance tracking, appear not to be widely utilized. Instead, the Internet appears to be used predominantly as an outbound channel of communications, like print and broadcast media. There also seems to be a lack of coordination between the district's online presence and the way individual campuses communicate online. This coordination focuses on layout and format guidelines, but appears to stop short of standardizing the tools, content or information services deployed by both schools and district.

Finally, there appears to be a need in many school districts to rethink the role of the web site, and online communications in general. Historically, web site management was part of the district's computer network administration. With the web site expanding in use as a communications platform, the priority and management of online communication services will need to become more tightly

integrated with the district's overall communications strategy. IT departments must continue to provide valuable advice and guidance when evaluating features and functions of online communication systems. However, communication staff must become more technically savvy, so they can identify and select Internet solutions that address their short term requirements and align with their long term vision for integrated online communications in their district.