

October 2021

ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

inside

How and why to use Twitter as a school leader

Districts can expand their social media reach if leaders also post strategically to personal leadership accounts. Read tips for increasing engagement for district programs with tweets from the superintendent.

Let students take the lead during parent conferences

Parent-teacher conferences are better when students participate. Parents can hear directly from their children in meetings facilitated by the teacher, and students can practice presentation and personal reflection skills. Follow these steps to set up student-led conferences in your school.

Make your information accessible and understandable

School information can be complex. To build and maintain trust with your community, you must share it in a way that is understandable and accessible. Read this reminder about how and why to ensure that your audience understands you.

Plan your PR with tickler folders

There are a lot of events and dates to keep track of during the year. A simple system of folders and reminders will help you remember them all. Set up tickler folders for your PR planning.

Survey data: Still valuable and much harder to get

Data is the foundation of any good initiative plan, but how do you get it. Phone surveys, once excellent sources of public opinion research, are less effective. Read the latest on what you need and how you can still get it.

INSIGHTS FOR PARENTS: Help your kids learn math

Parents are often encouraged to help their children with reading skills. Here are easy ways to support math skills as well. Math is everywhere. Parents can build confidence and expand skills through regular, simple practice.

For subscription information, contact WSSDA at (800) 562-8927 or (360) 493-9231.

For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

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How and why to use Twitter as a school leader

Do you tweet? Many school leaders started using Twitter, some for the first time, to engage with students and families during the pandemic. School meetings were online, and face-to-face conversations were limited due to physical distancing requirements. Twitter offered a way to connect, inspire and show appreciation despite school closures.

While schools and school districts shared important news and pandemic-related guidance on Facebook, superintendents used Twitter to promote a positive school culture. In addition to giving everyone a glimpse into your job and district, having a separate social media account expands your school or district's reach. Using Twitter and, importantly, your district hashtag, helps create a sense of community and offers an opportunity to share what makes your district special.

Content ideas

Share your day-to-day activities to build trust and transparency. Tweet when you attend a conference, meet with stakeholders, visit a school, have a team meeting, etc.

Share your passion. Tweet articles, photos and quotes that convey your values and beliefs. Let your personality shine through.

Say thank you. People are overwhelmed and under stress. Thank families for their commitment to their children's education and thank staff for their flexibility and resilience.

Acknowledge partner agencies. Give a shout-out to bus drivers, after-school programs, nutrition services, etc.

Share progress. Share a picture of a construction project or a playground upgrade. Let people know that work is still going on despite the pandemic.

Celebrate students and staff. Share news of a sports win, a teacher's award, a student's volunteer work, etc. This is especially important if normal in-person recognition events aren't allowed.

Say something. Tweet even when there isn't anything to report from your district. A quick "have a great day" or "thinking of our students today" tweet sends a clear message that you care about your community.

Share others' successes. If your schools have their own Twitter pages, retweet their positive stories to your broader audience. Or share projects other superintendents have accomplished.

Ask your followers to share. Ask staff and students to share what they love about their school or what they missed most during remote learning.

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Look at how your peers are communicating to get more ideas:

Superintendent Michelle Reid, Northshore School District (Wash.), and the 2021 National Superintendent of the Year, has 3,646 Twitter followers. She shares new instructional practices, acknowledges staff and highlights student achievements. She also shares news with parents through a blog and a weekly Facebook live video where she often features special guests such as a student, a principal, a community representative or a local physician.
https://twitter.com/Northshore_Supt

Superintendent Gustavo Balderas, Edmonds School District (Wash.), shares school stories and news, but he also uses Twitter to build his professional online presence. He congratulates fellow education leaders and shares conferences and professional events he attends or moderates.
https://twitter.com/supt_balderas?lang=en

Superintendent Curtis Jones, Bibb County School District (Ga.), shares more personal information that gives his Twitter feed a human component and makes him more relatable. From sharing pictures of homemade pizza to spending time with his family to celebrating his favorite sports team's victory, he lets his followers see a more personal side of him.
<https://twitter.com/COLDR01>

Contributed by Erin Good, communications consultant

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Let students take the lead during parent conferences

Students are more successful when their parents are involved in their school. An easy way to increase parent involvement is to let students take the lead during parent-teacher conferences. Instead of nervously waiting outside a closed door or staying at home, students take an active role in leading the conference about their progress and behavior and encourage their parents to actively participate.

For fall conferences, students can help introduce parents to the school. At second semester conferences, they present portfolios with content they have assembled throughout the year. This should include their best work and an assessment of their performance.

The process helps students become better communicators as they tell parents about their classroom and what they are learning. It opens dialogue between parents and students and helps students take responsibility for their own progress and achievement. Teachers may facilitate one conference or several conferences in the same room, moving from group to group. A conference usually lasts 20-30 minutes.

Before the conference

Each student is responsible for curating a portfolio. They assemble materials and practice their presentation. As students plan the conferences they look at their attendance records, think about how often they complete their work on time and how well they get along with others. They may also write a reflection on their grades and study habits.

Teachers work with students to plan what the students will say and the strengths and weaknesses they should identify. Students discuss the presentation with their teachers and determine what they will tell their parents about areas where they need improvement. They may want to ask their parents in advance of the conference for particular topics they want to hear about during the conference.

To prepare, provide a list of questions for the student and the parent. Teachers can incorporate them into the presentation structure or provide the questions at the start of the conference. Questions could cover attitude toward school, homework, home support, social skills and peer relationships, goals, etc. Find a sample questions from [www.edutopia.org: https://edutopia.org/to/2YhE5vY](http://www.edutopia.org/to/2YhE5vY).

This experience teaches communication skills as they learn how to issue a written and oral invitation to the conference and how to explain the difference between this conference and the traditional parent-teacher conference. The teacher may want to include a memo telling more about the conference and why it is important to student learning.

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Students who will participate in student-led conferences have an opportunity to practice speaking and presentation skills as they take part in role playing sessions designed to help them be ready to present their personal progress reports. Schools may want to involve volunteers and other students as members of practice or coaching teams.

During the conference

Students greet their parents, introduce them to the teacher and serve as hosts for the conference. The teacher may join the discussion of the student's progress in all subjects. Parents who have attended student-led conferences express surprise at their students' insights into their work, how much their children are learning and how much they learn about their children's school day.

The format often opens lines of communication between parents and students after the conference as well. Parents and students often find that a student-led conference opened the door to a continuing dialogue about school and schoolwork.

After the conference

Students and their families should be asked to evaluate how the conferences went, what went well and what should change. Students can extend their social and writing skills by writing a thank you note to their parents that summarizes the discussion and student goals that were discussed.

Schools should accommodate parents who also want time alone with a teacher to discuss specific needs without the student in attendance. This can be handled by setting aside time at the end of each set of student-led conferences for parents who need to meet with the teacher, or by arranging additional meeting times.

Make this a positive experience for all students

This conference experience can be very disappointing to students whose parents or guardians cannot attend. Plan ahead for this scenario. To ensure that students benefit from the practice and experience, consider ways to hold a virtual conference, allow a student to record a presentation or present to family members at home and report back to the teacher on a simple form they all sign.

In some cases, a relative or family friend may be able to attend for the family. This could be an opportunity to gain support for your school by involving people who ordinarily would not be involved. It can turn people who may have had little or no contact with your school into supporters of your programs.

Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant

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Make your information accessible and understandable

Information about our schools can be hard to understand. Consider the “alphabet soup” of acronyms that are part of educational vernacular. Think about the new trends in pedagogy and changes to standards that can leave people who attended school as children completely lost in this foreign environment.

To build trust and support for your district, you must communicate complex information clearly, and you must also listen. You are not simply announcing decisions and sharing information; ideally, you are facilitating conversations.

Simplifying school information

People consume an overwhelming amount of information in daily life. Many people will dismiss or overlook material that looks complicated or time-consuming. If we want to compete for attention in this noisy media environment, we need to make content that is easy to read and easy to understand.

To get attention and ensure understanding, we must use clear language and interesting imagery and provide context to show why issues matter.

Speak and write in plain English

Avoid ‘eduspeak’ jargon, acronyms and unnecessarily big words. They all create unnecessary barriers to comprehension. When you are writing for a broader audience, jargon and insider phrases slow readers down and alienate them. They make readers work harder to understand your message and can come across as arrogant or deceptive.

One way to break through the jargon and get back to plain English is to practice telling your story to someone who has no connection with education. Choose someone who is representative of the audience you hope to reach. Ask them to give you feedback about your message. What is the most important message to them? What parts are clear and easy to understand? What is confusing, overly technical, or dull? Revise your message based on this feedback.

Use readability tools to make your writing more reader-friendly

Readability describes how easy or difficult it is to understand a body of text. Readability scores are typically based on U.S. grade levels, so something written to a fourth-grade reading level will be easier to read than something written to a tenth-grade level.

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One of the biggest myths about improving readability is that it is about “dumbing down” content. The truth is that readable, accessible writing helps all levels of readers. Why make your audience work harder to get your message? The desire to improve readability is about having respect for both your reader and your content. If you think the content is important enough to write about, it is in your interest to make sure your writing is appealing and easy to read.

A good target when you are writing for the general adult population is to aim for a high school reading level — grade 10 is a good target. This is not to suggest that the average adult can only read at that level, but it is an acknowledgement that most adults are busy and want to be able to read and understand your writing quickly.

The Flesch-Kincaid tool has become one of the most popular readability tools available and it is embedded in Microsoft Word. Search “readability” in your software’s help section for instructions on how to enable this feature so that readability statistics pop up after a review with the spelling and grammar checker.

You can also test your readability levels with online tools such as www.webfx.com/tools/read-able. Simply paste text to calculate readability.

Quick tips to improve readability

If your first readability check shows your writing is at a higher grade level than you want, here are a few easy ways you can bring it down to an easier level:

Read your document aloud. Revise unnecessarily complicated words and unnatural or convoluted phrasing.

Reduce your average sentence length. This is one of the most important factors in readability scores. Your average number of words per sentence should be 15 or less. This doesn’t mean that every sentence should be short; variety is the goal for more interesting text. Start by breaking up sentences with semi-colons and conjunctions (such as “and,” “but,” and “so”).

Break up long paragraphs. Include text breaks to make content easier to read. They also make a page look easier to read, a critical consideration when busy people are deciding whether to read your material. Make sure each paragraph has only one main idea.

Write in the first person. This encourages you to write in an active voice and makes your writing more interesting. The spelling and grammar checker in MS Word can be set to show you the passive sentences in your writing. Writing in passive voice can make content feel convoluted. Good writers keep passive sentences to a minimum.

Finally, write less! Remember, most of your readers are busy, and your organization is competing for their attention. Make your writing look quick and easy to read by keeping it brief, especially if it will be read on a digital screen. The guideline is to use 50% fewer words when you are writing for a digital platform. This tip bears repeating: Content written for an electronic screen should be half as long as the same content written for print publication. Nobody has time to wade through pages of text on a small screen.

Remember who your readers are and where they are reading your words and make it easier for them.

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Plan your PR with tickler folders

You want to get organized for the new school year, and that means thinking ahead further than the tasks that need to get done this week. Your plate is so full with today's projects that it can seem overwhelming to also think about future ones.

What to do? Create a tickler file system.

Tickler files are folders that include notes and reminders about upcoming tasks. They help you stay on top of your schedule without your head exploding from an overload of dates and information. Here's how they work:

Create 12 folders for the months of the year and 31 folders for the days of the month. Throughout the year, as you learn about upcoming events, stick a reminder and any supporting documents into the folder for the appropriate month.

At the start of each month, review all the tasks and documents in that month's folder and assign them to a specific date. The first task on your daily "to-do" list should be to review that day's tickler file. If, for some reason, you can't complete it that day, assign it to a different day.

As with all tools, a tickler file is only useful if you actually use it, so it's important to establish the habit of looking at your tickler file first thing each morning and addressing the outlined tasks.

Go digital.

While some people use paper folders for their tickler files, most people opt for electronic folders. There are a number of task management software systems available, such as tythree.me, which will automatically send you reminders about the tasks in your tickler folders. You can also set up tasks and alerts in a Google calendar.

What do you include in a tickler file?

Start with all the dates and activities that happen on a regular basis throughout the year: reminders about back-to-school events; updates on important activities, such as concerts and plays; information about new curriculum and programs; and publication dates for district newsletters and staff communications.

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) publishes a useful tool for helping you stay on top of important dates. Their "Resources for Planning the School Calendar" includes dates for a variety of national observances, from National Bullying Prevention Month to National School Lunch Week to Administrative Professionals Week.

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Curious about when different holidays are observed? This calendar lists the dates, along with those of special events like Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work Day, National School Nurse Day and many more. The calendar sells for \$40 per copy, plus shipping and handling and can be ordered online at nspra.org/products.

The “Key Dates” issue of this publication uses this resource guide. It is published each spring.

Throughout the year, use your tickler file to collect information that will save you time and effort. For instance, if your school board passes a proclamation honoring teachers for National Teacher Appreciation Week, insert a copy of the proclamation into your file, so you have it handy for next year.

Include photos and other graphics that you may need to illustrate content in your newsletter. Include registration information about relevant conferences. Add reminders about co-workers’ birthdays and important events. A tickler file is for any information that will help you stay more organized and on top of things.

Check in daily.

Keeping an active presence on social media is easier if you have a tickler file filled with reminders about upcoming dates and activities. Tools like Hootsuite (hootsuite.com) allow you to schedule your Facebook and Twitter posts days and even weeks ahead of time, using details in your tickler files. That allows you to keep your pages active even when you’re on vacation or busy with other tasks.

Once you set up your system, it is easy to manage, but you need to be consistent in checking each day’s folder. If you skip a day, you may skip an important task.

If you’re lucky enough to have a communications staff, a regular editorial meeting is a great time to review the tasks in your tickler files, so everyone is up to date on what needs to be done. It also allows you to brainstorm how to plan and communicate about them.

In a nutshell, a tickler file helps keep you organized. It helps reassure you that you won’t forget important tasks and dates. It allows you to plan ahead, so you can be strategic in your messaging. It makes your work life easier.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant

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Survey data: Still valuable and much harder to get

When it comes to surveys and gauging public opinion, the old ways may not work anymore.

Not so long ago, when we wanted to measure the community's pulse on a given subject, get their advice, or gauge support of a given issue, we turned to surveys. For really important issues, such as an upcoming bond measure, we used random-sample surveys to obtain accurate readings. These were usually phone surveys, but sometimes they were printed or sent via email.

Now we live in the age of unlisted and blocked phone numbers, reluctance to reveal email addresses, and canceled landlines. Our community members are barraged with spam phone calls and texts, so they ignore anything that is not vitally important to them. When caller ID says "school district," even parents of school-age children may choose not to answer.

Finding out what your community wants and thinks

In many communities, only the most-experienced survey firm, armed with a special method for reaching a random sample of community members, can pull off an accurate survey that tells you true community sentiment, and their services are expensive. That means schools must be more creative than ever to find ways of listening to and involving the community while also relying on old ways that continue to work.

School districts that consistently maintain community support rely on time-tested successful ways of communicating and constantly search for new ways to assess community attitudes. When making critically important decisions, they ask the following questions and establish guidelines for obtaining the information they need:

1. What do you really need to know?

Whose opinions are really important for this decision? What do we really need as opposed to what would be nice to have? Can we narrow the potential audience into a small enough group to assure we get a valid sample that reflects accurate opinions? Do we really need the opinions of every community member or only those who will be impacted by the decision? If we are formulating a policy that only affects students and parents, do we really need the opinions of our wider community? If we are looking for guidance for placing a measure on the ballot, do we really need the opinions of people who never vote?

2. How do we get responses from people whose opinions we need?

If you truly need the opinion of the entire community, it is unlikely you will be able to get a true measurement without hiring a professional survey firm to conduct a comprehensive, non-

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biased survey. You will want to look at the firm's methods and make sure they have a way to reach a true random sample of the group you want surveyed.

If you can narrow the audience, you may be able to forego hiring an outside firm and conduct the survey yourself. If you need only the opinions of parents, you will want to look at communications methods that work with your parents. Do you have good results when you rely on phone calls, email, snail mail, instant messaging or other electronic messaging? Have you tried an online survey in the past and, if so, did you get responses from a true random sample that accurately reflects grade level, school, parts of town and other demographics? If you will place a measure on a future ballot, did you get a true sampling of those who will actually vote? Or did you only receive replies from those interested in the subject?

If you have to hire an outside firm, ask extensive questions about how they will obtain the true random sample you desire. What methods do they use? How do they formulate and test the survey questions? What is their success rate for obtaining a true random sample? If this is a survey leading up to a ballot measure, how close did this firm's survey results come to the actual election results?

It may be possible to get the measurements you need without an actual survey. If you are making significant decisions over the long term, can you establish an opinion leader group whose members communicate with and represent the group(s) whose opinions you need? If you have established a key communicator network, does the membership of that group accurately represent your community composition? If not, can you expand that group to include people who represent the groups you need to reach? More importantly, will each of your key communicators agree to gather the opinions you need in an unbiased way and report the results back to you?

Contributed by Gay Campbell, communications consultant

For Families



Help Your Kids Learn Math



**October
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INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

Educators often emphasize the need to help kids learn. After they learn to read, they use reading skills to learn throughout the remainder of their education. Parents are encouraged to help their children learn to read.

Math is equally important, but many parents don't focus on math help at home beyond basic counting and arithmetic. Math instruction may be unfamiliar to parents, or their math skills may be rusty. Some people may also mistakenly believe that we are born with math skills — or not. This is not true. Anyone can be “mathy” with practice and confidence.

Your children will develop confidence in their math ability and build their math skills with these messages:

1. Problems can be solved in different ways.

It is essential to learn problem-solving processes. Although most math problems have only one answer, there may be many ways to get that answer. Learning math is about learning the processes of solving problems and applying them to new problems.

2. Wrong answers can be useful.

Accuracy is important in math, but understanding why and answer is wrong can help build math skills. Learning from mistakes is a helpful lesson for any subject.

Ask your children to explain how they solved math problems. Their explanations might help you discover if they need help with number skills, such as addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, or with the concepts involved in solving the problem.

3. Take risks.

Help your children to be risk-takers. Help them see the value of trying to solve a problem, even if it's difficult. Give your children time to explore different approaches to solving a difficult problem. As they work, encourage them to talk about what they are thinking. This will help them strengthen math skills and become independent thinkers and problem solvers.

4. Being able to do math — arithmetic — in your head is important.

Mathematics isn't restricted to pencil and paper activities. Doing mental math is a valuable skill for making quick calculations of costs in stores, restaurants or gas stations. Let your children know that by using mental math, their math skills will become stronger.

5. It's OK to use a calculator to solve math problems.

Calculators are a standard learning tool, and they are widely used in classrooms. Let your children know that calculators can support math exercises, but they should also understand math operations in order to know whether the answer is reasonable.

Strategies for building math skills

Parents can help their children build math skills by regularly practicing math. The Northwest Evaluation Association (www.NWEA.org) has a list of parent strategies for improving math skills, including activities for general math; computation; geometry; measurement; statistics, probability, graphing; problem-solving, and algebraic concepts. They suggest choosing two or three strategies to use throughout the year to help increase children's understanding of math skills and develop math confidence.

General math improvement strategies include activities that relate math to daily life:

- Talk about how many bowls to put out for dinner.
- Have your child count similar items as you put away groceries.
- Have your child help measure ingredients for recipes.
- Give your child change to count out to pay for purchases at the store; have older children calculate the change.
- Ask your child to compare prices of items by asking which item costs more.
- Allow your child to weigh fresh produce; have older children calculate the price by multiplying the price per pound by the number of pounds.
- Read the days and dates on a calendar, talk about the number of days in the month, the number of days remaining until a special event, etc.
- When traveling, write numbers on a grid and have your child color in the box as they see the numbers on signs or license plates.

Computation activities include:

- Count by twos, fives, or tens.
- Do connect-the-dot pictures.
- Count and pair objects found around the house and determine whether there's an odd or even number of items.
- Review math facts at home, in the car, waiting in line, or during other downtime.
- Practice multiplication tables. Make it a game by setting a timer. Offer a prize for the best time.
- Provide your child with verbal math problems. "Take the number five; add six; multiply by three; subtract three; divide by five. What's your answer?" Speak slowly until your child gets better at solving these mental problems.
- Help your child identify percentages in signs, newspapers, and magazines.
- Encourage your child to read nutrition labels. Have them calculate the percent of a specific nutrient in each item.

Find more strategies on the NWEA website: <https://bit.ly/3BHrb8W>.