

SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY GUIDE

for K-12 Communicators





Part 1: INTRODUCTION

Social media has become one of the main forms of communication for many people, and is often the quickest way to reach the widest audience. Because of this, many public sector agencies use social networks as their primary means of communication.

Education professionals are also taking advantage of this trend. Hundreds of K-12 schools and districts across the country are embracing social media to share school information, handle emergency communications, highlight teachers and students, and manage the perception of their school or district.

Social media also helps solve the difficult challenge of communicating with parents. Despite multiple methods of outreach, such as emails, newsletters, and paper notes sent home in backpacks, parents

can still not know what's going on at school and feel disconnected from their child's education. Social media provides a way of sharing information that is accessible day and night, can't get lost in messy backpacks, and is both cost effective and timely.

Even better, a majority of parents are already using social media. In fact, 75% of parents with children under 18 years old use these platforms regularly. Many parents say they use social networks to gain useful information, which likely includes topics related to their child's education.

We created this guide to help your school and/or district get started with social media. In it, we'll highlight the benefits, questions to ask before you get started, potential risks, and best practices for using social media in your school.

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE



Students¹

- 92% of teens go online daily
- 71% of teens use more than one social network
- 51% of teens use Facebook
- 72% of teens use Instagram



Parents²

- 75% of parents use social media
- 79% of parents who use social media get useful information from their networks
- 74% of parents on social media use Facebook
- 75% of parents on Facebook visit the site daily



Part 2: **THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SCHOOLS**

Let's take a look at a few of the major benefits social media can offer your school and district.

PROVIDING CRITICAL INFORMATION

Social media allows administrators and teachers to give parents updates, news, and information in real time. Schools can quickly provide necessary information on important issues like school closures, emergency situations, or viral incidents. It's also a great way to share photos of school events, club activities, sports, and more — a practice that's popular with parents. Not only does social media provide parents with access to up-to-date information, it also gives them fuel to spark daily dialogue with their kids about what's going on in their lives.

BUILDING TRUST WITH AUDIENCES

Social media offers a level of transparency that parents may not receive otherwise. It opens a window into day-to-day life on campus, and allows schools to highlight teachers and showcase student achievements. Social media also allows your school to use a more informal

tone compared to other forms of communication, which helps to humanize school officials and build trust.

ENABLING TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Social media is all about interactive communication, so it's important to listen to what your audience is saying. Social media provides an outlet for parents and students to directly ask questions and raise concerns. It also offers a platform for school officials to quell rumors and provide correct information.

INCREASING PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Social media allows parents to become more aware and involved in school activities. Parents who may not be able to attend every PTA meeting can keep up with school news via social media. It also makes the decision-making process more inclusive. Rather than limiting the conversation to those who can be at a specific place at a certain time, social media lets parents (as well as students and teachers) weigh in from anywhere at any time.

Part 3: PREPARING FOR SOCIAL MEDIA SUCCESS



Planning is an essential part of getting the most from your social media program. You can't simply create a page and expect the likes to roll in. Every post competes for space and attention in the newsfeeds and timelines of your audience. You'll need a strategy to cut through the noise and effectively reach parents, students, teachers, and your local community.

Social media strategy is not one-size-fits-all. While there are best practices you should follow, you'll need to determine the right approach for your school and audience. Here are a few important questions you need to answer before you get started:

What is the primary type of information you want to share? What are you trying to communicate?

Who are you trying to reach? Who is your audience?

Who will be primarily responsible for maintaining your social media?

How much time and effort will be spent, and how does that fit in with other responsibilities?

The answers to these questions will help you determine which networks, content, and tone make sense for you and your audience; and will help you anticipate the impact on staff.

NETWORKS

The makeup of your audience can tell you which networks you should be using. Think about the major segments of your audience, and then find out what platforms they use most often. For example, 74% of parents who use social media are members of Facebook. So if your information is targeted to parents, Facebook is where to post. However if your message is primarily for students, only 51% use Facebook, while 72% are on Instagram.³

CONTENT

Your audience also determines what type of content you should post. It can be hard to know what works when

you first start out, but over time you can figure out which content resonates with your audience by looking at which posts get the most engagement in the form of comments, likes, or replies. After a while, you may notice that certain topics generate more discussion than others, or that certain posts are more popular on different networks. This shows you what your audience cares about.

Your content can also help drive your network choices. For example, if your main use of social media will be for communicating school closures, delays, and similar updates, Twitter might be your best choice because it can be viewed easily even by those who don't have a Twitter account. If you want to highlight school art programs or pictures of events, photo sharing networks such as Instagram or Flickr might make more sense.

tone

Your audience can influence the tone of your messages. Of course, you want to be seen as an authoritative and trusted source for information, but that doesn't mean you can't have a little fun, too. Images, GIFs, and light-hearted posts can make your social media accessible and attractive to more people, and can showcase the personality of your school. However, if a social presence is new for your school, you may need to start off conservatively and build up the personality as you get to know your audience. Remember that while social media isn't as formal as other modes of communication, your page does represent your school and district, and should still reflect professional standards.

STAFF

Maintaining a successful social media presence takes time and attention. The best laid social media strategy can sink quickly if no one is dedicated to keeping it going. Even if multiple people are given the ability to post and share, it is important to establish a primary administrator who is responsible for overseeing the school or district's social media. This individual can help set the tone, provide guidance to users, and enforce your social media policy.

Part 4:

UNDERSTANDING AND MITIGATING RISK

As you probably know, when it comes to social media, not every experience will be positive. However, the risks you may encounter are common for many public agencies, so strategies exist to mitigate and minimize them. Let's take a look at some of these risks and how you should handle them.

MISTAKES

Mistakes are inevitable on social media. Some mistakes will be your fault and others will be completely out of your control. In both of these circumstances, the best thing to do is remain calm, accept responsibility, address the mistake, and move on. Most importantly, don't wait for a mistake to happen before you decide how to handle it.

Mitigation: *Develop a protocol and make sure all staff that has access to your social media is fully trained.*

RESOURCES

Limitations on resources, such as personnel and time, can be a roadblock to effective social media communication. However, creating an editorial calendar can help you save time and manage social media efficiently. Scheduling tools such as Hootsuite, Sprout, and Sprinklr that allow you to queue up posts in advance can be real time savers. You can also cultivate a sharing culture by encouraging others to submit potential content for your social media pages.

Mitigation: *Plan content in advance, use scheduling tools, and crowdsource content.*

Start With a Policy on Day One

Once you've decided that your school should use social media, the first step is to create a social media policy. The policy should offer guidelines for what type of content you'll post and how often, as well as how to interact with followers. The policy should also outline how staff should use social media in a professional context.

MEAN PEOPLE

Unfortunately, social media can bring out the worst in some people. The two-way communication that social media allows can also open the door to public criticism, inappropriate comments, and disruptive individuals. This is why a robust policy is a must-have for any agency using social media. Your policy should include clear comment guidelines that outline the type of content that is inappropriate and how you will respond. Make sure to post these guidelines on your social media page to inform commenters about your policy.

Mitigation: *Create a policy, post it publicly, and enforce it fairly and consistently.*

PUBLIC RECORDS

As a government agency, your school may receive public records requests. Familiarize yourself with your state's records laws and how they apply to social media communications, and then make a plan for retaining and accessing these records. Don't assume you can rely on the social media networks to keep these records for you. The best solution is to have a comprehensive archive of your social media activity before you even receive a records request.

Mitigation: *Determine a method for keeping records of your posts that is reliable, efficient, and doesn't rely on the networks.*

STUDENT PRIVACY

Of course, privacy is an issue with social media, especially when it comes to minors. As an educator, you're likely aware of laws about student privacy, such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. Follow these laws by never posting sensitive information about students on social media. You should also ask for permission from parents for their children to be featured on your social media pages.

Mitigation: *If you wouldn't talk about it loudly in public, don't post it online. When in doubt, get parental permission.*



Part 5:

BEST PRACTICES

Now that you're aware of how to avoid the most common risks, we'll cover a few best practices for your school's social media presence. First we'll look at best practices for setting up your accounts, and then we'll share tips for building and maintaining a strong presence.

TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED

Gain Buy-In

To achieve social media success, you need to make sure that everyone in your school is on the same page. It's important that administrators, communicators, and IT agree when it comes to the purpose and management of your social media program. Create an approval process for setting up new pages to ensure they represent your school appropriately, have the correct policy in place, and fulfill a need. It is also key for all stakeholders to understand the legal and reputational ramifications of social media, particularly when it comes to student privacy and public records laws.

Takeaway: *Get all of your stakeholders aligned early on so that everyone is positioned to support social media success.*

Enact and Post a Policy

We've said it before, and we'll say it again. A policy is your best friend when managing your school's social media. An internal social media policy clearly establishes guidelines and boundaries for employees. This policy is the secret weapon to empower teachers and staff members to convey information that supports your mission without the need for someone higher up to approve every post. An external policy lets commenters know that their communications are being retained and could be shared with others, even if moderated or later deleted. If written correctly, an external policy allows you to safely moderate and remove content based on its criteria.

Takeaway: *A good policy keeps you in control of your message and is crucial to a successful social media strategy.*

Start Off Small

If you're new to social media, it's a good idea to start with only one or two profiles. This is because at this stage you're still testing what works with your audience. Managing multiple pages takes a lot of time, and you don't want to become overwhelmed at the beginning. Once you get more comfortable with

social media and know your audience better, you can expand to other networks.

Takeaway: *Start slowly and then grow your presence once you learn the ropes.*

Set Up Pages Correctly

A large part of starting your social presence off on the right foot is making sure your pages are set up properly. If the option exists to set up your account as a business or entity, use it. Creating the account correctly at the beginning can spare you the headache and extra work of transitioning an account later on. This is particularly important for Facebook pages and Instagram channels, which both need to be associated with parent accounts and have strict terms of use.



Facebook: Create a page, not a profile, for your school. Profiles are for individuals and pages are for things (organizations, cities, businesses, etc.). You'll need a personal profile to set up a page on Facebook. Don't be tempted to create a "fake" profile to manage your page. Facebook routinely shuts down these profiles when they find them, and it can be extremely difficult to gain access to your page if that happens. Avoid this pitfall by ensuring that page administrators are real people, with real profiles.

An even better approach is to use Facebook Business Manager to create your page. This allows you to create and manage a page for your school without having to blur the lines between personal and professional use of Facebook. Business Manager is set up for advertising, but it is free to use and can be a very effective way to share responsibility for a page.



Instagram: When signing up for Instagram, use an Instagram Business account. This type of account will give you better insights into your impact, advertising capabilities, and make it easier to manage records and post

Takeaway: *Using business accounts can give you more flexibility in managing your social media. Be sure to follow the guidelines issued by the platforms to avoid being kicked off for violating their terms of use.*

Control Access

Make sure that more than one person has administrative access to your social media accounts, and review who has access on a regular basis. As staff turns over, you don't want to suddenly lose access to your account if the only person with the Twitter password leaves, nor do you want former employees to have the ability to post to your pages at will. Fortunately, on most platforms you can set user permissions to allow multiple people to post without granting full administrative rights to everyone.

Takeaway: *Redundancy is important when it comes to administrative access, and all accounts should be reviewed regularly to make sure permissions are only granted to current staff.*

Get Verified

Facebook and Twitter both offer the option to verify official accounts. Verified accounts feature a check mark next to the account name, signaling to followers that the account can be trusted to represent who it claims. This important trust indicator gives your audience confidence and protects your agency from imposters. Both platforms provide easy-to-follow instructions for verifying your account in the help section.

Takeaway: *Take the time to verify so your audience can trust that your pages are really you.*

Archiving

Archiving your school's social media activity is the key to compliance with public records law, and can be a great source of information for figuring out what works and what doesn't for your audience. Social media archiving also establishes transparency and accountability, which helps build trust within the organization and with your audiences.

Takeaway: *You are ultimately responsible for your social media records, so make sure you have a plan in place to retain them and be able to produce them when needed.*

TIPS FOR GROWING YOUR PRESENCE

Post Consistently

Social media is only useful when people see it. When you post regularly, parents and students will start to rely on your pages to get the most up-to-date information, and will check in regularly. This means that when you have something urgent to share, you can feel confident that your message will reach your intended audience quickly and effectively.

Takeaway: *If you give a reason for your audience to visit every day, they will be there when you need to reach them quickly.*

Use Multimedia

Posts and tweets that include photos, graphics, or videos consistently get more engagement than text-only messages. Fortunately, you don't need a degree in graphic design or fancy equipment to make your social media look great and attract views. Photos and videos snapped with a phone can be very engaging and accessible. Free tools such as Canva are simple to use and can help you turn an easy-to-overlook announcement into an eye-catching graphic in minutes.

Takeaway: *Use visuals to spice up your feed and draw attention to your messaging.*

Engage in Conversation

The best part about social media is that it is two-way. Don't be afraid of comments! To truly unlock the power of social media, you need to embrace the conversation. Don't be lured into arguments, but do use the platform as a way to dispel rumors, correct misinformation, and accept feedback. Rely on your policy as a means to keep the conversation civil and don't be afraid to enforce it when needed. Just make sure you have the records before you remove any comments.

Takeaway: *With a solid policy in place, and the tools to enforce it, you can get the most out of social media by embracing the conversation.*

Learn from Others

With so many schools and districts already using social media, it is easy to find inspiration for your own pages. A quick online search for the phrase "school Facebook" will turn up hundreds of pages for you to browse through to find out what is working for schools like yours. You can do the same for any social network you are considering. Professional groups such as the National School Public Relations Association (www.nspr.org) are also great places to look for help and training.

Takeaway: *Don't go it alone! Many schools and educators have been using social media for years, so look to them for guidance and inspiration.*





Part 6: **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

By now it should be clear that social media can offer significant value to school districts. While there may be risks associated with social media use, they are manageable with proper planning and preparation, and are far outweighed by the benefits. Now that you have the tools you need to get started, we hope you will embrace the power of social media for your school.

Here are some additional resources to help your school on its social media journey:

- ✓ **24 Social Media Content Ideas for Schools**
Content Ideas and strategies that will help schools expand and develop their social media presence across the largest four platforms.
- ✓ **Central Kitsap School District Case Study**
Learn how the Central Kitsap School District uses social media to inform parents, students, and staff, and build relationships with these audiences.

- ✓ **Webinar: What School Officials Need to Know About Social Media**
Hear directly from district practitioners and industry experts on how school districts should manage their social media to mitigate risks.
- ✓ **Social Media Records Protection For Education**
A guide to social media archiving for education through ArchiveSocial. Giving you the what, why and how behind our technology.

ENDNOTES

1. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>
2. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/07/16/parents-and-social-media/#fn-13802-1>