

# Time to



# Tweet



Using social media to distribute information and connect with stakeholders

*Terrance Falk*



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fter the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary last December, parents across the country were desperate for information and resources to help them and their children cope with this tragedy. How could they explain to their children what had just happened? Parents wanted to be honest with their children, but they also didn't want to create unnecessary anxiety.

Denise Callaway and her team at Milwaukee Public Schools sprung into action. They used various media outlets to connect with parents who were searching for information and resources. That outreach included text messaging and social media such as, Facebook and Twitter, along with the more traditional forms of electronic media, such as the district's website.

Today, social media is not just up and coming. It is already here. A growing number of parents have ditched their landlines and only rely on cell phones. In rural areas, smart

phones may be outstripping traditional Internet systems as cell phone towers go up faster than fiber optic cable is laid. Lower income parents are far more likely to have a smart phone than broadband. Even if they have broadband, they are more likely to use Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and text messaging than they are to surf the Internet or use email.

Unfortunately too many school districts haven't kept up.

### ■ Missing the Message

Recently, the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association





(WSPRA) conducted a survey of Wisconsin school districts asking about their communication practices. Remarkably, all 424 districts in Wisconsin responded!

When asked, "How would you rate your district's communication effectiveness with your parents?" A total of 73 percent of the districts responded with "Good" or "Great." And when asked what tools they were using, almost all said they had a general website. But just 49 percent said they used paper newsletters, 48 percent used electronic newsletters

and 49 percent used Facebook. Only 29 percent used Twitter. That means a whole group of young parents probably aren't getting the message.

Callaway says social media is an easy, inexpensive way for a district to tell its story. Parents are looking for instant information, and social media is a way of getting that information to them.

Instant information is especially valuable in an emergency situation. School leaders understand they need to get the message out in different ways during an emergency. When a snowstorm hits, districts post school closings on their websites and contact television and radio stations. Many districts use an autodialing system or text messaging directly to parents' phones. But Twitter can get the

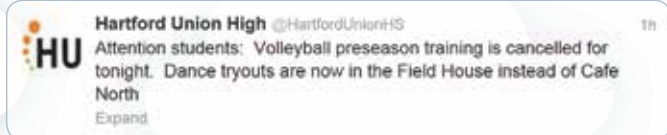
message out to a lot more parents.

#### ■ "Where the Action Is"

Social media is "where the action is in terms of communication," says Brad Hughes, director of communications for the Kentucky School Boards Association (KSBA).

"Ten years ago, the printed, send-home newsletter was already on the path of the dinosaur," says Hughes. That paper flyer might get home in the elementary child's backpack. Good luck in seeing the same flyer from your high school students.

Twitter limits messages to 140 characters, so Hughes uses Twitter to redirect the public to KSBA's own website and other links when important issues come up. Callaway uses Twitter for little reminders that parent conferences or other school events are coming up. The most popular item on Twitter and Face-



## TIPS for Social Media

These are simple ways to make your district's social media outreach more effective:

- **Don't reinvent the wheel for every media outlet.** Write your message in such a way that it can be sent as a printed flyer, a posting on your website, Facebook, or as part of an email.
- **Post every day with Twitter; a couple of times a week with Facebook.** If you don't post often enough, people will stop going to your electronic connections for information.
- **Check spelling and grammar.** You might get away with errors in your personal emails, but you can't do that with professional communications.
- **Keep it professional;** not personal.
- **Make sure you are sending out a single message** even if you are using different forms of media. Don't confuse the public.
- **Keep basic messages short,** but you can always include links to longer documents and other websites.
- **Add photos and videos** either directly or through links.



book? For Milwaukee, it's the daily school lunch menu.

Hughes also makes extensive use of YouTube. Not every member of the public wants to read text, says Hughes. These videos don't have to be high-end productions. If you are willing to go before the public at a school meeting or social event to give your message, it takes little time and money to record the presentation. You can place a PowerPoint online and simply add an audio component.

### Social Media Guidelines

Should individual school members begin activating Facebook and Twitter accounts to communicate with the public? If you are comfortable with such media outlets, jump right in. But don't mix your personal Facebook account with your school board information. Create a separate Facebook account. And never use district equipment and Internet connections to conduct your school board re-election campaign.

Also, be careful with what you Tweet! Hughes has a simple rule:

## Join in the Social Media Conversation

Many school districts are doing great work on social media websites. The WASB has established a Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Pinterest account to join in on the public education conversation happening on social media.

As Terrence Falk states in

this article, "Community engagement will become more important for school districts as competition increases due to open enrollment, charters and vouchers. School districts

can't afford to miss out connecting to even one family or one community member in your district."

Social media is a great way to get out positive information about the work that students and staff are doing in your schools. For instance, Milwaukee Public Schools began a social media campaign called "Start at MPS. Stay at MPS. Succeed at MPS." The website, which is connected to Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Pinterest, YouTube and Instagram accounts, features MPS graduates who are enrolled at a college or university. It's great publicity for the school district and a great way to recognize the hard work of some of its graduates. You can view it at <http://milwaukee.k12.wi.us>.

To make an impact on social media, districts don't need to coordinate an advanced social media campaign, simply post pictures from everyday school activities or articles highlighting positive news about one of your schools to show your parents and community the good work taking place in your schools. □

To connect with the WASB on various social media websites, visit [wasb.org](http://wasb.org) and select the icons at the bottom of the page.

The screenshot shows a webpage with the header "Start at MPS. Stay at MPS. Succeed at MPS." and a navigation bar. The main content features a photo of Mario Dixon, an MPS graduate, with the text "Mario Dixon MPS Rufus King 2013 Bachelor 2017". Below this, there are several news items: "MPS' Class of 2013 scholarship total grows to \$24 million", "MPS' top grads off to Columbia, Dartmouth, Georgetown, Howard, Stanford, U. of Chicago, U. of Wisconsin, Vassar and strong local colleges/universities", and "ENROLL INSUBSCRIBE". At the bottom, there are social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

**Social Media** provides many opportunities for a school district to connect with its community.



“Do you want what you tweeted to be on the front page of your local newspaper?” There is always a chance that is where it will wind up.

Callaway says MPS always has a second person read every Tweet before it is sent out. Hughes doesn't, but school board members might want to consider a second reader.

But both Callaway and Hughes believe the first place to start is to make sure your district is using social media in an effective way.

Community engagement will become more important for school districts as competition increases due to open enrollment, charters and vouchers. School districts can't afford to miss out connecting to even one family or one community member in your district. All channels of communications must be used, and that includes social media. ■

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## Upcoming WSPRA Conference

Interested in more information concerning social media and communicating with the public?

Consider attending the WSPRA workshop, **“Building Community Support For Schools: Our Future Depends on It.”**

The workshop will be held November 7th and 8th at the Heidel House, Green Lake.

For more information, go to the WSPRA website, [www.wspra.org](http://www.wspra.org).



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