

SOCIAL MEDIA

AS A

PROFESSIONAL

TOOL

Principals are finding social media platforms to be great sources of professional development.



ocial networking is more than catching up with family and long-lost friends; it's turned into a professional resource for educators to exchange ideas and expand their professional learning network (PLN). According to the report "School Principals and Social Networking in Education: Practices, Policies, and Realities in 2010," most responding principals indicated that social networking sites have value in education as a way for educators to share information and resources; to create professional learning communities; and to improve schoolwide communications with students and staff. However, according to the report, principals were less likely than teachers or librarians to have joined a social network. Whether you're intrigued or intimidated by social networking channels—such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and blogs—you have plenty to gain from principals Lyn Hilt and George Couros, who explain how they have grown professionally through social networking and what principals have to gain by participating.

Principal Magazine

What social networking platforms do you find most useful to interact with your peers and why?

George Couros: I have really connected with people through Twitter. It is a great way to connect and have questions answered to not only help myself, but also my staff and students. We have had many people from Twitter share their expertise and connect with our students at Forest Green, which has been very powerful and authentic.

Through my own blog and the Connected Principals blog, I have had great, deep discussions on ideas regarding

both school administration and education as a whole. This has really helped because I am able to not only connect with ideas, but actual people. The conversation has definitely deepened my own learning and development as a professional.

Lyn Hilt: Twitter is the most beneficial social networking platform I use to interact with my colleagues. It is an extraordinarily powerful way to connect with inspired, innovative educators who have a wealth of resources and information to share. It's easy to develop a network in a short amount of time with this tool, and it's very easy to share ideas and resources.

What have you gained professionally from being on these popular social networking sites?

Couros: Reading posts on the Internet is interesting but can only go so far. It is through conversation and connections that our learning really develops. Learning should be social but in our time, it should not be limited only to the divisions/districts or schools that we are part of. We have the opportunity to connect with people and ideas from all over the world, so we need to take advantage. My saying at the school is that "It is not my idea that I want, it is the best idea." I have more opportunity to find this best idea and develop it to apply to our school.



Hilt: Utilizing these sites has allowed me to establish connections with other educators and, in doing so, I have become part of a powerful network of supportive, resourceful professionals. Opportunities to improve my practice, bring new ideas to my school, present at conferences, contribute to publications, and become part of something bigger than myself have all resulted from connecting with others through social media.

What do you believe is gained by writing blog entries and responding to blog posts?

Couros: My former superintendent, who I adored, asked me, “How are you a reflective practitioner?” This really stuck with me and I figured that blogging would be a great avenue to do this. Through blogging, I am able to reflect on my own practice while getting input from teachers, parents, students, and other administrators from all over the world. This lets me know if I am on the right track or if I am way off. This also allows my entire school community to have a clear understanding of exactly where I stand. As an educational leader, I have to clearly communicate my goals, values, and vision. Blogging gives me the opportunity to share this, yet it is also a forum where they can be clearly developed.

How do you balance the time during the day between your involvement in social networking and your in-school responsibilities as a principal?

Couros: I see this as something that is *part* of my day. As an administrator of a school, I need to be a learner first. I need to develop an understanding of what is happening in schools. If I don’t develop, how can I expect my teachers, or even my students, to do the same? Blogging and connecting not only help me to learn; they are also done in an open environment where others can see. You cannot expect things from others that you are not willing to do yourself.

@NAESP asked: What’s the biggest professional benefit you’ve gained from social networking?

Here’s what some of our Twitter followers had to say:

@J_Bednar: social networking allows me to connect to learned people and insightful ideas faster and more easily than otherwise possible.

@mshumake: tweetdeck keeps me abreast of what the greatest minds in the industry are thinking!

@bhsprincipal: Social Networking provides me with access to 24-7 Professional Development! My PLN is my most valuable educational resource!

@shannoninottawa: PLN gives me efficient access 2 best resources, connections 2 expand learning opps 4 kids & myself & support 4 pushing 4 change

@CelinaPrincipal: Extending my PLN has opened the door to many more possibilities and ideas

@whsmahoney: Best place for prof. development and sharing best practices

@Dwight_Carter: Twitter has broadened my perspective and provides opp for dialogue with admins across the globe. Increased learning.

@JenVonId: Being able to discuss how schools in other areas address the same things, Ex. Rtl, and how it is being implemented in TX.

@karenszymusiak: It has extended my reach into the minds of thoughtful educators who are doing what’s right for kids.

@adamgoldberg1: As an aspiring principal, I have been awakened to ideas re: “change revolution” ideas across the country thru online PD

Check out NAESP’s networks:

Twitter: @NAESP

Facebook: www.facebook.com/naesp

Principals’ Office blog: www.naesp.org/blog

Hilt: Utilizing social media tools is imperative to my practice; therefore, I always make time during the day to connect. It can be time-consuming to begin on this journey, but in order to be a truly networked educator, I believe it’s imperative that I spend time throughout my day engaged in learning this way. First, I examined how I

was spending my time every day. Did I really need to watch an additional hour of television before bedtime? Was there a more efficient way I could communicate with staff rather than holding after-school meetings? Using social media contributes to my learning, so I simply replaced nonbeneficial, time-wasting practices with time spent

engaged with social media tools and online reading. During the school day, time is best spent in classrooms and with teachers and students, so most of my networking time is confined to before- and after-school hours.

How do you compare your virtual PLN with your face-to-face PLN?

Hilt: The students, parents, teachers, board members, and community members that comprise our school community are integral members of my face-to-face PLN, and it is important to dedicate time to meaningful work with these educators and supporters. That being said, the school “community” is no longer limited by geographic boundaries. Establishing a virtual PLN allows a principal to extend beyond that which is known and familiar and explore new and alternative ideas and opportunities. Both are unique in their contributions to my learning, yet both are very valuable. My virtual PLN is quite diverse,

containing educators from all over the world who serve students in a variety of different capacities, and I appreciate the many perspectives on educational issues the members of my virtual PLN contribute.

What do you want principals to know about the professional benefits of social networking?

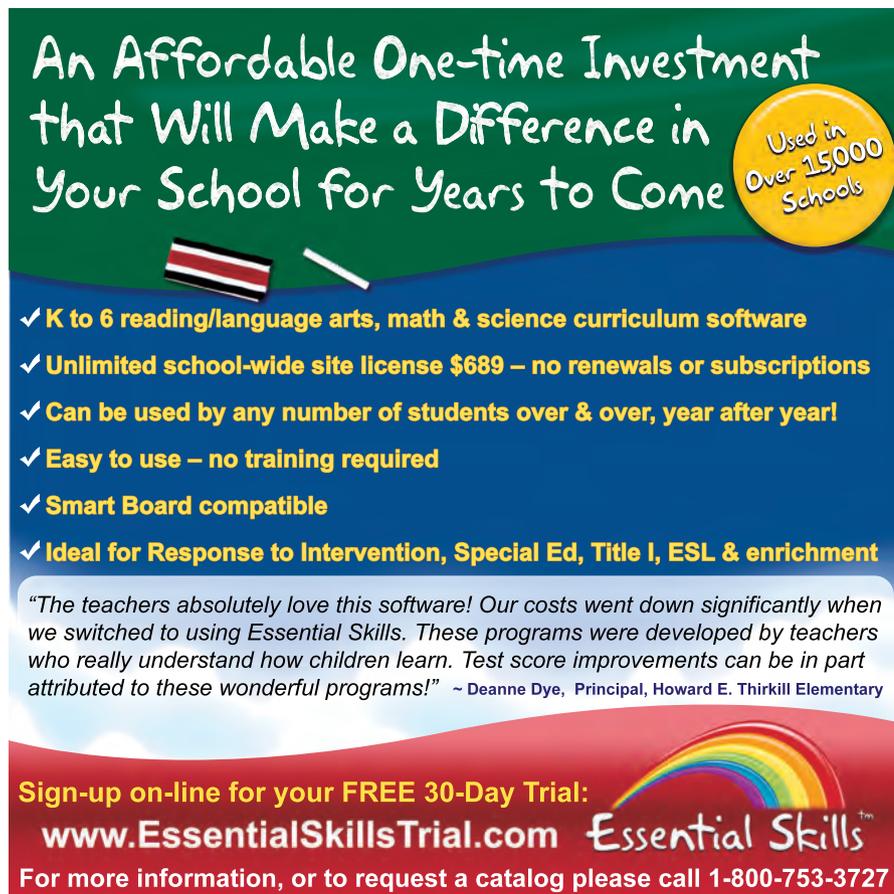
Couros: The biggest benefit of social

networking is that it gives you the opportunity to really immerse yourself in learning. Many believe that social networking is about technology only, but that is the same as saying writing is about the pencil. Social networking gives you the opportunity to learn about whatever you want, when you want to learn about it. Not only have I found that the learning is extremely beneficial, but this environment is characterized by the relationships that you develop with others. I have a network of people that I connect with all over the world who are passionate about education and are willing to share and learn together. Schools should be built not upon brick and mortar, but relationships. Effective use of social media is built upon this same ideal.

Hilt: I want principals to know that by involving themselves in social networking, they can improve organizational efficiency, develop meaningful professional connections that will positively benefit their practice, and help serve as the lead learners for their organizations in bringing social media to teachers and students. The benefits of use far outweigh the initial time requirements for establishing accounts and getting to know and use the tools. I can honestly say that over the past year, there has been no greater source of professional development for me than the learning I’ve embraced through social media. 

GEORGE COUROS  is principal of Forest Green School/Connections for Learning in Stony Plain, Alberta, Canada. He started using Twitter in December 2009 (@gcouros) and has been blogging since April 2010 (<http://georgecouros.ca/blog>). He also is the creator of Connected Principals, a blog that is the collected thoughts of school administrators who want to share best practices in education (www.connectedprincipals.com).

LYN HILT  is principal of Brecknock Elementary School in Denver, Pennsylvania. She has been using Twitter for the past two years (@L_Hilt) and has been blogging since November 2009 (<http://lynhilt.com>). She also contributes to the Connected Principals blog.



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