

The Power of the Walkie-Talkie Principal

How setting up a global PLN using Voxer can ignite your leadership life

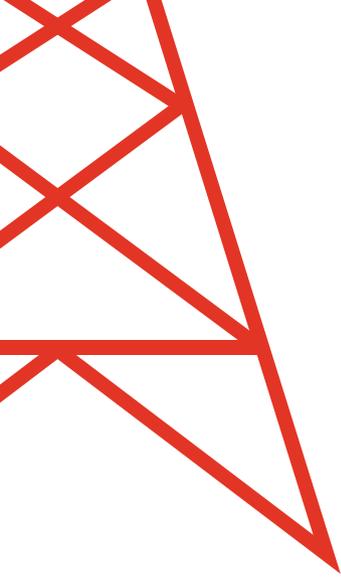
By Rick Jetter and Rebecca Coda



Years ago, life as a collaborative school leader looked something like this: You had your in-district colleagues to bounce ideas off of, to vent to when something was upsetting, and to provide ideas on how to work through or solve an issue. You may have also had regional out-of-district colleagues whom you befriended and worked alongside on various projects for the common good, including centralizing services, creating budget savings plans, and activating instructional best practices for students beyond your own schoolyard boundaries. Your leadership instinct may have been to reach outside the comfort zone of your own district, but you lacked the traction to hit global grand designs.

Technology now enables school leaders in even the most remote districts to connect with innovative educators around the globe. We have established incredible personal and professional relationships on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, and so many other social-media-driven collaborative platforms. We engage in Twitter chats, acquire “followers,” and find like-minded school leaders not only in our own backyards, but worldwide. Today’s technology allows principals to create global personal learning networks (PLNs). Principals now can connect to improve, mentor, enhance, and support school leaders *everywhere*.

Collaborating with others and basking in the power of a PLN drives our thirst to do the very best we can for our students. Now, we can reach beyond the vacuums of our own decision-making and instead enter into a world of social media to connect with others who become professional allies and, in time, friends.



Voxer, Explained

Enter Voxer, a mobile application for smartphones. Created by Tom Katis and Matt Ranney in 2007, Voxer has emerged as a primary go-to collaborative tool for educational PLNs all across the world.

The app wasn't originally intended for educators, but it's become a collaborative gold mine for educators and school leaders. With a text feature and walkie-talkie voice activation, you can utilize this application as part of a PLN communication tool. Texting can be used silently in any environment; the walkie-talkie feature permits users to converse with their new colleagues and friends.

We have used Voxer both when we worked in school-based leadership positions and in our districtwide leadership positions. Even today, as authors and consultants, we continue to be part of various Voxer groups across many leadership ecosystems in K–12 forums. We host our own #PrevailingLeaders Voxer group as a result of one of our books being read by others who originally wanted to carry out a Voxer book study group. We also are part of a #Superintendent group, a #P12Leaders group, and an #EduMatch group, not to mention so many other incredible forums that have helped us grow in new and amazing ways.

Most Voxer groups have just under 50 participants in order to facilitate communication. Some, however, have 100 or more participants across dozens of countries. We found most of the groups we are involved in via either Twitter or other PLN members who use Voxer to connect with others on a one-to-one basis. Sometimes we simply received invites to be part of a group in which others wanted to know what we thought about issues in the field of education or how to work through a local issue or problem.

Voxer groups form from a desire to connect with others who have a common belief or cause.

The beauty of Voxer is that it does not hold any prejudice. Many principals are part of superintendents' groups. Many assistant principals are part of principals' groups. Many educational authors are part of all of these groups.

Managing Voxer interactions can be challenging. But you likely already listen to an audiobook, podcast, or your voicemail messages on the drive home from work or when your kids are asleep for the night. You can do the same with Voxer and learn and grow as a leader. Whether you participate actively or simply listen to your PLN members discuss the love and challenges of leadership, Voxer can inspire you and lead to great changes.

Voxer has collaborative powers that can go beyond your imagination. Here are some real-life examples of the things that Voxer does for us and can do for you:

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Generating Ideas

Roger, one of our PLN members, sent out a Voxer message asking what to do regarding students who refused to get required immunizations due to their religious beliefs. Forty-two PLN members (out of the 55 members in the group) responded with text-based photos of sample questionnaires, sample follow-up questions, and copies of their own policy manual pages pertaining to this issue. This repository of global problem-solving and idea generation was invaluable not only to Roger, but also to other group members who responded through text or voice application options.

Providing Data and Research

John, another PLN member, asked about discipline policies for student suspensions related to drug use on school grounds. His PLN on Voxer gave him—and others—a glimpse of what others across the nation would do in a similar situation. While statewide policies might differ from one PLN member to another, John and other members of the PLN found it helpful to look at best practices for discipline matters.



IF YOU ARE INTERESTED

in book study Voxer groups, you can search the title of the book to see whether there is any Voxer action already going on or you can inquire with the author to see what is happening with their particular book.

If a book study Voxer group doesn't exist, let the author know that you would love to set one up. This is a great way to connect with other educators and authors!

Offering Unique Expertise

Matt and Tom, two educational consultants, asked a group of school principals what they were currently reading in order to gather ideas about what books to recommend for school-based book studies. Your Voxer PLN can act as a book study or vast library of experts who have read relevant research and books on almost anything. Learning from the expertise of others is a positive outcome of engaging in a PLN-based Voxer group.

Supporting You

Carolyn, a third-year principal, was having trouble with a few teachers at her school. She felt as if they were ganging up on her and trying to get her board members to not renew her contract. Her PLN Voxer group helped her through this hard time by coming up with ways to handle her situation.

Remember, it's up to you to decide how actively involved you will be in your social media PLNs. You can simply listen to gain incredible insights into big ideas from colleagues all over the world, or you can become an active agent and use Voxer to its utmost collaborative power. You control what you listen to, when you listen to it, and how candid you become. Starting off cautiously is fine. Take the time to get to know your PLN. As your comfort increases, your anxiety will decrease.

Letting You Vent

Once you feel secure, you can use your PLN Voxer Group to help you get through tough days. Amy, an assistant principal, needed to vent about how her principal was treating her poorly each day. Our shared Voxer group let her vent, supported her feelings, and offered solutions. That, Amy says, was particularly useful one night when her mom and sister were unavailable to chat. Your PLN can support you through the darkest days on the job.

Voxer is not the be-all and end-all in technological, social-media-driven, collaborative PLN tools for school leaders. Sometimes, phoning a friend can be just as powerful. But Voxer allows you to assemble a global army of incredible thinkers, mentors, problem-solvers, and leaders.

It is a tech tool that has withstood the test of time. We believe that Voxer will be around for another decade, because we all need allies and like-minded PLN members beyond those within our local boundaries. It is with global wisdom, experience, and universal passion that we can grow and achieve great things. **P**

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