

Connect & Celebrate With Facebook

Are you looking for a way to share your school's story without overloading your already busy schedule? There are many dynamic tools that can help principals tell powerful narratives that look beyond test scores. Facebook is more than a network for communicating about our personal interests. The social media tool can also give principals the power to meet families where they are and enhance the home-school connection. Here are a few tips for getting started with Facebook and using it to engage families.

Establish a Page

First, you should create a unique Facebook page just for your school; do not use your personal Facebook page as your school's page. Before you establish your school's page, review your school or district's acceptable use policy (AUP). An AUP is meant to provide clear guidelines for appropriate technology use. This policy should also clearly delineate guidelines for using student photos, and should be posted within the profile settings of your Facebook page. You should also set specific Facebook guidelines for your school community and those who are posting to your page.

Once the page is established, you can integrate it with other communications vehicles. For example, you can use widgets to embed your Facebook stream in your existing school website or school app.

Management Tips

While your following may start small, it will grow with frequent posts. Maintaining an active page is critical to building an audience. If you use other social media tools to communicate to your school community, such as Twitter, use a social media management tool such as Hootsuite to post to multiple platforms at once.

Multiple users can manage a page, so consider designating more than one person as page administrator. Start with a small number of individuals who serve as key stakeholders; add more as you feel more comfortable. For example, parents and commu-

nity members love to see the learning taking place in classrooms, so encourage teachers to add pictures of learning throughout the school day. Also consider adding a PTO or PTA representative as an administrator of the page. The representative will feel empowered, and the action promotes transparency and collaboration within the school community.

As a school leader, your busy, unpredictable schedule may prevent you from frequently monitoring the page. Use the notification settings to help you manage comments and posts that need a timely response. Don't, however, encourage your community to use the Facebook page as a main vehicle for communicating time-sensitive information. Post your expectations and guidelines on your page, and send regular e-mail reminders about them.

How you handle posts and comments by others sets the tone; remember that proactive comments and posts are the best way to combat negativity. Respond to all comments—positive or negative—as soon as possible. Determine whether you will delete negative posts from the school's Facebook page.

It has been our practice to delete overly negative or inappropriate posts, and then contact the person by phone. During the conversation, we mention the post on Facebook—and the fact that it has been deleted—and talk through the situation. The person is usually satisfied once we have provided the full details and multiple perspectives of the situation.

Know that even if you delete a post or comment, there is always a chance that it has already been seen. A quick post to address the information demonstrates transparency. When your followers realize you are open to feedback and input, they will begin to use appropriate, more direct channels for negative feedback.

Promote Two-Way Engagement

Facebook, like a Web page, is great for sharing information. But it also has the power to promote two-way communication, beyond the function that can be accomplished with a static Web page. Use these strategies to engage families in interactive conversations:

- Share images from the school day. Parents appreciate this glimpse inside classrooms and will check back for photos of their own children.
- Use Web tools such as Poll Everywhere to gather ideas or request feedback on events.
- Encourage students, parents, and staff to communicate and share information and photos with tools such as Padlet. For example, during spring break, ask your school community members to post what they are reading or where they are traveling.
- Host contests where followers post photos of creative snow-day activities during the winter and vacation T-shirts during the summer.

Explore Other Pages

Visit other school Facebook pages to gather ideas about how you can best tell your story and engage others. As principals, we should model positive online communication and find other school leaders to emulate. Facebook is one way to do that. 

Kathy A. Melton is principal of Lowell Elementary School in Wheaton, Illinois.

Melinda Miller is principal of Willard East Elementary School in Willard, Missouri.