School Web Sites: Essential Communication Tools

A study by the National Center for Education Statistics (Parsad & Jones, 2005) concluded that at least 83 percent of schools in the United States are hosting a Web site. However, many school Web sites offer little more than isolated, random, and often outdated information. In this age of online banking and shopping, properly designed school Web sites can provide an excellent forum to communicate with parents and community members. With a click of a mouse, parents can view school menus, contact teachers, join the Parent Teacher Association, and review school policies. Studies have linked parent and community involvement in schools with increased student achievement, reduced student absenteeism, increased graduation rates, improved student attitudes and behavior, and increased student enrollment in secondary education.

School Web sites also have the potential to serve as an instructional resource for students. For example, teachers can post homework assignments, provide links to relevant Internet sites, display classroom projects, and offer online collaboration with a global audience. School Web sites can offer formal, online instruction (such as discussion boards and distance-learning courses) to supplement classroom instruction or to reach homebound and homeschooled students. In addition, many schools subscribe to online databases, virtual libraries, and other resources that can be made available to students and parents via a password-protected portal on the school’s Web site.

Elements of Effective School Web Sites

The effectiveness of a school Web site can be measured by its usefulness to the constituents (parents, students, and community members). Although some of the elements overlap, these major components have proved to be useful.

Parents

- School calendar (holidays, state assessments);

Students

- Homework assignments and due dates;
- Instructional links (Web sites, online discussions); and
- School calendar (sports, clubs, after-school activities).

Community Members

- Information about the school (history, awards);
- Maps/directions to the school; and
- Event calendar (sports, music, theater).

Remember, however, that the information on a school Web site must be current, accurate, and easy to find. Objectives and goals need to be outlined (by administrators or committees); a webmaster may need to be hired or trained; and priorities need to be established. Careful consideration must also be given to legal issues, copyrights, and student privacy. For example, student photos should not be posted with names or other identification.

Assuring Accessibility to School Web Sites

As more and more schools rely on Web sites as primary communication tools, they must implement design techniques that will ensure the sites are accessible to all—including students and parents with disabilities.

For many years, the American Rehabilitation Act focused on removing physical barriers, such as restrooms that were not accessible and curbs on streets. An important focus now is to remove virtual barriers so that everyone can access vital information on the Internet. Techniques for Web site accessibility...
involve making sure that the text on a Web page is large enough for those with limited vision. In addition, all images must have text alternatives so that screen readers will be able to convey the information (as it reads the Web page to those who are visually impaired).

A person with low hearing or who is deaf may also have difficulty if a school Web site relies heavily on sound to convey information, such as a welcome message from the principal. Text scripts should be available for audio files, movie clips, and podcasts that are incorporated into a site.

Cognitive issues, such as the reading level of the target audience, must also be considered in the design of a school Web site. In addition, you may need to include options for two or more languages, based upon the English proficiency of the parents and community members.

Although more homes now have Internet access, the software and hardware used in homes vary a great deal. Some parents may be using computers that are several years old; the platforms (Macintosh versus an IBM) will vary, as will the browsers (Safari, Internet Explorer, Foxfire, etc.). Before a school Web site is launched, it must be carefully tested in all environments.

School Web sites have become the public face of a school. Never before have administrators had a communication tool that is so inexpensive, expandable, and easy to update. The time, money, and energy necessary to design and maintain an effective Web site will be well spent and result in high dividends for your school and community.

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**Reference**


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