

A stack of grey vinyl records is shown from a low angle, receding into the distance. Overlaid on the records are several social media icons: a red circular icon with a white 't' (TikTok), a green circular icon with a white 'p' (Pinterest), a red circular icon with a white bird (Twitter), a white square icon with a camera (Instagram), and a red circular icon with a white 'g+' (Google+).

Taking Social Media by Storm



Principals are using online platforms in innovative new ways to connect with the school community

BY DEVERY RODGERS

For years, school principals have used multiple social media outlets to reach stakeholders. But with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic two years ago, social media rapidly became a critical communication tool.

Social media offers valuable ways to keep people informed and connected, but it can also amplify the wrong kinds of messages or be subject to misinterpretation. Maybe that's why principals participating in NAESP's *Leaders We Need Now* study found that they could benefit from additional support in using social media for crisis and everyday communication.

The majority of the public has learned to generate, disseminate, and cull information from social media channels. But when social media is used without discretion, it can create what might be called an infodemic—too much information that too often is inaccurate, misleading, or worse.

Principals are using social listening skills to glean insights from social media conversations and promote appropriate solutions for their communities. By forging school responses to societal events, colleagues have developed effective ways to use social media to find resources, build community, and advocate for students and families.

Here are several strategies school leaders have used to support their school's engagement with students and families:

Inform with humor. Returning to school during the initial stages of the pandemic required stakeholders to understand safety protocols. Nick Holtvluwer, principal of Mammoth Heights Elementary in Parker, Colorado, used his karaoke skills to communicate safety precautions on the school's YouTube channel. Presenting contingency plans for school reopening to the tune of Justin Timberlake's "I'm Bringing Sexy Back," Holtvluwer's "I'm Bringing Plexiglas" offered authentic content that engaged parents positively on a sensitive topic.

Similarly, Quentin Lee, principal of Childersburg High School in Childersburg, Alabama, created a YouTube parody video of MC Hammer's "Can't Touch This" to introduce sanitizing, masking, and social distancing concepts to students and parents. The video now has more than 6.4 million views.

Issue everyday updates. To maintain learning momentum as principal of Brodhead Elementary in Brodhead, Wisconsin, David Novy started posting to Facebook Live every morning in the early days of the pandemic. Students were treated to morning

announcements, news about school events, and readings with the principal—often in character—to encourage listening literacy. This might have helped Novy get promoted to his current position of superintendent.

After the pandemic forced school closures, Michele Savage, principal of Shue-Medill Middle School in Newark, Delaware, started creating daily video announcements to replace her habit of meeting students in the school lobby. Using Snapchat filters and TikTok editing tools, she shared the videos on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, where students commented to say good morning, shared words of encouragement, or simply posted a few emojis. Parents responded online as well, welcoming another school-to-home avenue of communication. "It's all about that community, and how in the world you keep your community going when it's all broken with COVID," Savage told the *Newark Post*. "We're online, and we all feel separated, so it's like, how can we connect?"

Challenge kids to connect. When he had problems reaching students and parents through emails, phone calls, and posts through the school's online learning platform, Harold "Butch" Ingram, principal of Glasgow High School in Newark, Delaware, moved to Instagram. Toward the end of the first pandemic spring semester, Ingram offered students an incentive, promising that if they met the previous year's graduation rate, he would dance at the graduation ceremony. They did—and the resulting viral clip had more than 56,000 views and ended up on the local news.

Likewise, Megan McCarter, principal of Scott Elementary in Portland, Oregon, felt she couldn't ask teachers to do more than she was willing to do to maintain connections with families during the pandemic. Thus, she donned a school-themed cape and launched a video morning message for all teachers to play for their students. She also engages students weekly through TikTok dance challenges, changing Megan Thee Stallion's "I'm a Savage" to "I'm a Scholar" and inviting students to post their own responses. McCarter has also written original songs that her students can stream from SoundCloud.

Invite direct messages. Mariellen Taraboletti, principal of Keene Elementary School in Newark, Delaware, turned to the school's online learning system, ClassDojo, as the most effective way to broadcast key messages. As a school that already has a strong sense of family, Taraboletti said parents like ClassDojo because they can message teachers and staff directly and view one another's comments. "Parents know that if they send me a message, I typically will get back to them within an hour," she told the *Newark Post*. "They know they're going to get their questions answered, [and] they can reach out to the teachers very easily."

Tools You Can Use

The following apps can help juggle the tasks related to maintaining an online presence:

- TweetDeck helps schedule tweets to post at specific times.
- IFTT (If This Then That) and Sprout Social allow users to post to one social media platform and have the content appear on multiple platforms simultaneously.
- Since Instagram and Facebook are owned by the same company, internal settings allow users to post to both platforms simultaneously.
- Use a tool such as Wakelet to curate all social media with your school mentions into one place and feed it to your school's website.

Core Concepts: Communication

Advocate for equity. Besides throwing virtual school rallies and hosting yoga for staff and parents, Justine Lucas, principal of PS143Q in New York City, uses her Twitter feed to promote kindness, celebrate cultural awareness, and advocate for local community causes.

And thanks in part to his coordination of social media campaigns on Twitter, Derrick Lawson, principal of Indio High School in Indio, California, was named Advocacy Champion of the Year by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Championing students' rights to broadband and health care, organizing food drives, and encouraging peers to contact state representatives on behalf of their school communities, Lawson became a voice that legislators listen to on multiple school matters.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Other school administrators have used social media for these purposes and more during the pandemic, and what you can accomplish using communication tools such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter is limited only by your creativity. A few tips:

- If you haven't yet begun your foray into social media, try to create school accounts with the same or similar names on all major platforms.
- Keep the same professional boundaries that you'd maintain with parents and students face to face. Post items for your stakeholders that would make your school board proud.
- Due to student ages and maturity, communication with elementary students on public platforms should target parents and caregivers.
- You might need to dedicate more creative energy to capture and keep the attention of middle school students.
- Instead of declarations, use invitations. Create social media challenges to elicit response and interaction from students and families. If your audience engages with the content, it will help build an online school community.
- Be a connected educator—and share others' content. Once you decide which educators to follow, including those in your own district, repost salient content with anecdotes tying it to your school.
- Post early and often—or at least stay consistent. Get in front of stories to control the narrative. Families want

- Principals are now using social media to find resources, build community, and advocate for students and families more than ever due to the pandemic.
- Humor, regular updates, and challenges have been effective in getting students and parents to engage on social media platforms.
- A frequent—or at least consistent—posting schedule allows leaders to control the narrative on issues related to the school.

to hear from you directly about the issues affecting them and the school environment.

- Use photos and videos to help tell your story. Visuals will help attract stakeholders' attention and have a greater likelihood of likes and comments.
- Ensure that your use of social media to engage stakeholders supplements traditional communications instead of supplanting them.
- Have fun! Most of us got into our jobs to guide school policies that guarantee learning happens in a caring, enjoyable, and rewarding environment.

One last example: As a parody of *Home Alone*, Andrew Orefice, principal of Hawkswood School in Eatontown, New Jersey, taped himself running amok in an empty school when stay-at-home directives first went into effect, ending with this heartwarming message: "After a while, you really miss those who surround you with love and lend to your purpose." ●

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