

THE DEFINITIVE SCHOOL LEADER'S

GUIDE TO

NAVIGATING SOCIAL MEDIA

SURVIVING AND THRIVING IN THE AGE OF FACEBOOK, TWITTER, AND EVERYTHING ELSE



INSIDE THIS GUIDE

-  Develop a social media plan that works for your schools and community.
-  Tell your story in a way that builds trust and support among key stakeholders.
-  Encourage two-way dialogue that is respectful, engaging and insightful.
-  Avoid common pitfalls on your way to becoming a social media master.

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If you like what you see here—and we hope you do—reach out to us at info@K12insight.com for more information or call us at **703-542-9600**. We'd love your feedback.

WHY USE SOCIAL MEDIA?

JEFF BUTTS HAD BEEN SUPERINTENDENT AT Indiana's Wayne Township School District for five days when a controversy about his predecessor's contract threatened to derail his best-laid plans.

The media firestorm that resulted left a wake of deeply hurt feelings and more than a few



We leveraged social media to change our image and succeeded.”

misconceptions about the school district and its leadership.

Butts knew he had to rebuild the community's trust in the school system—and fast. So he turned ... to Twitter?

The social network with a 140-character limit became his bully pulpit, a vehicle for Butts and other school leaders to broadcast the good that the school district was doing, even as negative headlines continued to swirl around them.

Recalls Butts, “If we didn't leverage the power of social media to tell the amazing things happening each and every day in our classrooms and across our district, we would very quickly lose the PR battle.”

What started as a fight for survival became a way of life for administrators in Wayne Township.

“Each day we tell our story to every follower,” says Butts. “We leveraged social media to change our image and succeeded.”

They hardly had a choice. As Wayne Township's example shows, district administrators can either move to lead the online narrative about their schools—or let others in the school community lead it for them.

CHOOSE YOUR APPROACH

The growing influence of social media has changed the traditional landscape of school communications—some would say, for good.

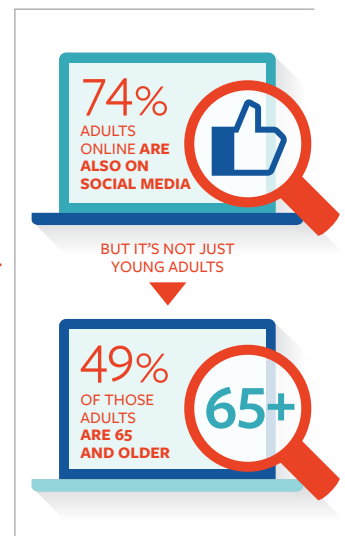
“We need to communicate with parents and other stakeholders in the way they communicate,” explains Linsae Snider, executive director of the Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA). If recent research is any indication, that's increasingly through social media.

As of January 2014, the Pew Internet & American Life Project estimates that 74 percent of adults who are online also use social networking sites. And not just young adults. Pew estimates that 49 percent of adults ages 65 and older are on social media.

Such numbers leave little doubt about the viability of social media as a communications solution for schools. Whether you're looking to inform the public, engage with parents, or muster support for important policy decisions, the benefits are myriad. Unfortunately, so, too, are the risks.

For school leaders, the difference between success and failure lies in the ability to approach these resources thoughtfully, with a clear plan and purpose.

That's the aim of this guide: to give you the knowledge and the confidence to put social media to work for your school community, minus all the headaches and pitfalls.



Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2014



DEVELOP A PLAN

WITH THE LESSONS FROM THE FIRST DAYS OF HIS SUPERINTENDENCY STILL FRESH IN his mind, Jeff Butts made sure his team was proactive in guiding online discussions. One of his first orders of business in Wayne Township was meeting with members of different stakeholder groups to develop a strategic communications plan for the district.

“We wanted to be very intentional about our messaging,” he recalls.

Wayne Township has a Facebook page maintained by the district’s communications office, which it uses to post news, recognize achievements and respond to community concerns. Butts himself manages the district’s official Twitter account ([@WayneTwpSuper](#)), which he uses to engage and inform the community.

“... the social media policy should be reflective of the culture of that district.”



"I had to demonstrate that social media was important," says Butts, "so I had to become a proficient user myself."

Wayne Township's communications plan requires that all schools maintain active Twitter accounts—each of which is linked directly to the district's website. This year, the district initiated a series of organized Twitter chats, using the hashtag #WeAreWayne. District staff take turns hosting and moderating the online discussions, choosing topics that are both timely and informative.

In a community where only 23 percent of the population has school-age children, Butts says social media gives the district a way to connect with a broader cross-section of the community.


An active social media user, and something of a technology veteran, Butts tries to respond personally to every online message he receives. Though it's important to note that not all school leaders are comfortable with that approach.

"Some districts we work with don't want the superintendent to post anything on social media," says TSPRA's Snider. "Every district is going to have its own policy, and the policy should be reflective of the culture of that district."

What's important is that school leaders involve every stakeholder group in the formation of their social media plan—and that they write that plan with the specific opinions and needs of the district and its people in mind.

Nine superintendents you need to follow right now

The superintendents we talked to for this guide are all must-follows on Twitter. So are Daniel Frazier (@[DaniellFrazier](#)), superintendent of Litchfield Independent School District 465 (Minn.), who created the #suptchat hashtag, which is moderated by Michael Lubefeld (@[mikelubefeld](#)), superintendent of Deerfield Public School District 109 (Ill.), and Nick Polyak (@[npolyak](#)), superintendent of Leyden High School District 212 (Ill.).

Here are seven other social media-savvy K12 chief executives to know 

- 1 David Britten (@[colonelb](#)), Godfrey-Lee Public Schools, Mich. (6,500+ followers)
- 2 Alberto Carvalho (@[MiamiSup](#)), Miami-Dade Public Schools, Fla. (13,000+ followers)
- 3 S. Dallas Dance (@[DDance_BCPS](#)), Baltimore County Public Schools, Md. (21,000+ followers)
- 4 Terry Grier (@[tgrierhisd](#)), Houston Independent School District, Texas (5,000+ followers)
- 5 Pam Moran (@[pammoran](#)), Albemarle County Public Schools, Va. (14,000+ followers)
- 6 Michael Smith (@[principalspage](#)), Tuscola Community Unit School District No. 301, Ill. (20,000+ followers)
- 7 Eric Williams (@[ewilliams65](#)), Loudoun County Schools, Va. (6,000+ followers)

Frazier compiled a public list of K12 superintendents on Twitter, and his list numbers more than 1,700. You can find his list at [@daniellfrazier/lists/supts](#).

HERE ARE FIVE ESSENTIAL POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN DEVELOPING A SOUND COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY FOR YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT:

#1 Social media alone won't cut it

Social media is but one tool in a vast communications arsenal that also includes a mass notification system, school and district websites, email, newsletters, calendars, phone calls, face-to-face meetings, local media and more.

“We need to make sure that we’re communicating our message in multiple ways, so we can get it out in the different ways that people like to receive information,” Butts explains. For instance, many senior citizens aren’t online. That doesn’t mean they don’t have an opinion on the school district or its policies. In Wayne Township, administrators conduct in-person outreach events in churches, community centers and other locations, to ensure that all stakeholders have a voice in important school district decisions.

#2 Know your community and the tools they use

Create a process to identify where your stakeholders are online. Dedicating precious resources to a hip social media application that holds little or no sway in the district is a waste of time.

“In our communities, it’s Facebook and Twitter. We know this because we’ve asked our members how they’d like to receive information,” Snider explains. “We tried Instagram but had very little response to it.”

Your approach—and your tone—should mirror exactly the type of community member you are trying to reach. Imagine that you are speaking to someone face to face.



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WHO'S USING THEM?



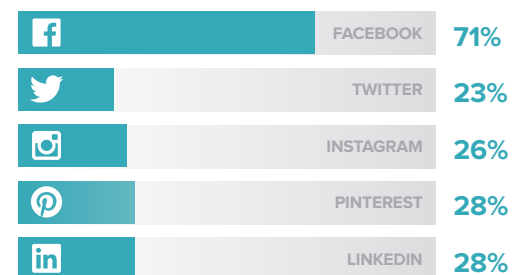
WHAT AGES?



WHAT EDUCATION?



WHICH SITES ARE ADULTS USING?



Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2014

“We know, for instance, that our largest Facebook user group is age 30 to 39 and primarily female, so it’s a lot of mothers who are following us on our Facebook page,” Butts says. “Twitter tends to be more of the younger generation and parents of our younger children.”

#3 Develop clear policies and procedures

Draft detailed guidelines that dictate social media use on official school or district accounts. Faculty and staff should know when they can post, what’s an appropriate use of content, whether they need to get approval before posting, how to respond to individual stakeholders, and so on.

Snider recommends that teachers only be allowed to post before or after school. This ensures that educators spend class time focused on students. Some schools have put in place filtering or review processes to ensure consistency in the messaging.

“If it’s a teacher posting to the school’s official account, maybe the principal approves it first,” Snider explains, “or if it’s a principal, maybe the central office approves it.”

#4 Be flexible

Technology changes fast. So, too, should your social media plan.

“I would caution others to be as flexible as they can, because of the nature of the technology,” says Luvelle Brown, superintendent of the Ithaca City School District in New York. Don’t be afraid to revisit your policies and procedures as often as is necessary.

#5 Don’t mix business and pleasure

Assuming school or district employees maintain personal social media accounts, it’s a good idea for them to create separate professional accounts used for work-related social posts only.

Keeping personal and professional posts separate helps ensure that your message is consistent. It also reduces the likelihood of content-fueled controversy.





TELL YOUR STORY

THE ITHACA CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT IS SO ADEPT AT USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO communicate with stakeholders that “people now see our official district accounts as the definitive source for news and information in the community,” Superintendent Luvelle Brown says. “We’ve had instances where someone put out false information, and people have fact-checked it with us.”

To build that level of trust requires schools to be both incredibly active and fully transparent in how they use social media.

“We put out a lot of information, and we don’t just do it when something good has happened—we put out the negative along with the positive,” Brown explains. “We do it every

“ People now see our official district accounts as the definitive source for news and information in the community.”



day, throughout the day. I'm our biggest critic, and I'll share things on our website or on social networks like, 'We aren't doing a good job on X and we need to get better on Y.'"

The district also uses social media more broadly to communicate its vision for learning.

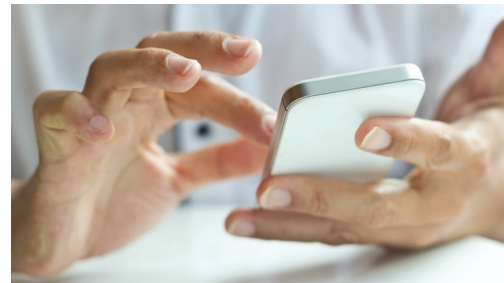
"We've had a lot of conversation about what keywords such as 'engage' and 'empower' mean. Social media lets us share examples of what this looks like in our classrooms. A teacher might share a link to a lesson with a photo showing how that lesson engages or empowers young people."

Wayne Township also uses social media to give community members an insider's view. Jeff Butts says he dedicates much of his time online to sharing best practices and compelling stories of classroom success.

"We can't rely on the newspapers and television stations to get those stories out, because there's a lot of news to cover," he says. "But we can celebrate each and every one of these stories ourselves online in multiple forms."

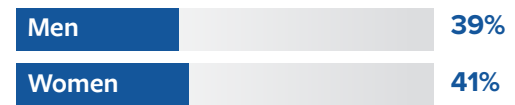
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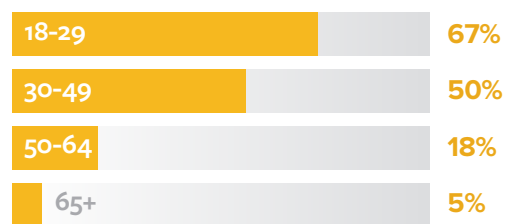


The growing ubiquity of cell phones, especially the rise of smartphones, has made social networking just a finger tap away.

WHO'S USING SMARTPHONES?



WHAT AGES?



WHAT ETHNICITY?



Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2014

BELOW ARE **FOUR TIPS** FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO TELL YOUR DISTRICT'S STORY:

#1 Take advantage of the periods of greatest activity

Research suggests that the early morning is when many people are active on social media. Linsae Snider says, "There's a pretty good chance that a large portion of your community is going to look at their social media sites before they leave for work that day. That's a great opportunity to get information to families and other stakeholders quickly."

#2 But ... schedule tweets for all hours of the day

When it comes to Twitter, "your greatest leverage for growing your followers is to tweet around the clock," says the social media marketing firm HubSpot. "People are active on Twitter at different times, and since the conversations are so ephemeral, the people you want to see your tweets may not ever see them."

Guy Kawasaki, one of the most influential people in marketing with 1.4 million Twitter followers, tweets 50 times per day on average, HubSpot says—and he tweets each tweet at least four times (once every eight hours) to reach a wider audience. You can schedule tweets at all hours of the day using a tool like Hootsuite or TweetDeck.

#3 Use photos to get people's attention

"With Facebook, I've learned that if there is not a photo that goes with a post, people aren't going to read it," Snider says.

Photos also can help your tweets get noticed. "Since we started using photos in tweets, along with a short URL linking to a landing page, we've seen the average conversation rate on those pages nearly double," says Brittany Leaning, social media manager for HubSpot. "For the best appearance in the feed, I recommend using landscape-oriented rectangular images that are approximately 2:1 in dimension."

#4 Write original content for each social media channel

"TSPRA members hated it when we used an automated service to post the same message in all of our social media channels," Snider says. "That approach was too industrial for them. And so we quit doing that. They said they don't do that in their own districts, either, because it's too redundant."

Dr. Jeff Butts @WayneTwpSuper Follow


Educators: low pay, negative perceptions behind struggles to recruit teachers in.chalkbeat.org/2015/09/24/edu ...



Educators: low pay, negative perceptions behind struggles t...
The second meeting of Glenda Ritz's teacher panel focused on why colleges are enrolling fewer education majors.
in.chalkbeat.org

S. Dallas Dance @DDance_BCPS Follow

\$50 million renovation adds new wing, capacity to Hereford High fw.to/gevxfe



\$50 million renovation adds new wing, capacity to Hereford ...
Don't be surprised to catch Hereford High School principal Joe Jira humming "Santa Claus is Coming to Town." Except in this case, Santa has already come to Hereford.
baltimoresun.com

pammoran @pammoran

Some thoughts from @j_k_crutchfield on engagement questions 4 kids @dcmcollins @mshaas68 @psubear @ACPSLeadCoaches

Luvelle Brown @luvelleb Follow

End of day in @IthacaHS_NY library I see an empty recycling bin, Ss collaborating using chrome books, & engagement 👍 📖



Alberto M. Carvalho @MiamiSup Follow

Miami-Dade launches school attendance campaign. We cannot teach the student who doesn't show up! #iAttend student! miamiherald.com/news/local/edu ...

RETWEETS 17 FAVORITES 18





ENCOURAGING DIALOGUE

AT ITHACA CITY SCHOOLS, LUELLE BROWN AND HIS TEAM USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO share outbound information and to engage stakeholders in a two-way conversations about the district.

“I share examples of our work, and I ask folks to comment: What do you see here that you like? What don’t you like?” he says. “I’m constantly asking questions on these networks, hoping folks will respond.” And people are responding, which has led to more dialogue—both online and in person.

Brown shares an example of how a conversation that began online spilled over into Wface-to-face meetings, leading to a deeper understanding within the community.

“Every time I would tweet out the snow day closings, I would get a lot of negative comments. So I started to engage folks who were upset about why we closed school or didn’t close school. I would ask, ‘Why shouldn’t we close school today,’ or, ‘Why should we close school?’ That started some conversations online. And I would also describe my decision-making process for closing school,” he says.

“What happened is, those conversations then evolved into a community conversation about snow day closures—including face-to-face discussion with the PTA council, for example. We had folks who saw the online conversation occurring and wanted to have more dialogue about it, and we did. Now, there’s a common understanding about what goes into the decision to close school when there’s inclement weather.”

“I’m constantly asking questions on these networks, hoping folks will respond.”



HERE ARE **FOUR TIPS** FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO ENCOURAGE AND MONITOR FEEDBACK FROM YOUR COMMUNITY:

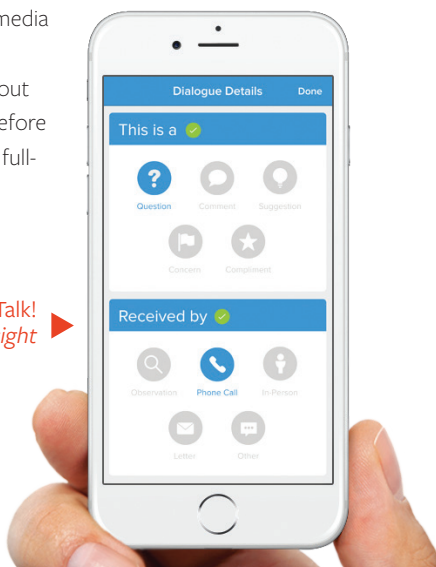
#1 When others follow you on Twitter, follow them back

Now you can have a private, two-way conversation via Twitter's private messaging feature, a useful way to engage in direct conversations with stakeholders.

#2 Monitor ongoing social media conversations about your district

Effective social media monitoring can help you stamp out problems fast, before they evolve into full-blown crises.

Let's Talk!
from K12 Insight



Have You Checked Your Blind Spot? It Might Save Your Career

School leaders are surrounded by risk. In the age of social media, those risks spread farther and wider than ever. K12 *Insight's* Let's Talk! was developed to do two things: (1) help school leaders more easily identify potential threats to their mission and vision and (2) build trust with students, teachers, parents and staff through open communication and honest feedback.

HOW IT WORKS

K12 *Insight* works with partner school districts to implement a system for managing all inbound and outbound district communications, a process for eliminating silos and creating high standards of customer service across the district and professional development for every member of their team.

- 1 Invite stakeholder feedback through your district website.
- 2 Track your response times and identify hot-button issues.
- 3 Receive flashpoint alerts when new threats appear on social media.
- 4 Generate instant reports. And use that data to make smarter decisions.

For more information, visit
www.k12insight.com/lets-talk.

Engage from K12 Insight ▶

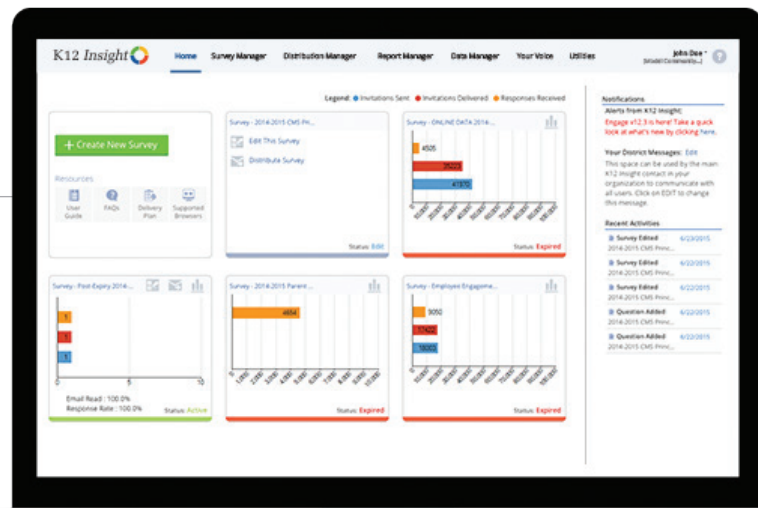
Build Trust. Bring Every Voice to the Table.

Social media is a critical resource for stakeholder engagement. Tools such as Twitter and Facebook make for excellent sounding boards. But they are only part of the solution. If you really want to hear from every stakeholder, you have to delve deeper into your community.

K12 Insight's Engage survey platform has helped thousands of school administrators connect with stakeholders on important issues. Whether your school district is preparing for a new bond referendum, redrawing district transportation boundaries or considering closing school buildings, it's important to understand how your community feels about these issues before making critical decisions.

- 1 Veteran school administrators and Ph.D.s help you design and administer the perfect survey.
- 2 Use the latest technology to engage the largest number of stakeholders.
- 3 Get a detailed report on your findings.
- 4 Receive action items and recommendations to help you make better decisions.

For more information, visit
www.k12insight.com/engage.



#3 Don't overlook more formal processes for collecting community feedback

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media tools are a great way to solicit informal opinions, but they “aren’t going to give you 100-percent reliable feedback,” Linsae Snider says. School districts need to employ more formal methods of engagement if they want to collect valid feedback, such as community surveys and focus groups.

Michael Lubelfeld, superintendent of the Deerfield Public School District 109 in Illinois, is the co-moderator of the Twitter hashtag #suptchat. His district uses a solution called Let's Talk!, from K12 Insight. “It’s a 24-7 communications tool that enables people to let us know what’s on their minds,” Lubelfeld says.

Using Let's Talk!, the Deerfield community has engaged in more than 200 separate online discussions this school year covering a range of topics, from the district's new 1:1 computing program to full-day kindergarten classes.

“We share time period reports of these discussions with our board,” explains Lubelfeld. The Let’s Talk! software automatically generates each report, at the push of a button. “It helps us affirm what topics or issues are of concern within the district.” By placing a special Let’s Talk! button on the district website, administrators are able to invite feedback from a broader cross-section of the school community, not just the vocal few, says Lubelfeld. On the backend, the technology automatically scans social media and online news sites for mentions of the school district or its employees, giving administrators the information they need to get out in front of problems fast.

#4 Don’t take yourself too seriously

K12 school leaders must have thick skin when they engage their community through social media. “On a snow day, I feel like LeBron James,” Brown says. “No matter what I say, I’m going to have hundreds of folks respond for everyone to see, talking about how crazy I am.”

Jeff Butts agrees: “You have to have a really good self-esteem, and you have to love who you see in the mirror—because some days, you’re the only one who does.”

With a last name that invites its share of jokes, Wayne Township’s superintendent has heard it all on social media.

“I’m a pretty easy target with my last name,” Butts says, “so I’ve had people make modifications of that or use various words to describe my family heritage. Of course, I grew up with some of that as well, so I’ve learned over the years to be able to handle that. I’ve learned to bite my tongue.”

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AVOID THE PITFALLS

SOCIAL MEDIA MISUSE WILL OCCUR, AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS SHOULD BE PREPARED for the fallout.

“The districts that have problems generally don’t have policies and procedures in place,” Linsae Snider says. “If you don’t have policies and procedures, then you can’t enforce anything. But if you do have these, you’re able to take care of the situation.”

Snider cites the case of a school district in Texas where a teacher posted racially insensitive comments on her personal Facebook page: “Because the district had policies and procedures in place, she was terminated immediately—and there was no lawsuit, there was nothing to fight or dispute it, because the policy was very specific in terms of what they expected,” Snider explains.

“You go to your enemies, or they’ll find you.”



Beyond the risk of misuse, there is the very real concern that certain vocal members of the minority will use social media to hijack the conversation, distort the district's vision, or stand in the way of progress.

"There are two schools of philosophy on that," Snider says. "One is, it takes care of itself. If somebody starts putting out false information or is inappropriate, somebody else will generally respond and clear the air. The other thought is, 'Hey, now we know how people feel about our school district—and it's our job to make sure there is accurate information out there and to clear up the misperceptions that people have.'"

Brown subscribes to the latter school of thought.

"When folks respond and say something negative and we see it, we respond to it—we don't just ignore it," he says. "We try to give them correct information, or we ask them to give us a call so we can have a conversation. We don't just ignore negativity. As Mike Mitchell once said, 'You go to your enemies, or they'll find you.'"

K12 leaders who are concerned about the possibility of hijacking can turn off the ability for people to comment or respond to their social media posts, Snider says—but that creates one-way communication, which really is no communication at all.

"The schools that turn off commenting and don't allow two-way communication are generally schools that don't have the resources or the manpower or the expertise to deal with it," she says. "That's another reason we encourage school districts to have an experienced communications professional on staff."

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HERE ARE **FOUR STRATEGIES** FOR AVOIDING COMMON PITFALLS IN SOCIAL MEDIA USE:

#1 Think before you post

“Once you put a tweet out there, it’s there forever,” Butts says. “You can’t take those things back. Unlike with a face-to-face conversation, it’s very easy to misconstrue or not get the full message when you’re reading 140 characters.”

Brown’s advice: “Don’t be stupid. There are some things you know you can’t say on social networks—so don’t say them.”

#2 Establish clear guidelines for acceptable behavior

“We have clear guidelines on what is socially acceptable on our Facebook page and what is not,” Butts says. “Obviously, you have to be careful, because you don’t want to limit anybody’s speech—but it’s a district-run page that is there to share information and promote the school district. When it starts to become outside of our guidelines—when the conversation becomes personal, or unprofessional, or uses unacceptable language—then we can remove that user.”

#3 Use ‘teachable moments’

Butts reaches out to people individually to discuss their online comments before making a decision to block them. “In my experience, people have been very reasonable with that,” he says. “Obviously, I don’t tell people not to disagree with me, because that’s how we have engaging conversation and can make change. Not everybody has to agree with everything I do or say, or the decisions that I make—but we can disagree in a respectful manner, and that’s what I try to get at. Let’s do so with some decency. We can work through whatever our differences are, or at least agree to disagree,” he says.

Wayne Township offers a digital citizenship curriculum. “We work with our parents and our children to help them become responsible users of social media,” Butts says. “We’re still in that generation where it’s new, and students haven’t had a chance to see the kinds of negative impact it can have firsthand—such as the permanence of what they post, and what that means for their reputation.” That must be explained through teaching.

#4 Don’t be afraid to take the conversation offline

“I’ll have parents contact me directly about an issue with their child, and I have to remind them that the conversation we’re having on social media isn’t a private conversation, so we probably need to move it offline,” Butts explains.

In Deerfield, “we only respond twice publicly to a negative comment,” Lubelfeld says. If the respondent continues, “then we’ll pick up the phone and call. At that point, it’s going down a negative road that we don’t want to go down.”

DON'T GO IT ALONE

GIVEN THE RAPIDLY EVOLVING NATURE OF these tools, establishing a social media strategy that works for your district is harder than it seems. Fortunately, you don't have to go it alone.

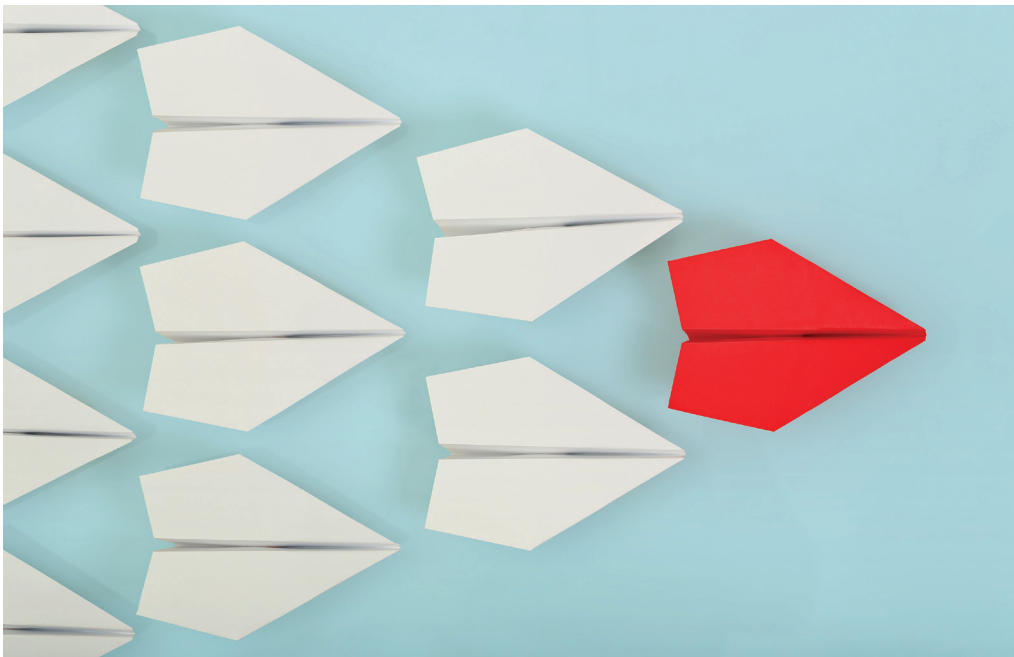
Michael Lubelfeld recommends that school leaders reach out to professional associations for help developing their social media strategy. Private companies with experience in these practices can also be a great resource—and they are often eager to help. “Consider partnering with a private company like K12 *Insight* to help,” Lubelfeld says. The company has worked with more than 30,000 school administrators to strengthen relationships with parents, students, teachers, and staff.

Social media is here to stay. It's not going away. That's why it's imperative for school district leaders to confront it, and to use it effectively.

“Just do it,” Luvelle Brown urges. “The train has left the station. This is how people are looking to get information today. There is no excuse for stakeholders to wonder where the superintendent is, or what the superintendent is thinking.”

This is the reality.

“We have no excuses. We have to be active on these tools as instructional leaders, to give people a sense of what we are thinking and where we are,” says Brown. Simple as that.



JOIN THE MORE THAN **30,000** SCHOOL LEADERS
WHO TRUST K12 *INSIGHT* TO HELP THEM BUILD STRONGER
RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS, TEACHERS, STUDENTS AND STAFF.

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2291 Wood Oak Drive

Suite 300

Herndon, VA 20171

P: 703-542-9600

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