Are Social Networking Websites Educational?

At a Glance

More and more school districts across the country are joining social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace. This Information Capsule discusses the frequency with which school districts are using social networking sites, how districts are using the sites, and potential drawbacks associated with their use. Issues for districts to consider before joining social networking sites are summarized. Social networking within Miami-Dade County Public Schools is also discussed.

School districts across the country are beginning to set up social networking sites to enhance communication with parents and other stakeholders, reinforce students' educational experiences, and provide staff with opportunities for professional collaboration. They are joining thousands of businesses and universities that are already active on these sites.

Social networking services are changing the way people communicate with each other, both for business and pleasure. They are the online equivalent of physical social networks and include features such as personal profiles, circles of friends, blogs, chat groups, instant messaging, forums, photographs, music, and videos. There are thousands of social networking services, with Facebook and MySpace currently the two most popular sites in the U.S. (Hébert, 2009; Melton, 2009; Unmuth, 2009).

The National School Boards Association (2007) surveyed 1,277 nine-to-seventeen year old students nationwide and found that 96% of those with online access reported using social networking services, such as chatting, text messaging, blogging, and visiting online communities, such as Facebook and MySpace. Seventy-one percent said they used social networking tools as least once a week. Teens reported spending almost as much time using social networking services and Web sites as they spend watching television. They indicated that they spent approximately 9 hours a week on social networking activities, compared to about 10 hours a week watching television. Similarly, researchers at the University of Minnesota conducted a survey of 16-18 year old students attending 13 urban high schools in the Midwest. The vast majority of respondents (94 percent) reported that they used the Internet and 77 percent stated that they maintained a profile on a social networking site (Science Daily, 2008).

How Common is the Use of Social Networking Sites in School Districts?

School districts that have set up Facebook accounts include Broward County Public Schools and Duval County Public Schools in Florida; the New York City Department of Education; Fort Worth, Northwest, and Plano Independent School Districts in Texas; Portland Public Schools; St. Louis Public

Schools; and the Anchorage School District, as well as smaller districts in states such as California, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina, Washington state, and Wisconsin (Letchworth, 2009; Mathewson, 2009; Melton, 2009; Shultz, 2009; Unmuth, 2009). These districts are using social networking sites as one of many communication tools. They join the sites to supplement their current communication efforts, which can include parent phone messages, e-mails, Web sites, television stations, and parent newsletters (Alff, 2009). A spokesperson for Pitt County Schools in North Carolina stated: "This is not going to be our only communication tool because we have lots of other ways to communicate with the community, but our whole thing is just having another tool for our toolbox. The more we have, the better we will be able to communicate with people. We realize people are there communicating already so instead of making them come to our Web site for information, we are going to where they already are" (Letchworth, 2009).

The National School Boards Association (2007) concluded that restrictive school district policies indicate that many educators are not yet convinced about the value of social networking as a useful educational tool. Their survey of 250 school district leaders found that most districts are cautious about the use of social networking. The majority of school districts surveyed stated that they had rules against social networking activities. For example, 98 percent of districts surveyed reported that they used software to block access to inappropriate sites, 84 percent stated that they prohibited online chatting, and 81 percent did not allow online messaging. More than half (52%) of respondents stated that their districts specifically prohibited any use of social networking sites.

Still, the National School Boards Association (2007) survey found some officially sanctioned, educationally packaged social networking occurring in schools. For example:

- 69 percent of districts stated that they had student Web site programs;
- 49 percent of districts reported that their schools participated in online collaborative projects with other schools;
- 46 percent of districts stated that their students participated in online pen pal or other international programs;
- 35 percent of districts reported that their schools and/or students ran blogs;
- 27 percent of districts stated that their schools participated in a structured teacher/principal online community; and
- 22 percent of districts indicated that their classrooms were involved in creating or maintaining Wikis (Web sites that allow visitors to add, remove, or edit content).

How are School Districts Using Social Networking Sites?

Social networking sites are usually free or have very low costs associated with their use (Jardin, 2009). They can be used as an effective communication tool, as a collaboration and recruitment tool, and for a variety of educational purposes.

One of the most common ways school districts are using social networking sites is as a vehicle for communicating with their stakeholders. Social networking sites provide a different way to reach parents and community members who aren't watching a lot of television or paying attention to traditional media outlets (Roberts, 2008). The Communications Director for the Forest Grove School District in Oregon stated: "In the old days, you could put something in the newspaper, send out a newsletter and hit most of your constituents. That's not the case anymore" (Melton, 2009).

School districts are currently using social networking sites to notify parents and the community about upcoming events; get messages out quickly during a weather or health crisis; announce school closures;

publicize school and district achievements; post test scores; and introduce the community to new principals (Mathewson, 2009; Shultz, 2009; Unmuth, 2009). Districts use social networking sites not just to share information with the community, but to listen to the community. These sites provide a way for districts to receive instant feedback on any posted information or following events such as a School Board meetings, PTA meetings, or open houses (Mathewson, 2009; Taylor, 2008).

School districts have also set up social networking sites specifically to encourage networking, information sharing, and collaboration between teachers. A growing number of districts are using these sites to connect teachers to peers who live hundreds of miles away. The sites facilitate online discussions about curriculum, content delivery, and classroom management. They allow teachers from school districts across the country to obtain feedback, get new ideas, and reflect on instructional practices (Sawchuk, 2008).

Some school districts are using social networking sites as classroom tools. Teachers use the sites to allow students to post blogs on a lesson or to find more information on topics they are studying. They are also experimenting with chat rooms and instant messaging for after-school homework help, review sessions, and collaborative projects (National School Boards Association, 2007). Dunlop (2007) stated that incorporating social networking tools into education increases students' enjoyment of learning and their desire to study. She contended that social networking gives students the chance to incorporate what they already do in their spare time with their formal education.

When University of Minnesota's survey asked students what they learned from using social networking sites, they listed technology skills as the top lesson, followed by creativity, being open to new or diverse views, and communication skills. The researchers concluded that the survey's results showed that social networking sites offer more than just social fulfillment and can actually support what students are learning in the classroom (Science Daily, 2008).

According to the National School Boards Association's (2007) student survey, education was one of the most common topics of conversation on social networking sites. Fifty-nine percent of students who used social networking reported that they talk about education topics online. Over 50 percent of students reported talking specifically about school work.

However, only 29 percent of school district leaders surveyed believed that social networking could help students improve their reading or writing; 28 percent believed it could help students express themselves more clearly; and 36 percent believed it could help students to work together to solve academic problems.

The National School Boards Association (2007) also surveyed over 1,000 parents and concluded that they had higher expectations than school district leaders about the educational value of social networking sites. For example, 76 percent of parents reported that they expected social networking to help their children improve their reading and writing skills or express themselves more clearly and 75 percent also expected it would improve their children's ability to resolve conflicts.

Finally, school districts can use social networking sites as a recruitment tool. Several members of the business community have determined that these sites are cheaper and more effective for identifying the right people for open positions. In addition, candidates are able to get a clear picture of the organization before they agree to an interview (Goodwin, 2008; Klein, 2008).

Potential Drawbacks of Social Networking Sites

Although social networking sites can enhance communication, increase professional collaboration, and reinforce students' educational experiences, several potential drawbacks have been noted. As with any new technology, social networking sites have advantages and disadvantages. School districts must determine if the benefits outweigh the risks.

The primary concern with social networking sites is the security of the organization and its employees. Key threats organizations need to guard against include viruses and malware; cybercrime, such as identify theft and phishing attacks; and data leakage, such as when employees unwittingly or deliberately post confidential information (Marshal8e6, 2009; Zambrano, 2009; Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Another security concern related to social networking sites is that it is almost impossible to remove information once it is posted online. For example, while Facebook's Web site offers users the option of deactivating their accounts, Facebook servers keep copies of the information on those accounts indefinitely. Many users who have contacted Facebook to request that their accounts be deleted have reported that their records were not fully erased from the network (Hébert, 2009; Aspan, 2008).

School district leaders believe that security and privacy concerns related to social networking are more common than students and parents actually report. The National School Boards Association's (2007) survey of 1,277 students and 250 school district leaders found, for example, that 52 percent of district leaders reported that students providing personal information online has been "a significant problem" in their schools, yet only three percent of students stated that they had ever given out their e-mail addresses, instant messaging screen names, or other personal information to strangers.

The National School Boards Association (2007) concluded that, in general, students and parents reported fewer problems with social networking sites than school districts' strict usage policies would imply. For example:

- 20 percent of students said they had seen inappropriate pictures on social networking sites; 11 percent of parents concurred.

- 18 percent of students said they had seen inappropriate language on social networking sites; 16 percent of parents concurred.

- 7 percent of students reported that someone had asked them for information about their personal identity on a social networking site; 6 percent of parents concurred.

- 7 percent of students said they had experienced cyberbullying; 5 percent of parents concurred.

- 4 percent of students reported that they had conversations on social networking sites that made them uncomfortable; 3 percent of parents concurred.

Social networking sites present a problem for public agencies and officials who must follow Florida's open government and public records laws. These laws require that officials retain all correspondence regarding official business so that any person may ask to view those communications at any time. No legal precedent exists for media such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter and the state of Florida has issued no formal opinion on social networking sites and Florida's Sunshine Laws. However, State Attorney Bill McCollum issued an opinion to the city of Coral Springs regarding Facebook in April 2009. McCollum ruled that communications on the city's Facebook page regarding city business may

be subjected to Florida's Government in the Sunshine Law. He stated: "Members of a city board or commission must not engage on the city's Facebook page in an exchange or discussion of matters that foreseeably will come before the board or commission for official action" (Albers & Williams, 2009).

Some school districts are also struggling to determine how social networking sites will be continuously updated and monitored without expanding existing staff. In addition, districts' Information Technology departments must secure and maintain the technology needed to use these sites safely and securely (Marshal8e6, 2009; Mathewson, 2009; Melton, 2009).

Finally, some districts contend that joint teacher-student use of social networking sites, such as communicating about assignments, blurs the professional line between teachers and students. For example, Lee County Schools in North Carolina prohibits teachers from communicating with students on public social networking sites and through text messages. The superintendent said he believes communicating on social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace makes the student-teacher relationship "less defined" (Hartness, 2009). And Elmsbrook Schools in Wisconsin banned communication between students and staff on social networking sites, after deciding it would be impossible to provide adequate oversight (Tully, 2009).

Recommendations for School Districts

Experts recommend that school districts consider the following issues before joining social networking sites:

- Districts should carefully evaluate their goals and objectives and determine exactly what they hope to accomplish by joining social networking sites (Zambrano, 2009). Roberts (2008) cautioned that "social networking just for the sake of social networking isn't always a good investment. It needs to connect to other elements of your strategy."

- Social networking sites vary greatly in their features and user base. Experts recommend that school district decision makers explore sites and review their user agreements to see which site will best fit with the district's objectives (Klein, 2008; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Willard, 2006). The National School Boards Association (2007) recommended that policymakers try out the tools available on different sites so that their decisions are based on real experiences. Taylor (2008) noted that "no one says you have to use every single social media application out there - choose a few and choose carefully."

- School districts should develop an Acceptable Use Policy that clearly specifies how social networking sites can be used. In addition, students and staff should be educated about online safety and responsible use of the sites, including the security and privacy issues associated with their use (Marshal8e6, 2009; Willard, 2006).

- School districts should obtain software that allows users to communicate safely on approved, malware-free social networking sites. Software should also prevent data leakage and control the content that can be downloaded or uploaded onto the sites. Software that provides bandwidth and time-of-day quotas to employees can also be installed so valuable time and network bandwidth are not exhausted on social networking sites (Marshal3e6, 2009).

On a Local Note

Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) provides social networking opportunities to its students, staff, and parents through its education portals. The portals provide these opportunities in a secure, monitored, and filtered environment. While users are on the education portal, they can communicate with other portal users, including the exchange of messages and photographs. By establishing its own internal social network, the District has avoided some of the common security issues normally experienced with other less secure sites. M-DCPS does, however, plan to disseminate important districtwide information through an established presence on the Facebook and MySpace social networking sites.

Summary

Social networking sites can enhance school districts' ability to communicate with members of their communities, reinforce students' educational experiences, and provide staff with opportunities for professional collaboration. Parents and communities expect schools to use powerful educational tools, including new technology, and most are in favor of social networking, as long as reasonable usage parameters are in place. The National School Boards Association (2007) recommended that school districts that prohibit the use of social networking reexamine their policies and explore ways in which access to these sites can be used for educational purposes.

Most school districts are in the early stages of experimenting with social networking sites and it therefore remains to be seen if they will be an effective communication and educational tool. Several school districts that joined Facebook were contacted by Miami-Dade County Public Schools' Information Technology Services staff, including Broward County Public Schools, Duval County Public Schools, New York City Department of Education, and Chicago Public Schools Alumni. The districts expressed no concerns or problems with the site and were pleased with Facebook's popularity and the immediate exposure it provided.

All reports distributed by Research Services can be accessed at http://drs.dadeschools.net .

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