No longer reserved for college students and teenagers, social media has quickly become a mainstream platform for communicating. As 35 percent of American adult Internet-users have a profile on an online social network, many forward-looking educators are seeing value in using social media to establish relationships and maintain open conversations with community members.

At the same time, schools and districts have made significant investments in mass notification platforms that disseminate important time-sensitive information. And administrators are wondering how to integrate these authoritative, one-to-many communications into the more conversational nature of the social graph. Increasingly, universities, businesses and local governments are incorporating social media into their comprehensive communication strategy to send messages across available channels for improved emergency preparedness and response.

Facebook and Twitter attract more users every day. According to the site, Facebook has more than 500 million users, while Quantcast reports that the number of Twitter users reached 190 million by the end of 2010. This growing audience is one reason social media is gaining prominence among communication professionals as an effective tool in a growing repertoire of messaging technologies.

Realize Greater Staffing Efficiencies

There are many benefits to incorporating social media into your district’s communications plan. You can reach diverse populations, increase parental involvement and boost student achievement, all by communicating instantaneously and proactively interacting with parents, faculty and students. Social media is creating a new era in school communication, one that engages students and fosters a better relationship with parents.
The Evolution of School-to-Home Communication

The avenues schools have for communicating have changed dramatically in recent years. Beginning with the calling tree and television and radio alerts decades ago, school communications have evolved to include automated telephone calls, e-mails and text messages.

These significant strides in communication methods have had several benefits:

- With more direct channels of communication and the capacity to reach thousands in minutes, schools have been able to keep parents better informed on a range of important matters – including scheduled changes, delayed starts, attendance calls, cancellations, event reminders and safety precautions.
- As parents are better informed, the number of non-emergency calls to the school or district office can be reduced, freeing up administrative staff to focus on other tasks or responsibilities.
- Districts are more transparent and superintendents, administrators and principals are better able to demonstrate an authoritative leadership voice and share district objectives and vision.

These newer methods of communication are relatively low-cost, allowing schools to better allocate funds to academic programs even during challenging economic times.

The communications landscape continues to evolve rapidly and the need for time-sensitive mass targeted communication has never been greater. In today’s instantaneous world, districts must stay vigilant in meeting the expectations of a tech-savvy community to keep pace with the proliferation of new communication channels. A range of new social media tools and platforms are already having a profound effect on the way schools, students, parents and teachers connect and interact.

The Emergence of Social Media

What started as an online phenomenon primarily geared toward young adults and teenagers, the use of social media has grown to play a prominent role in the lives of average, everyday citizens. From students and parents to professionals and elected officials, people from every walk of life are checking their statuses or sharing news on their social networks via social media.

The public is also relying more and more on mobile devices as their primary communication tool and increasingly using these devices to access social networking sites. A June 2010 comScore report found that 14.5 million people accessed a social networking application from a mobile device, up 240 percent from the prior year. “Social networking is by far the fastest-growing mobile activity right now with 20 percent of mobile users now accessing social networking sites via their phone,” said Mark Donovan, comScore’s Senior Vice President of Mobile in a June 6, 2010 press release announcing the report and its findings.

Sites such as Facebook and Twitter present new avenues to connect and exchange information, and a growing audience is one reason social media is quickly becoming a mainstream platform for schools and districts to connect with their students, parents, faculty and the community.

Social media “speeds up communication, and, for all practical purposes, it speeds up awareness,” said Georges Benjamin, Executive Director of the American Public Health Association at the “Expert Round Table on Social Media and Risk Communication During Times of Crisis” on March 31, 2009.

Using social media tools effectively requires some specialized knowledge in terms of messaging formats, styles, and limitations (e.g., Twitter messages are limited to 140 characters or less). But these tools can be quickly mastered, and when used in combination with other channels, provide a high-impact way to deliver important information quickly anytime, anywhere.

Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms are helping schools:

1. Reach new, diverse populations via the methods they prefer. Younger, more tech-savvy parents, students, and even teachers increasingly rely on mobile devices and social media tools to stay informed. According to a 2009 study by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), nearly half of 25-year-olds do not live in a household with a landline. Additionally, according to a report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 87 percent of minorities are active users of the mobile web.

2. Build confidence in school district leadership. The immediacy and accessibility of social media and other social media applications allows administrators to demonstrate control during times of crisis and disseminate accurate, relevant information to dispel rumors that tend to proliferate when information is lacking.

3. Communicate instantaneously. The Internet and social media technology provide administrators and educators with unprecedented opportunities to interact quickly and directly with millions of people whenever and wherever they may be.

4. Create an information exchange. Forward-thinking districts are finding social media tools can build relationships and transparency with parents and create new opportunities to communicate different kinds of information.

The Internet and social networking is currently the fastest growing mobile activity.
Social Media Policies within School Districts
As social media proves to be an undoubtedly powerful tool for quickly communicating with a concentrated, engaged audience, many schools and districts are grappling with how to properly utilize new, online mediums. In order to monitor usage and set guidelines for determining inappropriate online behavior, some districts have started to enforce sweeping policies within schools.

The rise of social networks has also led to increased communications, most of it taking place online between students within popular sites. Cyber bullying has created significant obstacles for educators and administrators in properly responding to allegations and attacks. Unable to monitor or observe harassment among students, administrators can do little to relieve parents and take action in reprimanding offending students.

Schools that have decided to embrace social media and other emerging technologies, however, have seen much success by utilizing the platforms. Using social networks responsibly and effectively within schools can serve to demonstrate to students the acceptable ways to use such tools. Additionally, being able to speak knowledgeably about social media and incorporate real instances of inappropriate behavior can help in warning of the hidden dangers of irresponsible online conduct.

A recent survey from the Kaiser Family Foundation found the top online activities among 8- to 18-year-olds to be social networking, playing games, and visiting video sites such as YouTube.

Opening the Door to Broader Communications
Utilizing social media channels opens up the door to more effective and different kinds of communication among schools, students, parents, staff and community. For example:

1. **Responding quickly and directly to parental and faculty concerns and comments.** St. Charles Parish Public School, of Luling, La., has been using Facebook to post information about non-urgent incidents happening near or around their schools, allowing officials to respond to inquiries in real-time. In urgent situations, administrators can send messages directly to parents who receive the information on their mobile devices to help alleviate concerns.

2. **Engaging parents and students.** Districts are going to great lengths to involve parents, while interacting with students in ways they’re familiar with. At Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District near Dallas, Texas, administrators use Facebook as a way to engage parents by posting pictures and updates about school events as they happen. Students can view pictures and watch videos of their friends and classmates, while interacting with the school outside of the classroom.

3. **Build community relations.** Many schools are finding unexpected audiences following their updates on Twitter. At Deer Valley Unified School District, of Phoenix, Ariz., officials use Twitter to engage the community-at-large about events or activities taking place at or concerning the school. Information about voting or school board meetings can be easily shared with local government officials, leaders and community members to encourage participation.

4. **Monitor and respond to inappropriate online behavior.** When derogatory Facebook pages surfaced ranking the appearance of middle and high school students enrolled in Beverly Schools, of Beverly, Mass., school officials turned to Blackboard Connect. A message was sent out to inform parents of the situation and explain what actions were being taken by the school to take down the current pages, while including steps to prevent similar web sites from popping up in the future.

**Case Study**

Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District
As the Assistant Director of Public Information for the Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District, Angela Shelley is not shy about using every available communication mode and device for getting the word out. But as digital communication channels gain more prominence, streamlined messages and outreach grows increasingly important, and in some respects, necessary for school districts.

Situated on the border of Dallas, Carrollton-Farmers Branch spans across six cities and is comprised of more than 25,000 students. Described as majority-minority, the district’s population largely consists of native speaking Spanish and Asian students, with most students speaking English as a second language. Such a large, diverse population requires flexible, robust communication from the school and district officials.

As digital communication grows in frequency, social media and networking sites help school districts send targeted messages to specific audiences. In an effort to expand outreach efforts, Angela Shelley took to the web to disseminate information about Carrollton-Farmers Branch. There is a blog, a Facebook page, a Twitter profile, a YouTube channel, a Vimeo page, a Scribd profile and Flickr albums, all while the school district’s web site is regularly updated and timely.

Using social media for communication has helped the district reach a larger, community audience, many of whom do not have children enrolled in the district.

“Our Facebook page has been liked by about 500 people, most of which is made of parents and faculty,” said Shelley.

“On Twitter, though, we have more than 800 followers, consisting of students, alumni, and community members, specifically local government officials and offices, plus local businesses in our area.”

To better engage the various audiences tuning into the district’s feeds, Shelley began using targeted messages and packaging information in the appropriate formats to best utilize the various channels. For the Facebook page, posts and updates tend to be packed full of important information and details for parents, students and staff, like a recent status update asking for ‘fans’ to share pictures and videos from the first day of school. Twitter updates, however, are shorter and contain links to other district web sites and documents, like a tweet posting the district-wide policy on social media.

As information flowed between multiple portals, it became apparent there was a need for a reliable system capable of streamlining communication while pushing messages out to digital channels, in addition to traditional phone and electronic devices.

Carrollton-Farmers Branch began using Blackboard Connect in 2006, as a way to quickly send out messages to thousands of contacts. While social media provides alternative means for interacting with students, parents and faculty, the district relies on the Blackboard Connect system to get important information out when it matters most. With the social media integration tool for Blackboard Connect, one consistent message is posted across all communication channels. In time-sensitive situations, streamlined communication helps in reducing confusion and stops rumors before they can spread.

We use Blackboard Connect to get information out to parents, and we rely on it to ensure that messages are received. It has become a part of our culture in this district as every principal and teacher knows its value and importance.

Angela Shelley, Assistant Director of Public Information, Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District
Incorporate social media into your communications plan. Use public communication platforms to share news and information about the schools or district with the greater community. So often, school news is directed and sent to immediate stakeholders, like parents, teachers and other staff members. Using social networks as a channel for sharing updates and event information encourages greater participation from the community and local businesses at-large.

No school district can rely on one channel to communicate important information. Refining communications strategies for time-sensitive information is a continuous process. Educational institutions need to stay abreast of new channels and introduce them alongside current channels. Blackboard is committed to helping districts deploy a multi-channel communications approach to ensure the broadest and most timely dissemination of information when it matters most. If your district is interested in exploring the vast array of school-to-home mass communication options, visit the Blackboard Connect website (www.blackboard.com/connect) to learn more.

Additional Resources on Social Media for K-12 Educators

Acceptable Use Policies in a Web 2.0 and Mobile Era, CoSN
(http://www.cosn.org/Portals/7/docs/Web%202.0/Acceptable%20Use%20Policies%20Web%202010Mobile%20Era.pdf)

Samples of various exemplary Acceptable Use Policies for Social Media

Broward County Public School District, FL. This school district established a technology committee to include key stakeholders to develop their AUPs.

Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District, TX. Defines district policies and procedures concerning electronic communication and Internet usage on school devices.

Fairfax County Schools, VA. A policy document pertaining to the use of privately-owned computer devices on the District network.

New Canaan School District, CT. Mentions how the Director of Technology and representatives can modify or disable any technology protection measures.

Littleton Public Schools, CO. This school district established a technology committee to include key stakeholders to develop their AUPs.

Springfield Public Schools, MO. A typical AUP; it specifies unacceptable behavior as well as sanctions for such.


Varying Approaches to Internet Safety
(http://www.barrington220.org/2114101992724577/1214101992724577/_files/SECTION6.pdf)

A discussion with senior officials from Ministries of Education, national information and communication (ICT) policy bodies, or national school networking organizations from Denmark, Sweden, The Netherlands, UK, the USA and Australia on Internet Safety.

Maine International Center for Digital Learning
(http://www.micdl.org/attachments/131)

Provides a comprehensive document for use in developing an AUP.

Social Media Guidelines for Schools
(http://socialmediaguidelines.pbworks.com/w/page/17050879/FrontPage)

A wiki for collaboration on developing social media guidelines for schools.

Cyber Security for the Digital District

This website provides information and tools to help school districts protect their networks, and to assist them in using technology for teaching and learning.

Empowering Parents and Protecting Children in an Evolving Media Landscape

From the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, this report provides a detailed review of research and policy pertaining to Internet safety for children.