



Social media arrive in school; Principals look at impacts

By: Lew Armistead

Social media have the potential to improve educational opportunities for high school students, but also present legal and policy challenges for public school principals. Those were among opinions expressed in the 2010 Principals' Partnership Poll.

Registrants for the 2010 Summer Leadership Institute were asked—

What are your most immediate leadership needs in managing social media applications in your school?

The most frequently-cited request by the 306 respondents was help in integrating social media into the curriculum. But principals also pointed out that as social media come into the schools, legal and policy implications arise.

One Colorado principal explained the need as “How to promote the use of this technology in a rigorous, engaging and yet safe and responsible way.”

The five top needs dealing with improving student achievement and the educational program were—

- Integration of social media into curriculum and instruction;
- Training school personnel on the use of social media;
- Increasing teacher use of social media in instruction;
- Educating students on responsible use of social media; and
- Understanding the ways that social media can improve communication with families and community.

Professional development on social media for teachers and other adults was a frequently-cited necessity. School leaders recognize that many educators are not as familiar or comfortable with social media as students are. Thus, teachers require training to understand the most effective ways to bring social media into the curriculum.

“Helping the staff understand how to use a variety of media as instructional tools, tools for learning,” was identified as a key need by one respondent.

Principals also see that social media can be effective in communicating with families, community members and alumni. However, they believe they need help in developing the best ways to use this technology.

“How to use (social media) as a tool of communication to gather community support and secure alumni...support” was cited as a need by a principal from California.

Four legal issues come to principals’ minds when they consider social media—

- Disciplining students for inappropriate use during school hours;
- Cyber bullying and sexting;
- Training for students and families on safe and appropriate use of social media;
- Clear legal guidelines about how schools can respond to the inappropriate use of social media.

Principals called for clear guidelines about how to proceed when there is a need to discipline students for the inappropriate use of social media. Principals reported that students are frequently using social media to communicate with others, and they want legal guidance for when and how they can discipline students for such acts as cyber bullying and sexting.

Principals believe that cell phones and other digital devices will continue to be a part of students’ lives and that schools have a responsibility to educate students on the acceptable use of these devices. They believe there is a need to work with students and families on the safe and appropriate use of social media.

School leaders, however, do not want to ban cell phones or other social media. While there are risks, principals also see tremendous potential to improve the educational experience through social media.

“How to use the technology that students have in a positive way for classroom instruction” is the key according to one Utah principal.

School and district policies must be in place to assure the best use of social media, according to the principals. They frequently called for an “Acceptable Use Policy.”

In addition to that policy, respondents cited three other policy issues—

- Assuring infrastructure (band width) for use of social media;
- Access to current technology in a time of budget constraints; and
- Sample guidelines for safe use.

While they see social media as a potential plus to instruction, principals are concerned with the impact unstable funding may have. With budget uncertainty districts may not be able to take advantage of social media and other technology in classrooms.

**New briefs available
On social media**

With the increased interest in social media during the past year, several Research Briefs focusing on many of the issues in the poll may be found on www.educationpartnerships.org.

- Social Media—An Introduction
- Cyber bullying
- Innovative Uses of Social Media
- Acceptable Use Policies for Social Media

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