

TV to the Internet, email, text, mobile applications, and social media.

While leveraging content across this multichannel spread can seem daunting, content aggregators allow communicators to schedule and automate news feeds to multiple channels simultaneously. Content aggregators are software programs that collect content, convert it to the appropriate digital format, and then distribute it.

The San Diego Unified School District, for example, uses RSS feeds and content aggregators to send news on a regular basis to the district's home page, e-newsletter, blog, and social media pages, and to individual school and department Web pages and sites.

Starting with a simple word processing document, the team compiles the news stories that will feed into the district's popular *Friday Notes* e-newsletter, a subscription-based program that now reaches more than 69,000 parents, staff, and community members. Advertising revenue from a partnership with an email marketing company pays for the program and helps support the district's communications budget.

The same stories that appear in *Friday Notes* are then scheduled to appear throughout the week on the district's home page. When relevant to school audiences, the stories also may be posted to one or more of the 145 school websites hosted on the district's content management system, which has helped automate much of this process.

By developing the stories in advance and then scheduling them for delivery, the district keeps its content fresh across a variety of important news channels while maintaining a lean communications staff for a large school system.

This same process can then feed school board member Web pages by including news items about the schools in the electoral districts board members represent—a feature San Diego Unified uses well. RSS feeds and content aggregators like Feedburner or Hootsuite are used to update the website and social

media networks at the same time.

Using new technology tools to schedule news feeds in advance helps the district respond proactively to emergencies without sacrificing a more proactive approach to keeping the good news in front of key audiences, including reporters.

“Social media requires that we engage our fans and our followers, and in order to get them engaged, it requires constant feeding,” says Bernie Rhinerson, San Diego Unified's chief of staff. “And to do constant feeding, it requires news.”

Smart communication strategies like those deployed by San Diego Unified help document the difference public education is making in the lives of students and their families, without breaking the bank or the backs of central office staff members, a dwindling number in most school systems.

For districts that do not have professional communicators on staff, there are a number of online resources on digital storytelling available for free, or at a low cost, through California's Center for Digital Storytelling, which publishes a step-by-step book that can be purchased and then downloaded.

The National School Public Relations Association also offers online resources focused on electronic and social media as well as on general communications.

Disrupting the narrative

For public school districts hammered by the national “failing public schools” mantra, this is not the time to skimp on communications budgets. School officials are always communicating. It's really just a matter of whether those communications are effective or counterproductive.

By offering an alternative view of public education, and backing it up with video and photos, school officials can disrupt the current anti-public-school narrative. When educators, parents, and students share their personal stories and carefully create and select the images, words, music, art, and animations that

Resources

Center for Digital Storytelling:

www.storycenter.org

info@storycenter.org

Telling Your Story: A Communications Guide for School Boards

This book, published by NSBA, focuses on how school boards can better communicate and engage with various constituencies, set the record straight about their work, build a network of supporters, work with the district's communications department, and develop an “elevator speech.” Order from www.nsba.org.

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best will convey their passions, challenges, and successes, public opinion about public schools will begin to shift.

In addition to offering more compelling and persuasive messaging, digital storytelling projects also provide students with the kind of hands-on, relevant learning prized by the Common Core State Standards.

These productions require creativity, research, problem analysis, writing, editing, political savvy, and media production skills. When students see their work impact public policy or inspire others to help a community cause, they learn life-long lessons.

If those lessons help preserve public education for another generation, the initial investment in technology and staff training will yield significant returns that will benefit entire communities for generations to come. ■

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