

#Twitterforschoolleaders



Consider these best practices when using this popular social media tool

Bryan Bullock

Whether you use it or not, there's no denying Twitter has become a cultural force around the world. The news media regularly report on noteworthy tweets. Twitter hashtags appear in advertisements, commercials, and television shows. Businesses use Twitter to answer customer questions. And, perhaps most importantly, Twitter has empowered anyone to share what's on his or her mind with everyone—140 characters at a time.

This fast-growing social networking and microblogging service has more than 232 million active monthly users, including such notable people as Pope Francis, President Barack Obama, and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

Schools and school leaders across the country are turning to Twitter as a communication tool. A survey released by the National School Boards Association and the Center for Digital Education in 2013 found 74 percent of U.S. school districts are on at least one social networking service, up 44 percent from two years earlier.

While Facebook is the most common social media service used by schools, many are joining Twitter. Hundreds of school districts, administrators, and school board members are using Twitter in Ohio alone.

"My school community loves my use of Twitter," says Joe Clark, superintendent of Nordonia Hills City School District in Northfield, Ohio. "They enjoy being in the loop on the internal happenings of the school, and they appreciate information I share with them

related to the world of education."

THE VALUE OF TWITTER

Twitter offers schools a powerful platform to provide real-time information to students, parents, and community members—and at no cost. Twitter limits users to very succinct messages, known as tweets. Tweets, for the unacquainted, are like long newspaper headlines. They often, but not always, contain a link to a Web page for more information.

Since tweets are so short and quick-hitting, users tend to share content more frequently on Twitter than on social networking services such as Facebook.

Clark sends tweets on his smartphone throughout the day to update the community on what's happening in his district, including posting photos of students and teachers in action. He says he tweets 30 to 50 times a day, which makes him a heavy user, even by Twitter standards.

"I use Twitter for five main reasons," he says. "To inform the community about district events and what I am doing; to brag about the great things our students and staff are doing; to share content related to the field of education; to share random thoughts I have about leadership, how we should treat kids or the mission of school; and to engage in my own professional development."

Clark uses hashtags—words preceded by the symbol #—to discuss education topics with Twitter users around the world. Hashtags are a way for users to categorize their tweets by topic so others can follow a conversation and join in.

Clark participates in a number of regular Twitter chats for the sake of professional development. He is a co-moderator of #ptchat, a weekly Twitter chat for parents, family engagement practitioners, teachers, and others to discuss new and innovative partnership approaches.

While Twitter is a valuable tool for connecting with educators worldwide, its primary benefit to schools and school leaders is that it allows them to engage in conversations with people in their communities.

"Twitter can open lines of communication with stakeholders and create advocacy for a district," says Erika Daggett, chief information officer with the Sycamore Community Schools in Cincinnati, Ohio, and president of the Ohio School Public Relations Association.



“It can encourage strong two-way communication and create a more transparent and authentic understanding of a district. It’s also a great way to share your brand, spread news, market services, and educate an audience.”

BEST PRACTICES

Daggett recommends doing some homework before joining Twitter or any hot, new social media platform.

“I would advise school districts [to] do a bit of research to confirm the audience they want to reach is actually on Twitter,” she says. “It’s a lot of work to properly manage a

Twitter account, so I would make sure there is a return on investment before leaping onto any social media platform.”

Sycamore Community Schools surveyed nearly 700 parents, students, residents, alumni, and staff to learn about their online habits before launching its social media campaign in February 2012. The district rolled out its Twitter page a year later after additional studies and educational efforts. Sycamore made it a priority to educate students, parents, residents, alumni, and staff about privacy issues and the appropriate use of social media.

“We decided to use Twitter as a niche communication channel that told the story of student achievement and staff commitment in real time,” Daggett says. “Community members can expect live tweets and photos from school board meetings, sporting events, student performances, school programs, and much more.”

It’s important schools and school leaders share content regularly on Twitter and respond to any questions from users, which means closely monitoring social media. There are a number of free Web-based tools, such as www.hootsuite.com, that allow users to schedule tweets in advance and coordinate messages with other people responsible for generating social media content.

School districts should determine the type of content they want to share on Twitter and decide who is responsible for generating it, says Eric Germann, a board member with Lincolnview Local School District in Van Wert, Ohio.

“My advice would be to coordinate your social media efforts in-house, not so much to necessarily control con-

tent, but to ensure uniform branding and aligned messaging,” Germann says. “You can still give autonomy to the groups for the content, but get them on the same page as to the overall image the district is trying to project.”

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Twitter, Germann says, can have many benefits for school board members, but it has to be used correctly.

“While it can be used in a positive way, it also enables one to very quickly expose the bad choices one might make,” he says. “As a board member, you can’t hide on Twitter, even if you protect your tweets. So, don’t say or retweet anything you wouldn’t say in a board meeting in public.”

Germann uses Twitter for professional development and to act as a “proud parent and booster” for his district by highlighting positive news. He says he makes a conscious effort on Twitter to ensure he is perceived as a single board member and not “the official voice” of the school district.

“Used correctly, board members can use Twitter to noninvasively reach into the lives of some of these kids and their parents, and meet them where they’re at,” Germann says. “We have to engage people wherever they are.”

Candice Christon, an attorney with the Ohio School Boards Association, advises schools and school leaders to analyze the content of their tweets carefully before sharing them.

“The comments they post on Twitter not only reflect on their school districts, but also their tweets may be subject to public records laws and protections against the disclosure of personally identifiable student information,” Christon says.

Each school district, she says, must determine how it will use social media, if comments will be allowed, and how comments will be monitored and addressed. Districts also should review all legal terms and conditions associated with the social media sites they are using.

Christon says: “Twitter can be an extremely valuable communication tool for schools, but appropriate precautions and training must be put in place so social media is used responsibly.”

Bryan Bullock (bbullock@ohioschoolboards.org) is a communication coordinator with the Ohio School Boards Association, which has the largest presence on Twitter of any state school boards association. He is responsible for the association’s social media efforts, and has spoken on social media at state and national education conferences and events.

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