Building Blocks to Electronic Communication:
A Rubric for School Web Development & Management

Developed By

Elliott Levine
Vice President, SchoolSpan
Adjunct Professor of Communication, Hofstra University, New York

Nora Carr
Chief Communication Officer
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, North Carolina

Executive Summary

For many years, school communication officials have lacked standards for publishing and managing school web sites. Yet, despite advances in electronic media, many schools have lagged behind in their electronic communications, investing in web sites and other electronic communication strategies that offer limited functionality and do little to improve the schools' communication efforts.

Nationally-recognized experts in electronic school communication, Elliott Levine and Nora Carr, have developed a rubric for school web sites. In addressing content, security, functionality and interaction, this model lays the groundwork for standardization of functionality and needs for K-12 school officials on a national level.

SchoolSpan

	Description	Exemplary Standards 5 points for each	Developing Standards 3 points for each	Emerging Standards 1 point for each
1.1	**Basic Contact Information on home page**	Provides mailing address, phone, and email address to contact school officials. Also provides description to identify where the district is located and general info for end users	Provides mailing address, phone, and email address to contact school officials.	Missing mailing address, phone and/or email contact information on home page
1.2	**Frequency of updates to district site (including news)**	Daily or Multiple Times Daily	Weekly or Biweekly Updates to Site	Monthly or Longer periods between updates
1.3	**Obsolete Information**	All pages on site reviewed and updated for accuracy every 3 months, ensuring end users get up-to-date and accurate information	Some pages clearly not updated in over 6 months. May contain obsolete or wrong information to end users	Some pages clearly not updated in over 12 months. May contain obsolete or wrong information to end users
1.4	**New content clearly labeled for visitors**	Web page prominently features new content with headlines and article summaries	"What's new" may display select information, but info may not be current	End user unable to determine what's new on site
1.5	**Calendar of events for end users**	Interactive calendar allows end user to search for events by building and type of event. May encompass events from schools and departments in single calendar	Static calendar in HTML or PDF displayed on web site. Represents only a portion of district events	Calendar events provided in list format only, limited to select events
1.6	**Email Subscription Options**	District uses narrowcast media to allow end users to personalize the type and frequency of news they receive	End users subscribe to get weekly/monthly email newsletter. Same content is distributed to all users	No regular email communication exists. May have emergency email list for school cancellation notification
1.7	**Feedback/Interactivity**	Commonly asked questions and resources are clearly marked on web site. Staff directories and contact forms used to communicate with school personnel. May also use live chat, opinion polls, blogs, and similar tools to communicate in real time with school system	Providing contact information for majority of district staff. May provide a simple contact form to ease contact	Email address and phone number(s) listed on web site to reach school officials

Section 2.0 – Publishing Techniques

	Description	Exemplary Standards 5 points for each	Developing Standards 3 points for each	Emerging Standards 1 point for each
2.1	**Publishing Staff**	Posting on site (select sections) controlled through some degree of content management, allowing many staff members and students to publish. Multi-permission levels allow control of postings and approvals	Posting on site restricted to fewer than 15 people. All content must be funneled through those staff members	Posting on site restricted to 1 to 3 people. All content must be funneled through those staff members
2.2	**Centralized Information**	District web site encompasses news and events from each school and department, creating a single silo of information	End user needs to visit district site and each school and department page to get updates	District site provides select information, but schools and departments mostly contain out-of-date information
2.3	**Website Navigation**	Regularly updated single navigation bar guides users to select information based on roles. Built-in web site search function in place.	Single navigation bar in place, but difficult to update. May not guide user by role. Minimal site search functions.	Sporadic use of buttons and links on site, not necessarily grouped by user and information. No search functions.

Section 3.0 – Security/Safety

	Description	Exemplary Standards 5 points for each	Developing Standards 3 points for each	Emerging Standards 1 point for each
3.1	**Emergency Contact/Security**	School cancellations posted on home page. Email notification of closure goes to regular email and cell phones. Also offers tip line and web form to report security concerns	School cancellations posted on home page of web site. Email notification may be sent out. May provide a phone number to report security concerns (tip line)	Link on home page to alternate page or third party site to learn if school is closed
3.2	**Web Development Policies**	Web authoring policies in place and shared with students and staff involved with web site. Standards exist for content, updating, authoring, images, copyright, security and use of third-party web sites	Partial reliance on a standard Acceptable Use Policy that may or may not address publishing responsibilities for users.	No web development policies in place.

Section 4.0 – Overall Site Design

	Description	Exemplary Standards 5 points for each	Developing Standards 3 points for each	Emerging Standards 1 point for each
4.1	**Contributions from Faculty**	Infrastructure in place for all faculty to post homework assignments, files, academic links and events in an updated web page	Small percentage of faculty have web pages to post events, but no standards for designs or updates exist	District site does not allow for faculty to have their own pages. Staff creating their own pages on third-party web sites beyond school's control
4.2	**Contributions from Students**	Site features student artwork. May allow for publishing of student newspapers and article submissions	Site features student artwork	No student work permitted
4.3	**Use of student images**	Site design highly integrated with photos of students (whether actual students or stock photos, if security concerns exist)	Some group shots of students used sparsely on site. But most of the images are graphics and pictures of school buildings and staff	No images of students. Only school buildings and school officials
4.4	**Use of Graphic Images on Web Site**	Images reflect consistent theme and support the messaging on the web site. Reflect a professional design strategy consistent with an academic institution	A portion of the graphics complement the content on the district web site, but some may interfere with the messaging. Site may appear to look too "busy" making it hard to read for average end user	Images which may not blend with the design theme or reflect an ideal image for the academic institution. Possible excessive use of clip art and special effects which may interfere with the message
4.5	**Download Time**	Download time (56k modem) less than 30 seconds. All images smaller than 35k	Download time (56k modem) less than 45 seconds. All images smaller than 50k	Download time (56k modem) over 45 seconds. Contains images/photos larger than 50k. May have posted photos as large as 300k to 900k in size, preventing dial-up users from viewing site
4.6	**Readability and AEA Compliance**	Limited reliance on graphics, text navigation, and buttons. Text and <alt> tags allow for easy accessibility for those with disabilities. Use of subheads, captions, limited PDF use. Essential data reached in 3 clicks or less	The district site may have limited reliance on graphics, text navigation, and buttons. School buildings not checked for accessibility	Heavy use of images, lack of <alt> tags makes accessibility challenging

5.0 Rewards and Deductions

Please add or subtract the following points if they apply to your district web site.

	Description	Reward	Deduction
5.1	**If web site is missing area codes for phone numbers, assumes that web site visitors only live in the local area**	-	Deduct 5 points
5.2	**If web site contains broken links or "under construction" messages for pages from the welcome page, discouraging visitors from revisiting the site**	-	Deduct 5 points
5.3	**If web site is picked up by major search engines (Yahoo, Google) for common keyword searches, and appears within first 5 listings, making it easier and simpler for visitors to find your site**	Reward 3 points	-
5.4	**HTML code for site is checked and confirmed against errors, to avoid viewing problems among major web browsers**	Reward 3 points	-
5.5	**School posts advertising to commercial companies (names, images, links) on their site, districting viewers from essential school information**	-	Deduct 3 points
5.6	**Use of pop-up web pages and links not directly connected to school or district initiatives, districting viewers from essential school information**	-	Deduct 3 points
5.7	**District allows parents secure access to student information (student information system)**	Reward 3 points	-
5.8	**District clearly provides "news you can use" information for Parents, Students, Staff. Such information is clearly marked and easy to find for those users from the welcome page**	Reward 3 points	-
5.9	**District uses web tracking or statistical software to influence efforts of web site development (identifies what information is of greatest interest to their audiences)**	Reward 5 points	-

SchoolSpan

Raw Score Range	Classification	Comments
18 to 38 points	**District Web Site in Need of Assistance**	Many public engagement experts would suggest your existing web site is doing more to hurt your image and communication efforts than help it. An ineffective web site may be a symptom of a larger overall communication problem impacting the school system. The district would be well advised to consult with communication professionals as part of a larger communication audit to determine how the school system is communication with its audiences. Lack of funding may be a rationale given for the current web site, but schools are in a position where they cannot afford to let a web site remain in this manner.
39 to 59 points	**Emerging District Web Site**	The school system has been making efforts to disseminate information via the web site. But web sites cannot remain one-directional flows of information. Lack of contact and interaction with community at large may suggest the inability to provide the information your audiences are looking for. End users may experience difficulty finding information across the silos in the district (departments, school buildings). Districts should consider centralizing their information to help ease data access.
60 to 79 points	**Developing District Web Site**	The district is demonstrating both the commitment and the ability to publish meaningful information on their web sites. The site serves as one of many important communication vehicles for the school system. End users may experience difficulty finding information across the silos in the district (departments, school buildings). Districts should consider centralizing their information to help ease data access.
80 to 100 points	**Exemplary District Web Site**	In such rare instances, the web site is an important part of the communications strategy for the district. There are clear roles, responsibilities and publishing guidelines. End users are able to access the information they want, when they want it. The community-at-large feels empowered as active stakeholders in the community, and the site reflects that ongoing communication objective.