

Blogs: The Community Engagement Tool for the 21st Century

NSBA Annual Conference, April 9, 2006

Brian Wheeler, *Charlottesville, Virginia*

At-Large Member, Albemarle County School Board

(434) 984-2233 • bwheeler@albemarlematters.com

Albemarle County Public Schools (12,400 students) • <http://www.k12albemarle.org>

Brian Wheeler's Internet sites

<http://www.wheeleronboard.com> (constituent website)

<http://listserv.bnsi.net/mailman/listinfo/schoolmatters> (constituent e-mail list)

<http://schoolmatters.typepad.com> (blog)

<http://www.albemarlematters.com> (a network of school-based e-mail newsletters)

Blogs are a still in their infancy as a two-way communications tool. Many of the people you will want to read your blog are not yet regular users of this technology. E-mail broadcasts help bridge the divide by drawing people to your blog. In time, more and more people, particularly the parents and students in your school system, will come to expect school board members to have these tools as a constituent communications service. **The tips, tools and resources below should help you get ahead of the curve and start blogging!**

Tips, Tools & Resources

Tips on blogging as a community engagement tool

- **If you build it... they may not come!** Drive people to your blog with an e-mail mailing list or listserv. Don't expect a lot of comments initially.
- **Offer blogs AND emails**—Today, more people respond to emails than are willing to blog publicly about school issues. Offer both options. Create a blog posting first, then include a link to that posting in an e-mail that reminds readers they can comment online. I average about one posting a week. If you find you are blogging a lot (several postings a week), you can use e-mail to send a summary of all the postings with links to your blog (instead of sending an e-mail announcing each item separately).
- **Media engagement**—Tell the media what you are doing. You may be among the first elected/appointed officials with a blog. That's news! If you post informative and timely information, the local news media will use you as a source for story ideas. You will have a way to get messages to the community about public education that reach far beyond the blogosphere.
- **Blog only when you have something to say**—Watch out for information overload. Your readers already have lots of e-mail to read and websites to visit. *Make your messages stand out.* Draw readers attention to resources online that they would have had difficulty finding on their own.

- **What if nobody comments on your blog?** That doesn't mean they aren't reading your postings. It may mean you need to promote commenting and expand your e-mail broadcast list. Keep on posting items because you are building an online archive of topics people can examine in the future.
- **Use an RSS reader to watch other community blogs:** Each blog has a "feed" link that is different from its Internet address. An RSS reader can watch these links and tell you when there is new content. Subscribe to other community blogs, particularly if they are talking about school issues. **Technorati** can help you find the blogs in your community. See: <http://www.technorati.com/blogs/>
 - Sample RSS feed links
 - **My RSS feed:** http://schoolmatters.typepad.com/my_weblog/index.rdf
 - **NSBA Boardbuzz feed:** <http://boardbuzz.nsba.org/index.rdf>

Tools

1. **Blog authoring software:** TypePad <http://www.typepad.com> (\$50 to \$150/year subscriptions available. My blog is the \$50 version.
2. **RSS reader:** Free software that allows you to easily monitor lots of your favorite blogs. This brings the content to you automatically whenever you get on the web! If you understand RSS readers, then you can help educate others to use them too. I use Bloglines <http://www.bloglines.com>
3. **Listserv or e-mail mailing list software:** Start building a constituent e-mail list. I use software provided by my local ISP that is about \$10/mo. per list, however there are free options like **Yahoo! Groups** if you don't mind the advertising. See: <http://groups.yahoo.com/>
4. **Web authoring software:** While you do not need this to blog, you may also want to build a constituent website. To do that you need an Internet Service Provider (ISP) that can host it and establish your domain (e.g. www.<mysitename>.com). You also need software that can build web pages. I currently use **Microsoft FrontPage**. I have also used **Dreamweaver**. Many templates are available for both programs that allow you to create professional looking sites easily. If you use MS FrontPage, make sure your ISP fully supports MS FrontPage websites.

Other Resources

- **Albemarle County Public Schools Policy BG: Board-Staff Communications** http://www.k12albemarle.org/Board/Policies/BG_0405.pdf
This may be a helpful model for board communication protocols, particularly for e-mail messages sent to your board. Blogs are just another form of communication with the public. If you are a constructive and positive communicator in print and in e-mail, just do the same thing on your blog! Always respect your colleagues and your code of ethics.
- A primer on **RSS feeds** <http://waldo.jaquith.org/blog/2006/01/rss-intro/>

*Note: All of the links here are available on the **SchoolMatters Weblog**.
Click on the **NSBA** category to easily find this posting.*