

Panelists

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Brian Wheeler's Blogging Tips, Tools & Resources

Blogs are a still in their infancy as a two-way communications tool. Many of the people you will want to engage are not yet accustomed to blogs as a source of news and community information. 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 schools (and board members) to have these tools for communications.

The tips, tools and resources below should help you get ahead of the curve and start blogging!

Tips on blogging as a community engagement tool

- **If you build it... they may not come!** It takes time. 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 e-mails 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. 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.
- **Setup your blog so that anonymous comments are discouraged.** This is a setting in all blog software where you can at least require the commenter to submit their name and an e-mail address. This sets the expectation that comments are not anonymous and people behave themselves better in their remarks. It is also possible to moderate comments or approve them individually.
- **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.
- **Treat all blog postings and comments as public documents for FOIA and for retention purposes.**

- **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 announcement list. Keep on posting items because you are building an online archive of topics people can examine in the future. Post comments on other's blogs and provide links back to your content.
-  **Use an RSS reader to watch other community blogs.** RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication. Each blog has a "feed" link that is different from its Internet address. An RSS reader (now built-in to Internet Explorer, Outlook, and FireFox) can watch these links and tell you when there is new content without you having to visit the website. Use RSS to subscribe to other community blogs, particularly if they are talking about school issues.

Tools

1. **Blog authoring software: TypePad** <http://www.typepad.com> (\$50 to \$300/year subscriptions available. My blog is the \$50 version. Another blog provider is **WordPress** <http://www.wordpress.com> which has a free version.
2. **Web-based RSS readers:** Free software that allows you to easily monitor lots of your favorite blogs. These tools bring blog content to you automatically whenever you get on the Internet! I use Bloglines and have this website as my browser's homepage. <http://www.bloglines.com>
Primers on **RSS feeds**
<http://waldo.jaquith.org/blog/2006/01/rss-intro/> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rss>
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/> Comes in handy for elections too!
4. Embed an **online calendar** in your blog: **Trumba** <http://www.trumba.com> (expensive) or **Google Calendar** <http://calendar.google.com> (free).
My website and blog use the Trumba calendar system. It allows for me to easily create appointments and to advertise community events in one place and have them appear automatically on my website, blog and in my Outlook calendar.
5. **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.
*NOTE: If I was starting over, I would only create a **blog** and skip the **website**.*

Other Resources

- **Albemarle County Public Schools Policy BG: Board-Staff Communications**
http://www.wheeleronboard.com/docs/ACPS-BG_0306.pdf
This may be a helpful model for board communication protocols, particularly for e-mail messages sent to and by 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.

*Note: All of the links here are available on Brian Wheeler's **SchoolMatters Weblog**.
Click on the **NSBA** category to easily find this document.*