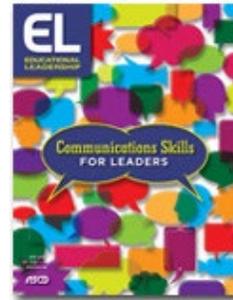


Don't Make Them Come to You

Walter McKenzie

By orchestrating multiple social media channels, the Minnetonka School District in Minnesota boosts its brand and builds community.

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Traditionally, school communications have been all about managing the flow of information to the public and then framing the discussion about that information. Even technological advances like robo-calls and mass e-mails still constrained schools to push out information in one direction, say, to announce school closings or publish school test score results.

But in the age of new media, things have changed. Popular social media tools like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, blogs and webinars enable schools to maintain interactive dialogue with stakeholders. Today, the vision of school district communications is all about building relationships.

For example, on January 9, 2015, Minnetonka High School hosted "[It's FAFSA Season: Five Tips for Parents](#)" a [webinar](#) that provided background information and strategies for graduating seniors who will be applying for financial aid as they make college decisions. The webinar allowed parents to learn from college and high school counselors in real time, to better understand the process and deadlines, and ask questions to further their understanding, all from the comfort of wherever they are located: home, work, and even while on travel from wherever they can access the internet.

A Story of Engagement and Outreach



Minnetonka Public Schools, a central Minnesota district serving about 9,600 students in grades K-12, is demonstrating how to use social media thoughtfully and strategically to engage, inform, and interact with stakeholders. Minnetonka has built "a constantly evolving technology interface" to accommodate, embrace, and engage parents, teachers, students, business leaders, and all other segments of the community, according to Janet Swiecichowski, the district's executive director of communications. The district has identified social media tools like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter as effective ways to reach the audiences with whom education leaders want to communicate. The key is to reach out through many different channels, Swiecichowski advises. "Don't make them come to you."

YouTube

YouTube was the first new media tool that Minnetonka developed. Why YouTube? It's one of the top-ranked websites in the world, and the district wanted to send out its message without a filter. In 2005, the district implemented its own [YouTube channel](#) and added professional video experts to its staff who could work from a broadcast journalism perspective. Today, the district's target is to post two new videos a week on YouTube, with feeds to the district website and an app that pushes the video content out to students on their smart phones and tablets.

Consider “[Minnetonka Kindergarten Options](#),” a video designed to introduce parents to the choices they face as their child enters school. Because the district offers full-day English, Spanish immersion, and Chinese immersion kindergarten programs, plus an option called Ready-Start Kindergarten for children whose parents feel that they may not be mature enough to thrive in the regular program, parents must make some important decisions. The video gives parents a detailed look at each program and explains that all the options combine learning with play. Parents viewing this video are bound to be reassured about the services their child will receive and to feel more confident about making a choice. The video encourages them to visit schools and directs them to the district website where they can find more information about how to enroll their child.



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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lezMDAtymPQ&ab_channel=MinnetonkaSchools

Other videos focus in on specific kindergarten options, like [this one](#) about the Chinese Immersion program. In the video, a school principal explains, “If you choose the Chinese immersion option, your child will only hear Chinese from day one from their teachers, and they’ll learn the core subjects all in Mandarin.” Viewers see various educators reassuring them that children rarely feel overwhelmed by the demands of second-language immersion; enthusiastic kindergarteners are seen singing and learning to read in Mandarin. In addition, parents are told that “by grade 4, the Chinese immersion students have historically outperformed their peers” on standardized tests of English language arts skills.

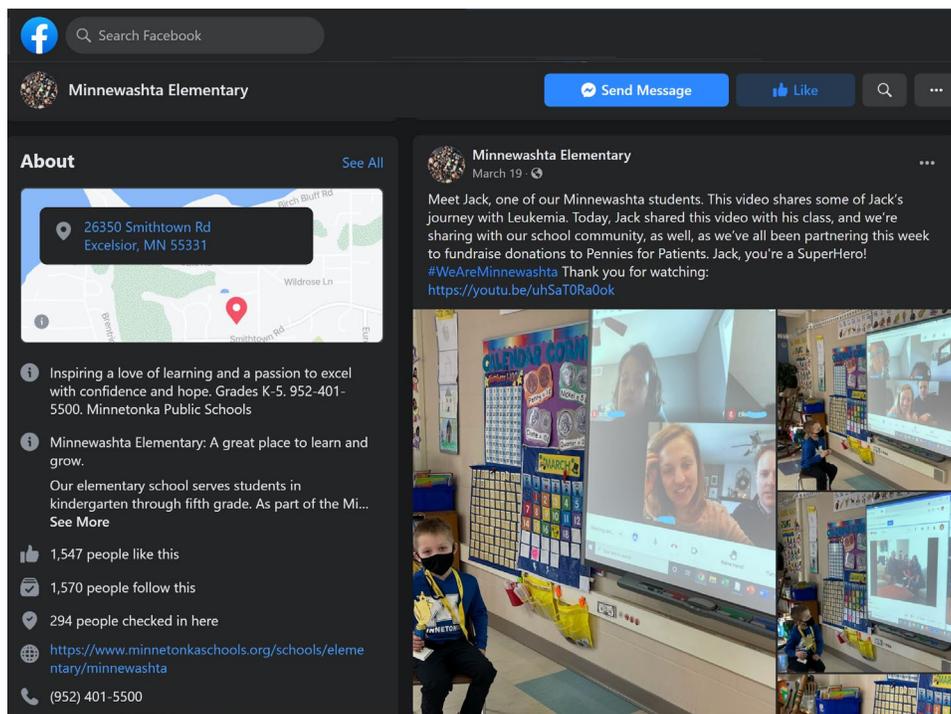
A video called “[Freshmen Connect 2014](#)” illustrates how the district uses YouTube to make both students and parents feel welcome and connected from their first days at Minnetonka High School. In

the video, we see incoming 9th graders spending a half day with 12th grade “First Mate Leaders” to get to know one another, older students, and the school. The students participate in team-building activities led by their enthusiastic senior mentors and get inside tips about what to expect the first week of school. The video notes extend an invitation to new high school students and their parents: “This is an important first connection to the school so students will not want to miss this! Kids who attend say they feel more comfortable and relaxed the first day of school.”

Facebook

Facebook became the second social media channel Minnetonka folded into its communications plan. An annual survey indicated that parents checked Facebook at least weekly, so it seemed like an ideal tool for community building. The districtwide [Facebook page](#) showcases what’s happening in schools, celebrates students, and provides parents with information to support student learning from home.

Announcements posted on Facebook can be more informative and interactive than printed announcements sent home in students’ backpacks ever were. For example, a recent post invited parents to an upcoming presentation by a child development expert on raising resilient, self-disciplined children; the post included a brief video so that parents could preview the presenter’s style and message, as well as a link that parents could use immediately to sign up. Another post highlighted the projects that students in the high school’s advanced professional studies program had completed with their business partners, including Habitat for Humanity; a link enabled readers to go directly to the Habitat website for more information on this partnership. Recently, eight Minnetonka high school football players signed national letters of intent to play at the college level, [Minnetonka Public Schools posted photos of the athletes](#), along with a link to further information on their Newsroom page. Members of the Minnetonka community responded with likes, comments and shares of the story, which can be seen across the country by extended family.



<https://www.facebook.com/MinnewashtaElementary>

Three Minnetonka schools now have their own Facebook pages: [Minnewashta Elementary School](#); [Groveland Elementary School](#); [Minnetonka Middle School](#). The common denominators for success are frequent postings to maintain engagement, with pictures and photo albums receiving the most hits.

Twitter

Recognizing that most students are on Twitter, in 2013 the district began its [Twitter feed](#) as a third communications tool. Recent tweets have congratulated the winner and runner up of the geography bee, pointed students to information about online course offerings, announced the dates of student activities from orchestra performances to basketball games, and highlighted the efforts of students in the Thanksgiving gift drive. Minnetonka High School principal Jeff Ericsson, who has his own [principal Twitter feed](#), got student buy-in by promising not to follow them on Twitter. He models responsible digital citizenship in his own tweets by sharing high-interest tweets of happenings around the school, celebrating student successes, and creating awareness of staff work and school programs for students and their families. Erickson's feed now has more than 5,000 followers, and many cocurricular teams and student activities have joined in by starting their own Twitter feeds.

<https://twitter.com/TonkaSchools>

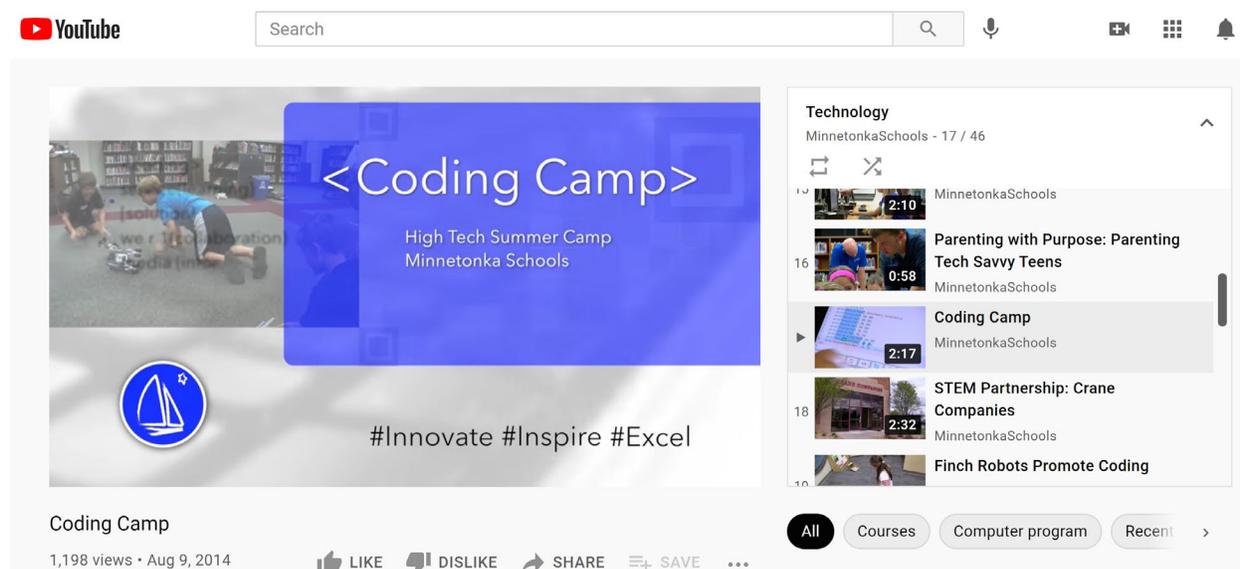
Keeping the Focus on Student Learning

Browsing through Minnetonka School District's YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter channels, it's clear that the district's social media use focuses on student learning. The district makes a conscious effort to make 75 percent of posts about students and learning, rather than defaulting to posts announcing the abundance of cocurricular activities.

For example, Minnetonka recognizes its responsibility to help students acquire the skills and abilities they will need for the rapidly changing world they will live in. So in the 2014-2015 school year, Minnetonka launched its first K-5 coding curriculum to introduce elementary students to the language of computer programming, while simultaneously offering and developing advanced-level coursework for those students wishing to specialize in this area. This program is the first of its kind in Minnesota.

“[Coding Camp](#),” a video on the district YouTube channel, describes the benefits of this curriculum and gave stakeholders a look at the elementary summer coding camp that introduced it. The district also uses YouTube to inform stakeholders about VANTAGE, its advanced professional studies program for high school students. When the program expanded with a Business Analytics class in 2014, a [YouTube video](#) showed students and parents how the class would provide real-world experience in high-demand corporate environments by enabling students to “spend both semesters working on a variety of industry-driven projects, solving business problems and learning about the challenges of project-based work.”

The district’s embrace of social media has not meant that it has abandoned traditional communications tools. Rather, the goal is to send and receive messages through multiple channels, new and old, to increase access for all stakeholders. For instance, principal Jeff Erickson introduced his Twitter feed using traditional communications media like newsletters. He also extended this communication channel with a video series, “Beyond 140,” explaining at the beginning of each episode, “Sometimes I sit down to write a Tweet, and my idea just doesn’t fit. I wish there were a way to take my ideas beyond 140. I’ve got it!” The videos deal, often humorously, with important aspects of the school’s culture and illustrate what students and staff appreciate about the school. For samples, see episodes of Beyond 140 on how to “[do the right thing](#)” (one of the school’s mottos), [what students are thankful for](#), and [goodbye messages to departing 12th graders](#).



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opHKuU1ZmlI&list=PL635BB9213EE197FB&ab_channel=MinnetonkaSchools

Minnetonka Public Schools also works to get citizens into its buildings as often as possible to showcase the district’s technology-infused instructional program and talk about how children’s minds are wired differently. Social media channels enable the district to extend these in-person visits by taking people into the schools digitally. Consider this [middle school YouTube video](#), which shows how a 6th grade class used 21st century skills to research, design, and build correctly scaled models of architectural landmarks like the CN Tower and the Sears Tower. Students are visibly proud as they describe their projects and what they learned.

In [another video](#), 8th grade teachers and students share their insights and experiences in teaching with the iPad. Watching this video provides a window into the innovative academic environment that Minnetonka students enjoy through the schools' 1:1 iPad program. Viewers of the videos are urged to learn more by visiting Minnetonka schools in person, and are given a link to the district website page where they can schedule a visit. Janet Swiecichowski emphasizes that getting community opinion leaders into the schools is a key strategy; they can be advocates and ambassadors for the total school program.



Search



Beyond 140 Do The Right Thing

1,046 views • Sep 11, 2014

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jxYDEqec_c&ab_channel=MinnetonkaSchools

What Social Media Can Accomplish

Minnetonka School District's work to craft and implement a progressive communications plan has yielded many benefits:

- Relationships with all education stakeholders are stronger.
- Quick information gets disseminated on the fly.
- Stakeholders capture and pass on messages quickly and easily, sharing and retweeting information about school events and celebrations, such as this [Happy New Year announcement](#) retweet promoting students learning coding, retweeted 124 times and favorited 90 times.

- School programs and initiatives are cross-promoted with business partners in real time.
- Educators model digital citizenship, developing community expectations and norms.
- Pediatricians, care providers and parents are getting more involved through school social media channels, sharing ideas and information in real time, For example, Dr. Ross W. Greene presented an [online webinar](#) December 16, 2014 for Minnetonka parents on “[Fear and Worries: What to Do When They Keep Growing](#),” providing perspective and guidance about developing resilience in children.
- Grandparents are much more engaged in their grandchildren’s school lives, even if they live a distance from Minnetonka, especially through Facebook. In a recent post on the [Minnewashta Elementary Book Fair](#), grandparent Jan Green commented, “Yeah, I finally see my granddaughter, Haley. Awesome!” (Facebook, February 3, 2015, 4:56 pm)

School districts like Minnetonka, which use new media in deliberate, strategic ways, go beyond the traditional role of school communications and build relationships in real time, 24 hours, 7 days a week. Agile, responsive, authentic communications promote stakeholder support for schools’ work and values. By celebrating successes, discussing challenges, and identifying opportunities in an open dialog with the larger community, schools can build stakeholder relationships that will serve them well in advancing their goals.

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In addition to his work in public education, McKenzie is an internationally known author and presenter on multiple intelligences theory and instructional technology, and he has authored several books on these subjects. A 25-year veteran in public education, he has been proudly working on behalf of ASCD members for 5 years.