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The SchoolCEO Guide to Social Media

Can social media change how people see your schools?

These days everyone is on social media—but does that mean your schools should be, too?

In a world of open enrollment, school marketing has become more important than ever before, and it's now vital for school systems around the country to more easily and effectively connect to their communities. It's not just about enrollment either. Professionals in every field are now using social media to find jobs, including teachers. But when is social media helpful and when is it simply a distraction from the good work of your schools?

You've probably read your fair share of simple social media tips. So we've decided to dive deeper. Here's our nuanced analysis of social media from every angle—why you need it, how you can use it to its full potential, and how you can measure the impact of what you're sharing. We'll also show you how to harness the true power of social media like the private sector does, platform-by-platform, and how to navigate the vulnerability that comes along with putting your brand online.

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The Case for Social Media in a Competitive Enrollment World

Social media is often described as a one-stop shop for community engagement. The narrative painted for school administrators in conferences, news articles, blog posts, and professional development sessions is that social media can build a school's brand and transform their relationship with the community. The reality is that school leaders were hired to run schools, not social media accounts. Making the transition onto Twitter and Facebook can be awkward at best, especially when running a Facebook page pulls administrators away from time in schools.

As marketers from the private sector, we see how businesses across industries are using social media to win and retain customers. New companies that scale quickly often do so by leveraging social media platforms to their advantage; it's one of the most affordable ways to engage with a large audience. It seemed obvious that schools that are savvy enough to be on social media would also be good at marketing themselves to parents. We set out to see just how big of an impact social media is making in school districts.

Does having a social media presence boost enrollment?

To answer this question empirically, we analyzed two states: California and Michigan. Both states are known for having a wide array of school choice programs, meaning that their schools are familiar with competition. Each state's Department of Education also shares detailed records of how districts are gaining or losing students to school choice programs.

We recorded whether or not each district had an account on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, expecting to find that schools who were on social media would be attracting more students than those that were not. As it turned out, there was no statistically significant connection.

In sifting through hundreds of school profiles, we noticed that many schools only posted a few times a year. We wanted to see if this trend held true across the board, so we calculated the number of posts per district, then compared those numbers with the district's gains in students. The result was the same: no significant correlation.

Brands in the private sector are using social media to grow into billion-dollar companies. What is the difference between how social media is used in schools versus private sector companies?

Does the old saying, "It's not what you say, it's how you say it," apply to schools and social media? To find out, we expanded our research to 1,000 schools from across the country. After accumulating data on the types of platforms each district used in 2017, we focused specifically on the way each school was using each platform: where were they posting, when were they posting, and what were they saying?

We found that industry best-practices that drive results in the private sector marketing world are not being applied in schools.

There are a few basic adjustments that schools can make to their online presence to improve their marketing efforts. We'll go through three key disconnects — and explain how schools can fill those gaps.

Disconnect #1: Schools don't show up.

Before looking at the ways in which districts are using social media, we wanted to find out which platforms schools are using most frequently to communicate. What we found surprised us: one in five districts did not have a social media presence at all, let alone consistent usage. We'll go through the three main social networks, examining the usage on each one

Percentage of Districts on Each Platform

68% Facebook

53% Twitter

22% None

10% Instagram
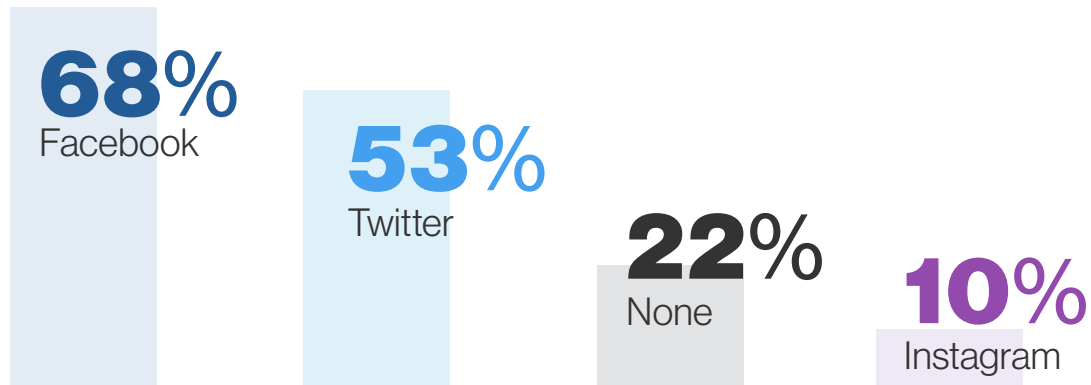
Facebook

Approximately 32% of schools didn't have a Facebook page in 2017. When you consider the number of adults — families, teachers, parents, and community members — who are logging onto Facebook every day, it comes as a surprise that almost a third of schools aren't utilizing the most common social media platform.

The Pew Research Center reported that 68% of American adults are on Facebook, and three-quarters of them check the platform every day. As a reference, around 100 million Americans watched the Super Bowl in 2018, which boils down to about one in three Americans. It's as if the Super Bowl were happening twice a day on your community's phones, but almost a third of schools aren't even joining the conversation.

> Facebook is a great community building tool, but we weren't noticing much interaction on the vast majority of school pages.

Facebook is a great community building tool, but we weren't noticing much interaction on the vast majority of school pages.

That being said, schools use Facebook more than any other social network. The company has even started to gear their networking site towards schools specifically; they've built page and group templates that are designed to meet the unique needs of educational organizations. Districts have an opportunity to utilize these resources not just for marketing, but as educational tools in the classroom.

Twitter

School districts use Twitter less frequently than Facebook; only 53% of schools had a Twitter account. Twitter has a significantly smaller audience base than Facebook overall. Pew Research reports that 24% of U.S. adults used Twitter in 2018, which is less than half of the adults on Facebook. Looking at these numbers, Twitter might not seem as valuable as Facebook simply because there are fewer people logging on. However, the two platforms are used in fundamentally different ways. As we have seen in recent years (just think of the 2016 election) Twitter can be hugely important in shaping political and media narratives.

Journalists, politicians, and everyday community members are logging onto Twitter to post about trends and hot topics, especially as they relate to political activity. Every member of the U.S. Senate and 98% of the House of Representatives have Twitter accounts. A survey from Muck Rack, a journalism analytics company, showed that 70% of journalists actively use Twitter. Ignoring the platform means missing out on a critical networking space. When rolling out new policies, sharing press releases, and thanking community volunteers, Twitter becomes a high-value platform for professional communication.

Instagram

Instagram ranks dead last in terms of school districts' usage. Less than 10% of districts are on the platform. This is probably due to the fact that Instagram's user demographics slant towards millennials and teenagers, while most schools are run by the young at heart and wealthy in age.

The problem with ignoring the platform is that it's widely used by a younger demographic — your students, parents, and teachers. Pew's research finds that 64% of 18–29 year-olds are Instagram users. A study by the Associated Press found that 76% of 13–17 year-olds are active users. All the while, Facebook usage is shrinking in these groups.

A tactic used by many technology companies is to post about their company culture on Instagram as a recruiting tool.

> Instagram gives candidates a window into the workplace environment; companies celebrate their employees, show off their quirks, and highlight the best parts of the job.

For schools, this is especially relevant because teachers are posting about their curriculum, their classrooms, even their new Jupiter-shaped earrings on Instagram. The platform has become an informal professional community, a great place for teachers to learn from one another. This creates an opportunity for schools to directly engage with the best teachers in their area.

At the same time, parents who are about to enroll their five-year-olds are in the core demographic of Instagram users. Posting about your most innovative teachers, spirit week, handwritten notes from students — anything that uniquely showcases the experience of working at and attending your school — can make a great first impression.
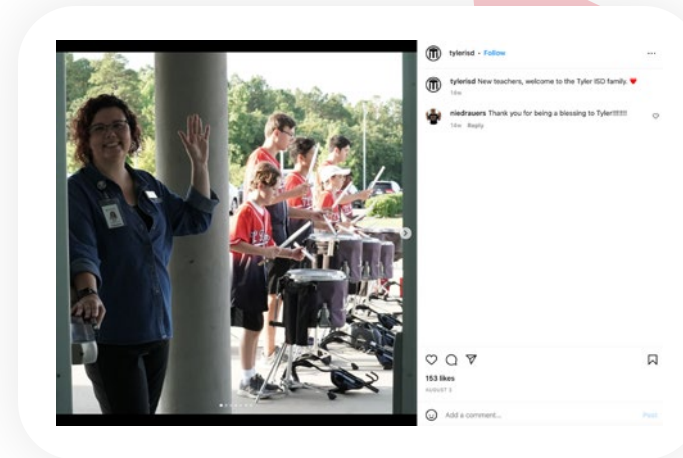

In this article, we won't be focusing on Snapchat or LinkedIn. While they do have larger user bases, they aren't really appropriate for school messages. Snapchat's messages disappear after 24 hours, making the platform less useful for schools. LinkedIn is built for professionals, and is not seen as a major news source like Facebook or Twitter. While they can be powerful ways to connect, they are not a core platforms that schools would be expected to use.

Disconnect #2: Schools aren't consistent.

The problem with the way most districts are using social media is a lack of consistency. The majority of districts aren't posting at all, many are sharing with seemingly little rhyme or reason, and a few are overwhelming their audience with minute-by-minute updates.

Instead of training customers to look to their social media for information, many school leaders act reactively to social media. They think that they have to bend to the world. The reality is that you can bend the world to you by consistently sharing information that's relevant to your followers through the channels where you feel the most in control.

Districts' Twitter Usage in 2017

8%
Proper Use

< 1%
Overuse

33%
Underuse

59%
No Usage
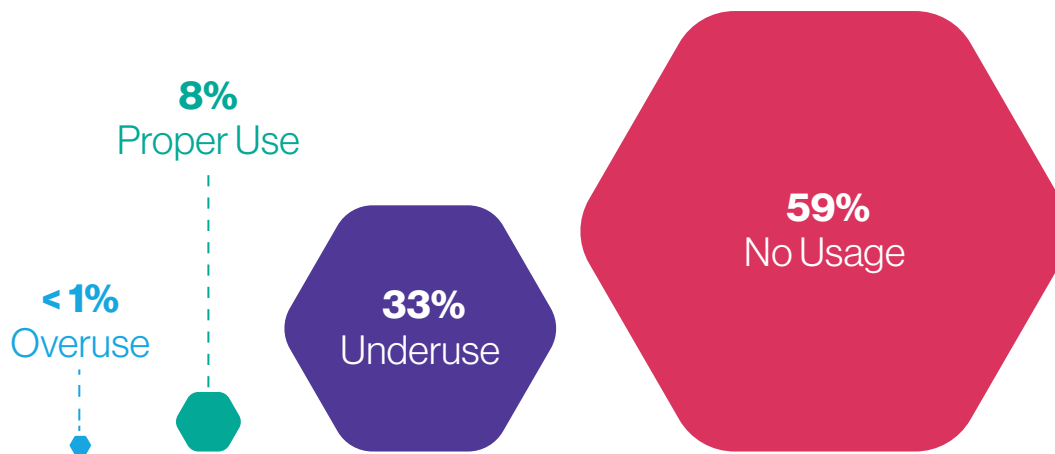
To understand the frequency of school social media posts, we focused on Twitter, which provides rich data about the timing and quantity of users' posts. The standard in private sector marketing is to post to Twitter 3-5 times a day for large brands, and 2-3 times a day for smaller brands. This would mean that a school that is properly using the platform is Tweeting between 730 and 1,095 times a year. We found that only a small fraction of schools, about 8%, hit these targets. Most were nowhere close.

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Our other major finding on consistency is that schools' Twitter usage corresponds directly with the school year. We see districts full of energy at the beginning of the year, taking a break around Thanksgiving, posting sporadically during the spring, and ignoring their Twitter page during summer break.
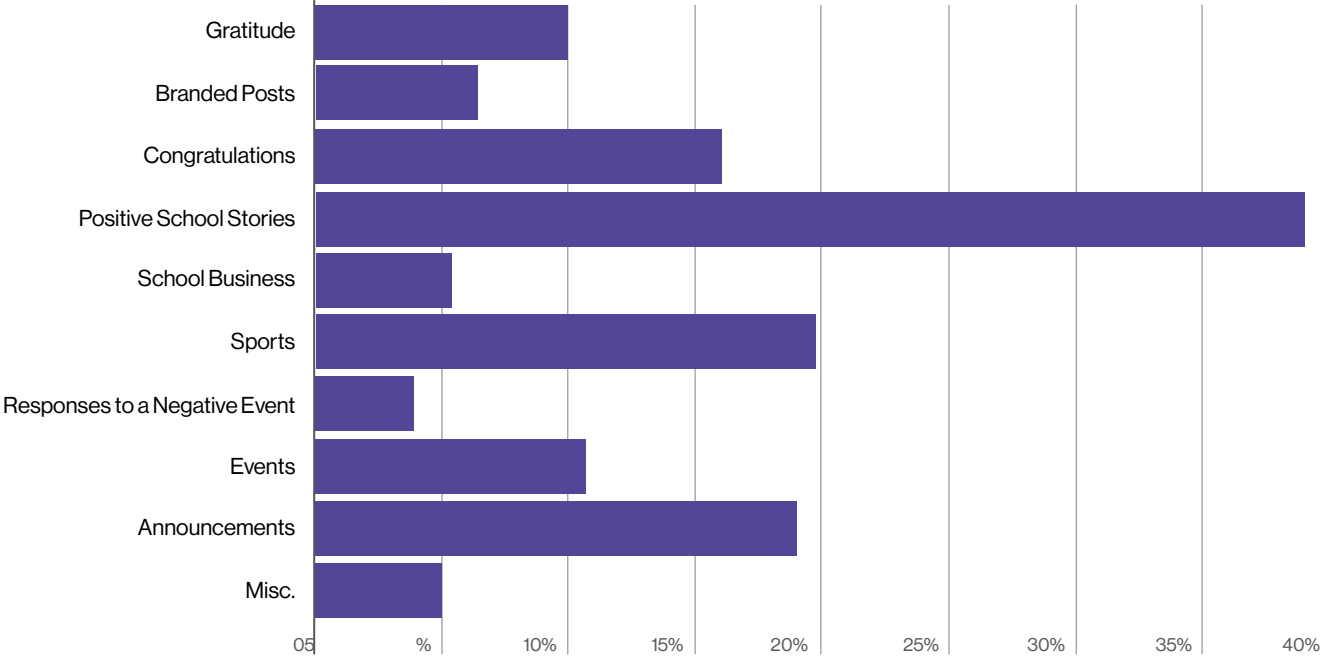
Average Tweets by Week in 2017
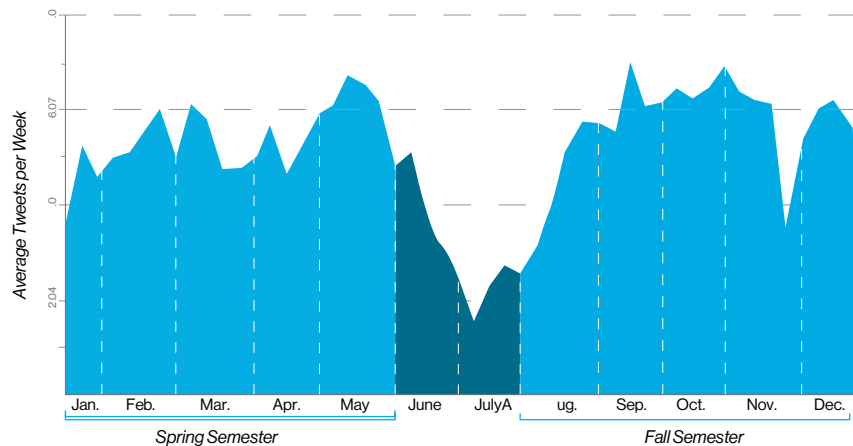
It makes sense that districts would post less when students aren't on campus. Unfortunately, the times when schools go on break are often the same times that parents are making choices about where to enroll their child. Schools need to find a way to maintain their social presence when school is not in session. This can be as simple as saving certain photos and stories to post in the future, creating a bank of posts available throughout the year.

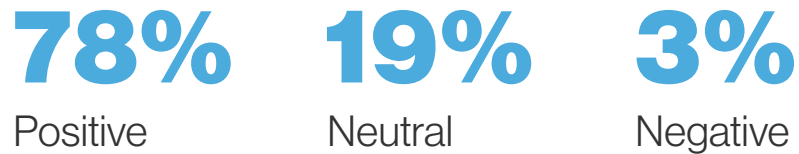## Disconnect #3: Schools miss opportunities to build their brands.

In the private sector, every post is crafted to spread the company's brand. Think of Nike — each photo or poster is paired with #justdoit. When schools are posting, on the other hand, they're not doing it in a way that spreads their messaging. To better understand schools' social usage, we again looked to Twitter. We reviewed the posts of 1,000 school districts across the country. After downloading 127,447 Tweets from 2017, we pulled out a sample set and then coded each Tweet by category.

In some ways, the results are encouraging. When we coded the Tweets to find positive posts (stories of student achievement, event invitations, and congratulatory messages), neutral posts (administrative updates), and negative posts (posts responding to a negative event or engaging in confrontation), we found that 78% of the posts were positive. We further broke the Tweets down into categories based on similar themes. The largest category of posts were stories of the great things happening in each school, which is an excellent use of the platform. It's clear that school districts see the power of sharing student stories.

Tweets by Content Category

Category	Percentage
Gratitude	11%
Branded Posts	7%
Congratulations	17%
Positive School Stories	40%
School Business	6%
Sports	21%
Responses to a Negative Event	4%
Events	11%
Announcements	20%
Misc.	6%

Number of Tweets by Sentiment

78%
Positive

19%
Neutral

3%
Negative

However, we see that schools aren't being strategic about linking stories to the school's brand. We found that only 6.5% of the Tweets linked to a statement about the school's messaging. For example, let's say your school's motto is "learning through grit." An unbranded story would be, "100% of students in Mr. Steven's AP biology classes scored a 4 or 5 on the AP test this year. Congrats!" A branded Tweet would be, "100% of students in Mr. Steven's AP biology classes scored a 4 or 5 on the AP test this year. This is how Cougars learn through grit."

> The largest category of posts were stories of the great things happening in each school, which is an excellent use of the platform. It's clear that school districts see the power of sharing student stories.

That last part, "Cougars learn through grit," shares the school's messaging, which ultimately communicates the ways in which the district is unique. The biggest goal of any branding campaign is to differentiate your product. By linking student stories to the school's brand, your audience gets a clearer picture of the unique experience of attending the districts' schools. If you want social media to make an impact, it's critical to write posts that tie your school district to a set of ideas you're hoping to impress upon your community.

Their loss can be your gain.

In any marketing effort, your goal is to differentiate yourself from everyone else. Because the education market is so far behind other sectors in social media, it's easy for schools to get a leg up on the competition. Getting started with social media marketing doesn't have to mean devoting hours to finding the best photos and statuses to post about the school. Making the effort to plan in advance and share stories on the go—taking a little bit of time to focus on your school's reputation—can transform your district's online presence.

Many superintendents take the plunge into social by capturing great stories in their district right when they see them. Whether a student is helping a friend with their homework or breaking a record in the swimming pool, taking note of a positive moment and sharing it online builds rapport with your community.

The key to developing a great reputation online is finding the positivity in your schools and sharing those stories. A small effort can go a long way on social media. The more the community can get to know your schools, the stronger your schools' relationship with the community. From seeing how effective social media can be in the private sector, we know that social platforms can be a major tool to build your school's identity.

Use Social Media Like the Private Sector

Social media has changed the way people consume information. People choose products partially based off of the company's reputation online, making social platforms valuable tools in sales and marketing.

The platforms provide companies the ability to connect with their audience in ways that were impossible twenty years ago; the fact that marketers have tracked their audiences onto the platforms is no surprise.

As a result, many small companies have grown exponentially in the past decade by figuring out the mechanics of marketing online. Let's take a look at what strategies schools can steal from these companies that will drive results in your school's marketing practice.

1. Tell small stories that support your larger story

Airbnb is rethinking travel. The company has grown at a breakneck pace, bringing its value to over $60 billion today. One of Airbnb's strongest marketing strategies is to share many small stories that build up a larger narrative about adventure and excitement.

Instead of posting about value, security, and special offers, they post about people trying things for the first time, forging friendships, and witnessing incredible views. When their audience continuously sees these stories, it strengthens their overall narrative of their brand: Airbnb is an affordable way to find adventure, connections, and experiences.

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How can this translate to schools?

- Repeatedly share small, personal stories that relate to a larger narrative about what makes your school special.

- Keep sharing new content with the same core message.

- Use action images as a storytelling tool.

2. Repeat yourself again and again

Nike uses their tagline, #justdoit, in post after post to drive home their branding. Companies in the private sector understand that getting your message across means repeating yourself again and again.

Each post is an opportunity to paint the company's vision. Nike attaches the same messaging, #justdoit, to inspiring athletes' stories, keeping their content fresh while maintaining their brand. Depending on the sports season, Nike shares updates about different athletes' games and races as they correspond with the company's messaging. Nike crafts posts that are meant to inspire, which fits into their branding narrative. The company inspires athletes to dream big, then provides them with the technology to meet those goals.
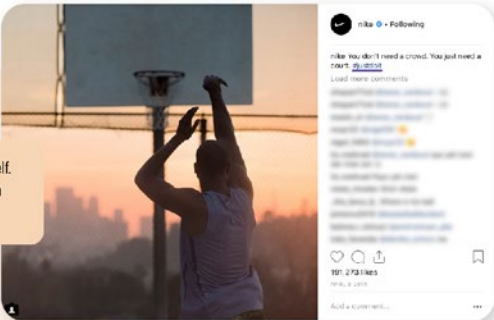
> Companies in the private sector understand that getting your message across means repeating yourself again and again.

Nike tells longer stories over time by posting about different races, letting the audience get to know their athletes.

Nike lets the picture speak for itself. Sometimes a shorter caption can be more powerful.

Breaking stories into pieces makes athletes' victories more exciting.

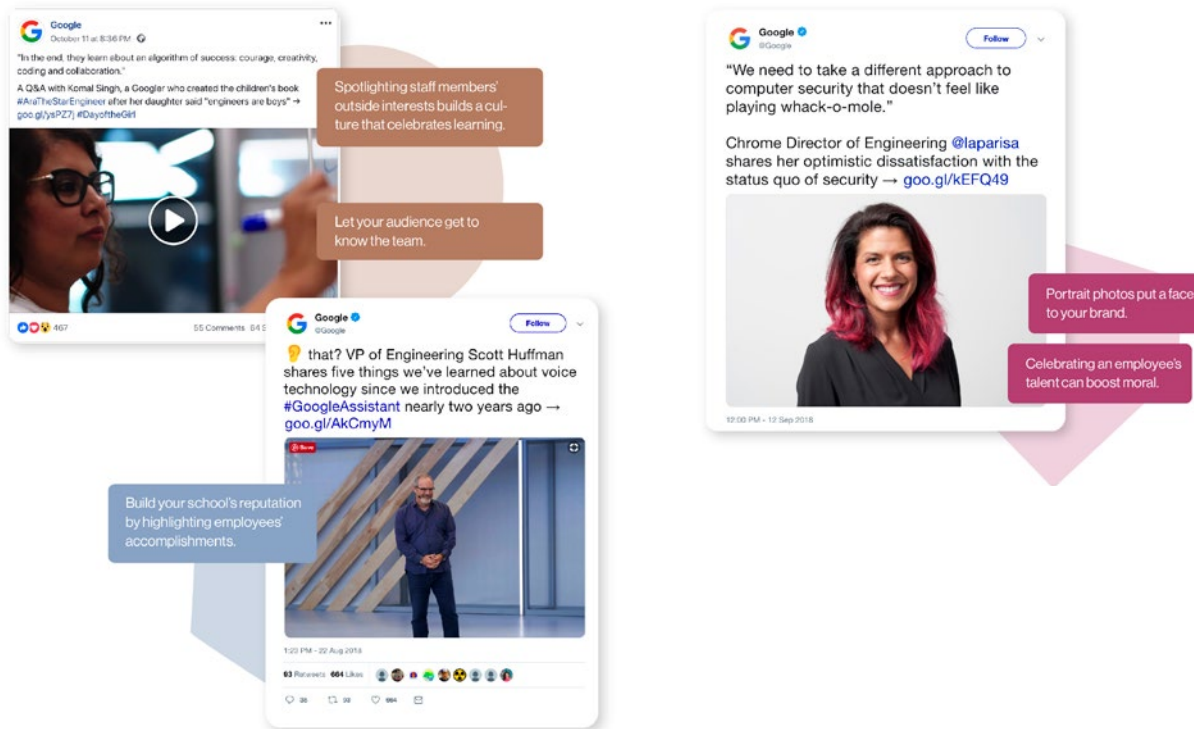## How can this translate to schools?

- Only a fraction of your audience will see each post, so repeat yourself to spread the message to every user.

- Continually link each post to the school's vision; Nike accomplishes this goal with #justdoit.

- Just as Nike shares stories about different sports, post student stories from a diversity of interests, relating those stories back to your school's values

3. Spotlight staff

Google frequently shares thought pieces from executive staff members. Each post focuses on something the "Googler" specializes in, allowing the staffer to put their best foot forward on social platforms. In turn, the company gains credibility in association with the staff member's knowledge. Oftentimes their posts will be shared across social platforms, even contributing to larger conversations on the topic. Allowing employees to share their expertise is a small way to highlight their excellence, improving employee engagement.

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How can this translate to schools?

- Get to know your teams' passions and interests, or identify elements of their classroom that are truly exceptional.

- Give your team a platform to share their expertise, like creating a schedule for blog posts.

- Include a headshot that highlights their personality, putting a face to their name.

How to Measure Your Social Media Impact

Let's face it—social media can get a little overwhelming sometimes. A lot of thought goes into what you post, when you post it, and what platforms you should use. But are your posts making the impact you want?

It's easy to tell how many likes a post has received or if you're getting comments on your content, but what about more in-depth metrics? Knowing data points such as how many people viewed a post or clicked a link you've shared can help inform your approach to social media in the future.

Fortunately, the social media platforms used by most schools—Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—all have robust analytics capabilities built right in. But making the most of this information starts with understanding what metrics to look for and what these numbers indicate. With that data in hand, you can begin pulling insights that will shape and inform your social media strategy.

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Key Metrics

Each platform has slightly different approaches to their analytics sections, but they all measure the same core set of information:

Followers:

Your follower count is the number of people who've indicated that they want to see your posts in their individual feeds.

Impressions:

Impressions measure how many times a post has been viewed in users' feeds. It's a quick—but imperfect—way to gauge how much traction your content is getting.

Reach:

Reach measures the number of individual users who have seen your content. You may watch a funny cat video six times in a row (impressions = six), but you're still the only one watching it (reach = one). One set of eyes equals one user reached but can account for multiple impressions.

Likes and Reactions:

When most people think of measuring success on social media, they think of likes. This is simply a count of how many users have indicated that they, well, like your post. In recent years, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn have added post reactions that allow a user to express sentiments other than "liking," such as "crying," "laughing," or "angry." This can convey specific reactions, as opposed to simple acknowledgement or appreciation. A high number of likes—or reactions—may make your post show up higher in a user's feed, but your likes count is not the end-all be-all of social media metrics. Other factors like comments and shares play a large role in the virality of a post, and depending on your objective, they may completely override likes as the primary metric to track.

Comments:

Social media is meant to be a space for conversations. That's why each individual post has space for comments (or replies on Twitter). The more comments you have, the more users are interacting with your content in some way. That being said, not all comments are created equal. Sometimes people leave comments because they are angry about something or wish to lodge a complaint. That's probably not the sort of engagement schools are looking for on social media, so it's important to keep an eye on your comments and respond when necessary.

Shares:

Are users sharing your content with their networks? That's what your number of shares or retweets is measuring. Shares expand the reach of your school brand beyond your existing audience.

Link Clicks:

This is less a measurement of your posts themselves and more a measurement of how many times users have clicked a link you've shared. This is an important metric to track if you're using social media to promote a news story, a blog post, or your careers page. It's good to know if people are not only seeing your posts, but actually taking the actions you want them to take.

Goals Over Metrics

Each of these metrics tells you something different about your performance on social media. Understandably, you might be tempted to dive into the numbers and fixate on certain measurements. Social media seems so much easier when you can hold up a single value, such as likes or followers, as an indicator of success.

However, likes, comments, and shares don't really mean much on their own. These numbers can inform your approach to social media only when placed within the larger context of what you're trying to accomplish on a given platform. Again, think about Facebook comments—if you have a lot of negative ones, a high number of comments isn't necessarily a good thing.

It's a common trap to become focused on one or two metrics and base success solely on whether those numbers are increasing or decreasing.

But if you really want to be strategic when managing your accounts, you have to always think about the bigger picture. For example, having a large number of followers doesn't tell you much about how well your audience knows you. Perhaps one popular post drove people to like your page, but your posts since then haven't gotten nearly as much engagement.

Let your desired outcomes guide your metrics. If you want to increase the number of people keeping up with your schools (your brand awareness), track the number of followers you have and how many times your posts are shared. If, instead, your goal is to drive engagement with your content, you should drill into the posts that have the most likes, link clicks, and comments. The information you find could be valuable if you're wanting to promote a bond election or another important event to your community.

The metrics that matter to you are specific to your district and could even change month to month depending on your larger goals. Viewing metrics in a vacuum doesn't provide any context, and, more importantly, it doesn't leave you with much insight for your future content strategy.

Accessing Your Metrics by Platform

Facebook

You should always create a Facebook Page—not a profile or group—for your district. On a Page, administrators will be able to see advanced metrics for reach and impressions for each post, not just likes and comments. Click on "See insights and ads" to see these insights.

In order to view Page-level metrics, you'll need to access the "Insights" section located in the sidebar on the left (under "Professional Tools") when you're viewing your page.

This section allows you to track metrics such as Page views, post reach, and more across time—specifically the last 28 days. In addition, you'll find data detailing your overall post engagement and page likes.

🐦 Twitter
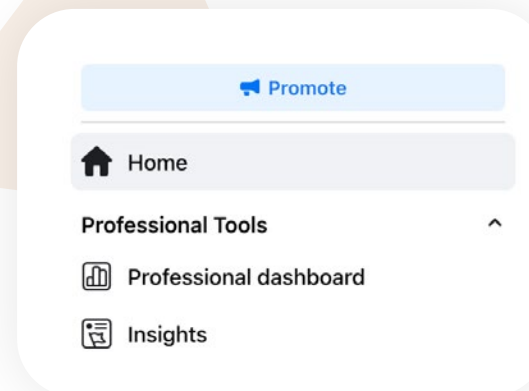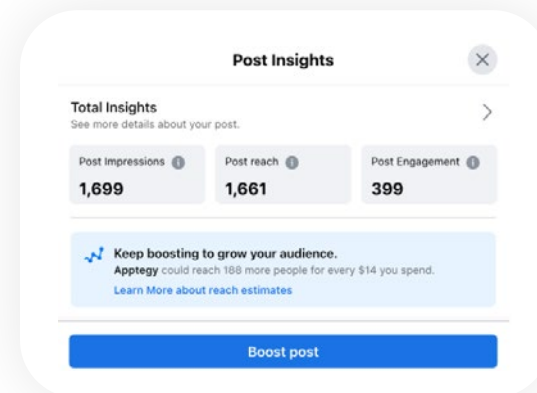
Every tweet you send will have a button underneath called "View Tweet analytics" that looks like a bar graph.

This button will allow you to see detailed information about how users have engaged with that specific tweet.

In order to see account-level insights, you'll have to click on the "More" button (on desktop) in the left hand menu, find the "Creator Studio" button, then click on "Analytics."

Once there, you can find data for your account broken down in a 28-day summary as well as a month-by-month view that highlights top tweets and provides information about overall account performance.
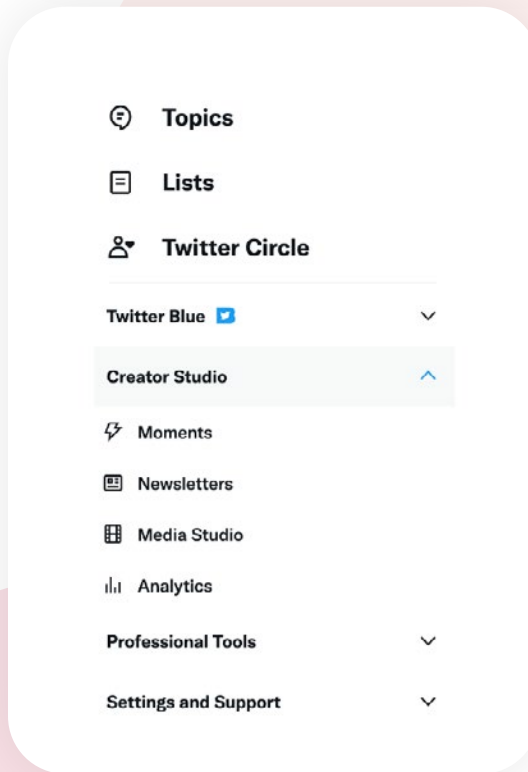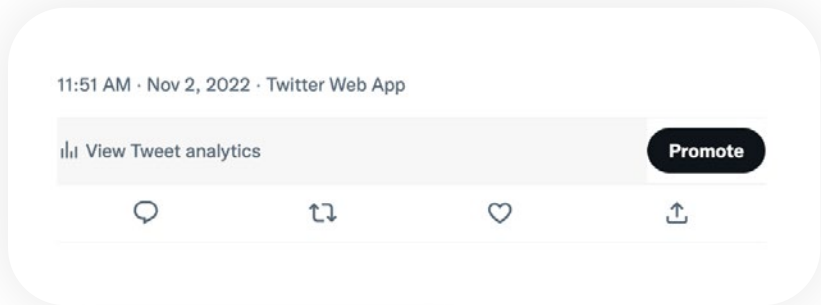
⦿ Instagram

You can only see advanced metrics on Instagram if you have a Business Account.

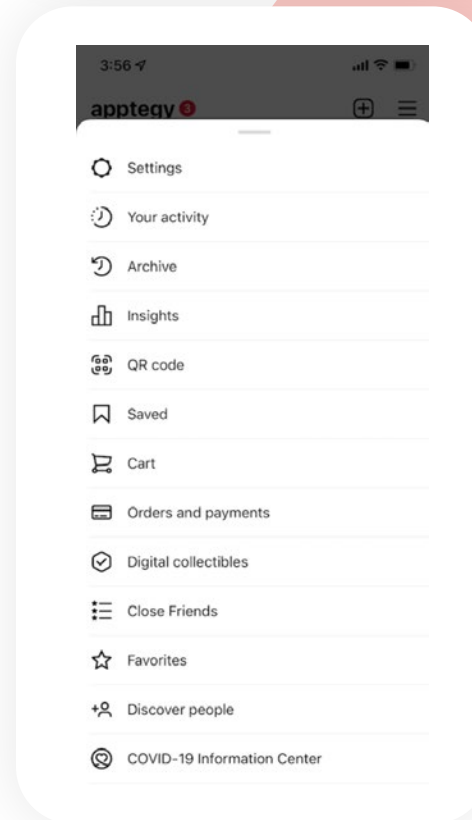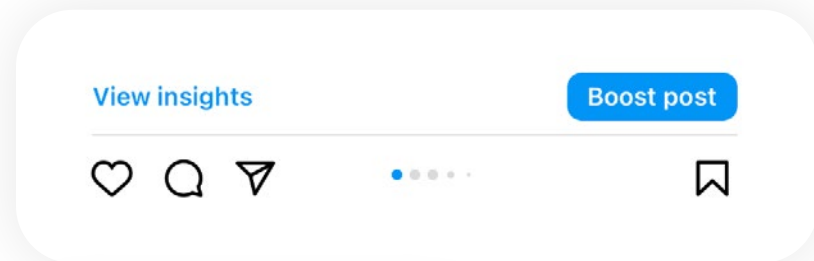On the Instagram app, there is a button under each post called "View Insights"—this button will lead you to more detailed stats for that post, such as reach and post-generated profile visits.

In order to see metrics for your entire account, click on the "Menu" button, then "Insights." The "Insights" page can also be accessed under your bio if you click the "Professional dashboard" button. The Insights section allows you to filter your account metrics over specific date ranges.

Taken all together, you'll be able to accurately track how your accounts are performing both on a per-post basis as well as over time. Once you know which metrics to prioritize given your current strategy, you'll be well on your way to turning these insights into actionable next steps.

View insights   **Boost post**

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⦿ Settings

⏱ Your activity

⟲ Archive

◫ Insights

▦ QR code

▢ Saved

⊟ Cart

▭ Orders and payments

⊘ Digital collectibles

⊟ Close Friends

☆ Favorites

+⦿ Discover people

⊚ COVID-19 Information Center

Making Sense of Your Metrics

Just as you shouldn't obsess over your number of likes or impressions, you shouldn't take a single popular Facebook post or tweet as a reflection of overall social media success. Look instead for patterns that reveal underlying trends. Perhaps your teacher appreciation posts consistently receive more engagement month to month than your other content. That's a good reason to create and publish more posts highlighting not just teachers but your paraprofessionals as well. Finding patterns in how posts perform can teach you more than analyzing each post individually.

You also need to understand your posts in the context of how well your entire account is performing. Tracking your account performance can be as simple as benchmarking the metrics you're interested in over time. Knowing how many new followers you gained on Twitter last month is helpful on its own, but it's ultimately more meaningful to compare that number to your new follower count from previous months.

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By studying your social media data at this level, you'll better understand how your efforts are contributing to your larger goals. Social media platforms are just tools you can maximize to communicate better or build momentum behind an initiative. Don't lose sight of the big picture when looking at account data.

Fine-Tuning Your Strategy

Sometimes, a particular post will gain far more traction with your audience than usual, and you won't always be able to put your finger on why. These outliers offer a chance to experiment. Maybe you've noticed that posting to Instagram at 5 p.m. results in more engagement than at other times. That gives you some insight into when your audience checks their Instagram feeds. If you never experiment with how and when you post, you could miss these sorts of insights.

Finding out what content performs best with your audience may take some experimentation, too. In some cases, it could be district announcements; other times, updates from athletics or other extracurricular events could perform best. It's only by digging into post-level insights that you're able to see what's resonating and what's not.

A great example of this is better understanding what types of media get the most engagement. It's generally understood that videos perform better than static images, but is that true in your context? Whatever you find, these types of insights can be invaluable as you continue to formulate and tweak your approach to social media.

Ultimately, the value of your social media insights depends on your overall strategy. Once you know what you want your posts to achieve, social media metrics can tell you whether or not you met your desired outcome.

If your accounts haven't performed as well as you hoped, no sweat!

Those same insights can inform how you adapt and change your approach going forward. You probably won't ever feel like you've mastered social media—and that's okay. Iteration is the name of the game, and that allows a lot of room to find an approach that fits your unique school community.

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Navigate Negative Social Media in a Positive Way

> ...it's crucial to deal with your negative comments in a way that shows your community—and your commenters—that you care.

Over the past few years, the conversation around public education has become more negative than ever before. Whether it's about mask policies, curriculum concerns, or banned books, it seems there's always someone waiting to criticize your schools. And as you probably know, negativity rears its ugly head on social media more than just about anywhere else.

Unfortunately, negative comments and replies are pretty much unavoidable these days. But while you can't stop negative comments from happening, you can't afford to ignore them, either. They can massively impact your brand.

According to a survey by Sprout Social, 60% of people are unlikely to purchase from a brand if it has received negative social media comments. In general, people trust other consumers, and when we see complaints about a brand online, it damages our trust in that brand. It's the same for your district. Prospective families and staff are on the lookout for other people's perceptions of and experiences with your schools.

They notice your responses to comments, or lack thereof. Oftentimes, they form opinions about your district based on the way you engage with your audience—particularly dissatisfied customers.

That's why it's crucial to deal with your negative comments in a way that shows your community—and your commenters—that you care. Luckily, we've got some effective tips for keeping your social media profiles positive and productive.

Ignore the trolls.

There's a big difference between a community member with a legitimate concern and someone who just wants to cause trouble. While genuine complaints deserve your respect and attention, trolls do not.

How do you tell them apart? It's actually pretty simple. If your commenter's account was just created or has a blank profile picture, that's a huge red flag. So is an account without any posts of its own—only comments or replies to other pages. These are basically "burner" profiles, created by people who want to attack other pages with a degree of anonymity.

But whether they're anonymous or not, the strongest indicator that you're dealing with a troll is the substance of their posts. While an offended community member may be frustrated, trolls are hateful. Their comments are inflammatory, exaggerated, and often off-topic. They may even lob personal attacks at teachers or other staff members. Worst of all, they return to your comments or replies again and again, pushing the same agenda no matter what you're posting about.

At the end of the day, trolls are out for attention—so your best course of action is to ignore them completely. If their comments are vulgar or outright abusive, block them. You'll never win this group over, so there's no sense in wasting your energy trying.

> While genuine complaints deserve your respect and attention, trolls do not.

Respond quickly.

Unless you're dealing with obvious trolls, you should always respond to negative comments.

Have you ever voiced a concern to someone face-to-face and been ignored? It doesn't feel good. The same is true online. A Sprout Social survey found that when people complain on social media and don't receive a response in return, 40% will reach out through another channel. Additionally, 35% will never buy from the brand again.

It's also important to respond in a timely fashion. This shows your commenters that you care about them and that their concerns are a priority for the district. What constitutes "timely"? Well, data from Hubspot suggests that on both Facebook and Twitter, consumers expect a response within 30 minutes.

That may not be a realistic timeframe for an understaffed communications team, and that's okay. Even in the private sector, only 50% of companies meet that expectation on either platform. But suffice it to say that checking your social media and responding once or twice a week isn't enough. As much as possible, keep a close eye on your comments and answer them as quickly as you can.

> A Sprout Social survey found that when people complain on social media and don't receive a response in return, 40% will reach out through another channel.

Keep it personal and authentic.

Have you ever noticed yourself acting differently online than you would in person? You might overshare a bit in your Facebook statuses, for instance, or be a bit quicker to complain about a negative experience. Either way, it's fairly common to act differently on social media than we would in real life. There's actually a name for this psychological phenomenon: the online disinhibition effect.

So why does this happen? While a variety of factors combine to make our brains react this way, a major one is invisibility. From behind a screen, we can't see others and they can't see us. This makes it easier to forget we're talking to real people on the internet—which, in turn, makes it easier to be mean. That's a great reason to make your replies to negative comments personal and authentic. If you constantly remind your audience that they're talking to an actual human being, they're more likely to react with kindness and understanding.

Keeping a response personal is fairly simple, and it starts with adopting a tone of intentional informality—replying in a casual voice. If you're used to being formal, this may feel unnatural or even unprofessional, but don't worry.

> By taking a more conversational tone, you're infusing your replies with authenticity—and reminding your commenter that there's a real person behind your social media profile.

As you craft your response, you'll want to refer to your commenter by name—but that's only the beginning. Take personalization a step further by signing your reply with your own name.

Once again, this reminds your audience that there's a real person behind the screen and makes it harder for them to be unkind.

Finally, make sure you're not using the same canned response to every negative comment. If your commenters think you're copying and pasting your replies, you'll come across as insincere and impersonal—which is the last thing you want. Go back and read your five most recent responses.

If they sound the same, or you sense a pattern in your replies, you need to add more personalization.

Make the conversation private.

If you're dealing with a serious complaint, suggest moving the conversation to a private space, whether that's direct messages or your real-life office. Private conversations give you more control and keep the situation from escalating in the comments section.

Before you go, though, it's important to leave a public reply. This lets the rest of your community know you're not ignoring your negative commenter. Not sure what to say? Here are a few guidelines:

- Address the commenter by their first name and thank them for their feedback.

- Acknowledge the commenter's frustration and apologize if appropriate.

- Give them your school email address or ask them to send a direct message to the district's Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter.

- End on a positive note, like "Thank you!" and sign your name.

While it's fine to share your own contact information, you should never ask for a commenter's phone number, email, or personal information on a public social media platform. And remember: These replies should be personal. Don't just copy and paste a response.

> Private conversations give you more control and keep the situation from escalating in the comments section.

Accentuate the positive.

Negative social media comments can be uncomfortable to deal with, but viewed from the right angle, they're also opportunities. If the district has handled something poorly, you have a chance to apologize and make it right. If there's confusion surrounding an issue, you can set the record straight.

Handling these situations may even turn detractors into advocates for your schools. According to that same Sprout Social survey, nearly half of people said that if they received a thoughtful reply to their initial callout, they'd post about that positive experience on social media later. About 37% would tell their friends about it.

Unfortunately, your schools will always have critics—but you have the power to shift the social media narrative. By responding with promptness, kindness, and authenticity, you can help keep your comments section a positive place to be.

> ...nearly half of people (surveyed) said that if they received a thoughtful reply to their initial callout, they'd post about that positive experience on social media later.

Using Social Media to Connect to Your Community: One Superintendent's Story

When it comes to social media, there are myriad ways you can connect to your community. Of course, each platform has its own advantages, but consistency of messaging and purpose should be at the forefront of any approach.

For an impactful example of using social media for community connection, we look to an expert on the topic: Dr. Joe Sanfellippo, superintendent of Fall Creek School District in Wisconsin. Sanfellippo has taken a unique approach to telling the story of Fall Creek, one step at a time. He actually lives across the street from his small, one-building district. To connect to his community, he decided about four years ago to start recording his walks to the office and giving advice on school leadership. Thus the #1minwalk2work Leadership Challenge was born.

"Living in the village and leading a school that is the hub of our community means I'm always on stage," Sanfellippo says. "It means that every interaction I have with people matters, because every interaction could be the one they talk about for the rest of their lives. The best learning for me has come from adjusting after I fail at something. If there's a way to help others by sharing our failures and what we've learned from them, then I believe it's incumbent upon us to do so."

The #1minwalk2work Leadership Challenge has been the platform for Sanfellippo's journey. "The concept was simple: walk to school, tell a story, talk about leadership, record it, and challenge myself and others to do things differently for those we all serve," explains Sanfellippo. "Some weeks I make a video; others I don't. But the one thing I keep at the forefront of my mind is to be authentic and real in all my messages."

As simple as these short videos may seem, they are steeped in strategy. "There are a few things I keep at the core of every leadership challenge video I post—give actionable challenges, use consistency in my messaging and timing, and force engagement with our brand," Sanfellippo says.

> ...consistency of messaging and purpose should be at the forefront of any approach.

Give actionable challenges.

"I always give an actionable challenge—not to add something to your plate, but to get you excited enough to actually do something," Sanfellippo says. Many of his videos challenge teachers and fellow leaders to be more mindful, take care of one another, and keep genuine connections at the forefront of their work.

Be consistent with messaging and timing.

For Sanfellippo, consistency of messaging and timing are key. All of his #1minwalk2work videos begin the same way: *All right, everybody. Friday morning. Fall Creek, Wisconsin. One-minute walk to work, and here's what I'm thinking about today.* And they also all end with the statement: *Just gotta take care of each other. We're all in this thing together, man. Have a great week, everybody! Go Crickets!* "That consistency of messaging and length comes up often when I talk to people," Sanfellippo says. "I love the videos, texts, and tweets I get on social media that say, We're all in this together, man, or, Just gotta take care of each other. It's humbling and wasn't planned, but with that momentum, it's been a fun way to open and close the videos."

When it comes to timing, Sanfellippo keeps the length of each video as close to one minute as possible, even though his walk to work actually takes less time. "They always seem to fall from 90-100 seconds, and I think this has been helpful for both me and anyone watching," he says. "They know they are not in for a 10-minute rant on how education needs to change or a tweet that takes eight seconds to read. The timing has given me the opportunity to tell a story and bring real people into these scenarios."

Force engagement.

Perhaps the most strategic aspect of Sanfellippo's videos is the way they subtly connect his audience to the district's brand. "I actually force the audience to engage with the Go Crickets message six times in the 100 seconds of the walk videos," he says. Sanfellippo is always sure to be consistent here, too. "I open by telling

everyone we are in Fall Creek, Wisconsin, I walk past my car with the GOCRKTS license plate, I walk by a green Fall Creek welcome sign on my front door, I continue past a 30-foot #GoCrickets sign on my fence, and then we round the corner of the school building with a Welcome to Cricket Country sign on the wall." Whether his viewers realize it or not, each video helps strengthen the district's brand—and their pride in it.

"The walks have become not only a way to share my leadership journey but also to spread the word about the great things happening in Fall Creek," Sanfellippo says.

To date, Sanfellippo has posted over 80 #1minwalk2work videos on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Vimeo. Even though it would be easy to look at this project as purely strategic, it's the vulnerability Sanfellippo exhibits, along with the added accessibility of using multiple social media platforms, that truly makes them impactful. "When we take care of one another, at all times, in all places, our leadership capacity will grow," he says. "That mindset also grows those around us. We lead learning organizations. Therefore, we need to lead the learning in those organizations. Whatever your method, whatever your platform, whatever your process, the one thing that has to be at the forefront of who we are as school leaders is modeling the learning process to those we lead. Understanding that we don't have all the answers and being willing to grow helps us when times get tough and leadership is needed most."

Stand Out from the Crowd with Instagram 📷

> ...getting in front of your audience isn't enough. You have to break through the noise and capture their attention.

When Instagram first launched in 2010, it established itself as a place for selfies, food photography, and cute cat pictures—but now, it has grown into one of the most important social media platforms for branding and marketing. People go to Instagram to find the brands they want to connect with, buy from, and even work for. In recent years, it's become a mega-hub for community building, amassing more than one billion average monthly users and counting.

Unlike Facebook or TikTok, the power of Instagram lies in its ability to attract everyone, from baby boomers to Gen Z. About 68% of moms check Instagram daily, and nearly half of dads use the platform weekly. Your students are on the app, too: 65% of Gen Zers check Instagram every single day. Even a striking 82% of teachers are on Instagram, checking their feeds for an average of at least 15 minutes each day. This universal appeal makes Instagram perhaps the most important platform for your district's social media strategy.

After all, everyone you need to reach is there.

If you want to share your unique story with every corner of your community, having a district Instagram presence is a crucial first step. But, of course, getting in front of your audience isn't enough. You have to break through the noise and capture their attention. Luckily, with features like Stories, Reels, and more, the platform makes authentic storytelling easy. Whether you're just starting out on Instagram or looking for fresh new strategies for your district, we're here to help you make the most of this community-building juggernaut.

Tell your story.

Unlike other social media platforms, Instagram is uniquely suited to visually tell your district's story. The human brain processes visual information 60,000 times faster than text—which makes Instagram the best option for quickly connecting your community to the heart of your schools. Done well, your official Instagram profile can offer an immediate snapshot of your district's personality, values, and culture.

The layout of your profile, or your grid, plays a key part in this. Your grid is like a picture book—you don't even need to read the captions to get a sense of your district's values and culture. Bios and captions are just the icing on the cake. Your Instagram profile condenses your identity into a small space, making it easy for your community to see who you are.

But how do you showcase your school culture visually? The key is to focus on authenticity. Your audience— whether it's parents, students, or even prospective teachers—wants to know what's really going on inside your schools. That's what your content needs to show them.

What does that look like in practice? Well, think of the moments in your schools that make you smile.

It's usually the small ones: a good morning greeting from a bus driver, an encouraging conversation between a student and teacher, or a coach beaming with pride after a game. The best Instagram posts take those invisible things—seemingly small moments your community might not witness—and make them visible.

> Your grid is like a picture book—you don't even need to read the captions to get a sense of your district's values and culture.

Take this post from Oklahoma's Jenks Public Schools, for example:
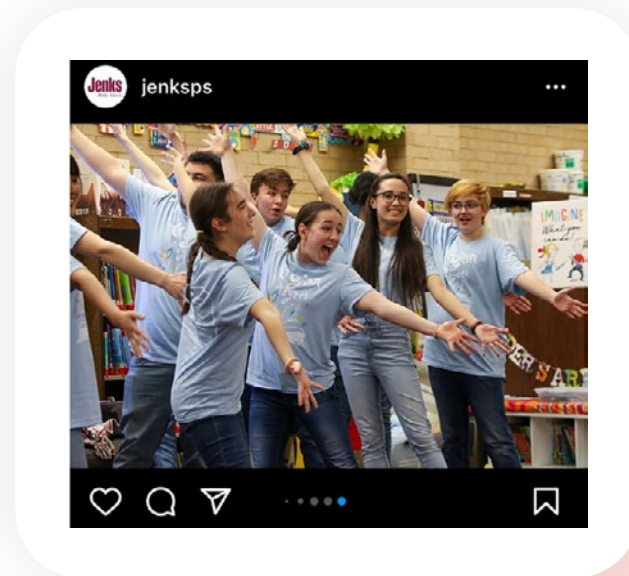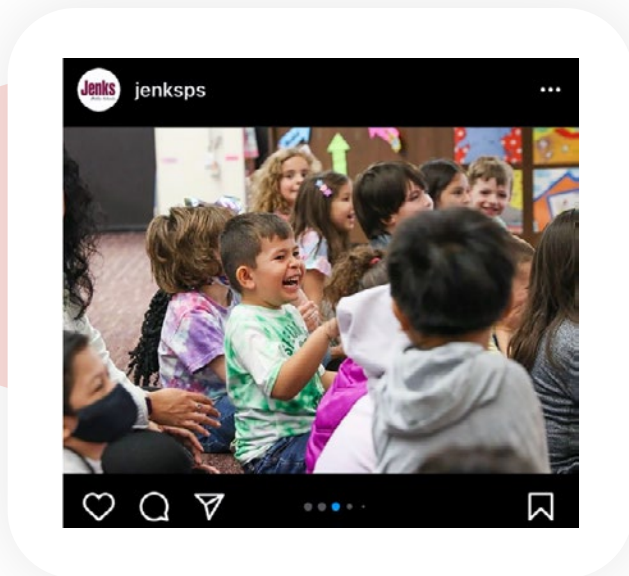
Like many Instagram posts, this one is highlighting an event: a high school theatre troupe performing for elementary students. But it's the specific moments captured in these photos—the older students' call for applause, the younger kids cracking up—that make the post captivating. Where some districts might have posted a group shot and explained the event in a caption, Jenks puts you right in the room with the students. That's authenticity.

Of course, as a school leader, you can't be everywhere at once—so empower others to capture content all over your district. In fact, those closest to the action are often your most authentic storytellers.

This is especially true when it comes to recruitment. When you empower your employees to share the moments they're capturing with your social media team, you let prospective staff see your schools from the vantage point of those who know it best. Try giving teachers control of your Instagram account every once in a while. These "teacher takeovers" give your followers a look at a typical day in your schools, up close and personal.

Because it's so visual, Instagram lets your audience do more than just read about your district's values and day-to-day practices. Instead, they can take a peek behind the curtain, getting a real sense of your schools for themselves.

Take advantage of Instagram's tools.

Unlike other social media channels, Instagram gives you many different avenues for content creation.

You can reach your audience in your Feed through a standard post, or engage with them through Stories. For events or big announcements, you can even go live and interact directly with your audience through the comments section.

The possibilities for storytelling on Instagram are endless—but where should you begin? Here, we'll focus on three features: Carousels, Stories, and Reels.

Increase engagement with Carousels.

The first tool in your Instagram toolbelt is the Carousel: a series of up to 10 photos in one swipeable Instagram post. Carousels are powerful because they allow you to tell a larger story.

With room for several images to work with, it's easier to build a compelling narrative.

Look at this Carousel from Texas' Tyler ISD:
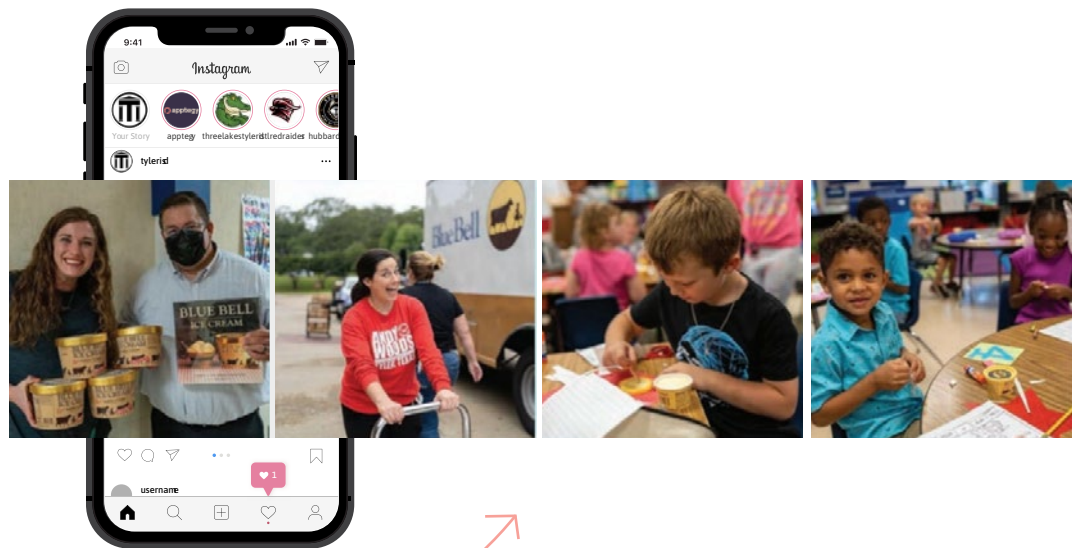
Even without the caption, the story—an elementary school ice cream celebration—is clear. We get to see the entire day play out: cartons of ice cream being delivered, excited teachers picking them up, and happy kiddos digging in. Several small, authentic moments build to create a full story.

Carousels also call your audience to engage with your content. On a Carousel, you don't just scroll past; you have to actively participate with the brand by swiping to see the next image. And once you start, you'll swipe until you see the last photo.

This built-in desire to finish what we've started is a psychological phenomenon known as the Zeigarnik Effect. It may be the reason why Carousels perform better than other forms of Instagram content in terms of engagement. In one study, Social Insider found that Carousels score higher engagement rates (1.92%) than single-image posts (1.74%) and video posts (1.45%). Long story short, if one of your Instagram goals is to increase engagement rates, Carousels are an optimal feature to explore.

> On a Carousel, you don't just scroll past; you have to actively participate with the brand by swiping to see the next image.

Capture Stories like a journalist.

Instagram Stories are short posts—videos, graphics, or simple text—that disappear from your profile after 24 hours. Stories make it easy to share content in real time. Because they are usually less edited than other Instagram content, they have a raw and transparent quality, lending your brand that all-important authenticity.

They make the viewer feel like they're not just seeing the brand—they're experiencing it.

Luckily, Stories also require little to no preparation ahead of time. All you have to do is pull out your phone, capture the moment, and share with all of your followers—instantly.

You can also save and group your Stories into collections called Highlights, which will appear at the very top of your profile. This is a great place to emphasize the content you most want your audience to see. For example, you might build a Highlight collecting all the Stories that relate to your core values. Other Highlights might introduce your district's administrators or cover annual events like Teacher Appreciation Day.

Since they're at the top of your profile, your Highlights section may well be the first content a newcomer to your district's page sees. Whatever you decide to include in your Highlights, be sure it's tied back to your district's overarching brand. By presenting the best parts of your schools with authenticity, you can make a case for why students, families, and even new teachers should choose your district.

> You can also save and group your Stories into collections called Highlights, which will appear at the very top of your profile. This is a great place to emphasize the content you most want your audience to see.

Expand your reach with Reels.

As TikTok grew in popularity, Instagram responded with Reels: a feature that allows users to create short-form videos and apply special effects like music and filters. Because of the effects component, Reels tend to look and feel more polished than Stories. They also enable you to show your audience who you are through engaging video, rather than just telling them.

Let's look at an example:

Because the U.S. Army Base at Fort Hood falls within its boundaries, Texas' Killeen ISD serves many military families. It's a huge part of their culture. And with just a single Reel—a touching reunion between a military father and his daughter—the district communicates their concern for this part of their population.

Unlike Stories, Reels remain on your Instagram profile permanently in their own tab. But depending on the content and quality of your post, your Reel could also show up in users' Explore feed—even if they don't follow you. We won't get into the nitty gritty of the algorithm, but basically, if a user has interacted with your Instagram content (or content like it), Instagram is more likely to feed them your Reels.
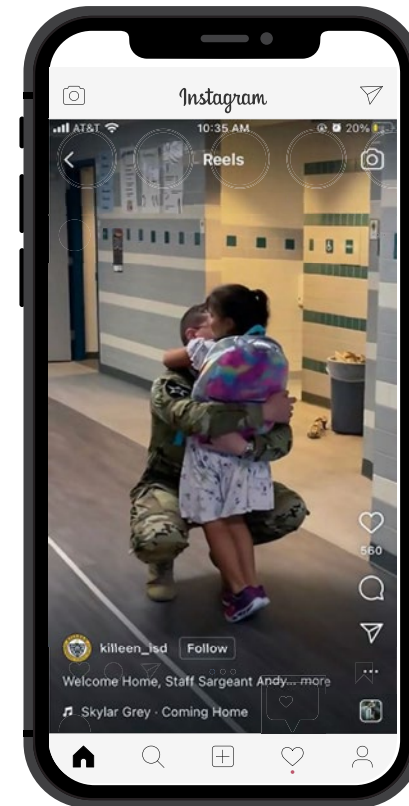
For this reason, Reels also have the potential to boost your content's reach. Killeen ISD's Reel, for example, has been viewed more than 11,000 times—even though the district's Instagram account only has about 4,000 followers. And lest you think only sentimental stories get views, check out this Reel from Washington's Sunnyside School District 201:

> Because of the effects component, Reels tend to look and feel more polished than Stories. They also enable you to show your audience who you are through engaging video, rather than just telling them.
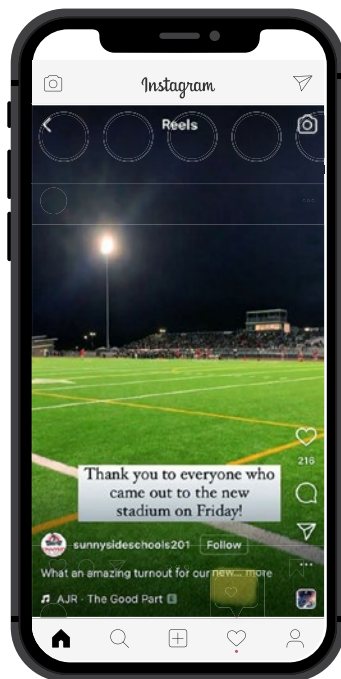
It's simple:

The camera pans up to show the district's new football stadium under the Friday night lights, while a catchy song plays in the background.

But that five-second video has garnered 9,700 views—about 12 times the district's number of Instagram followers.

Think outside the box.

Instagram offers limitless opportunities to authentically showcase your school's culture, values, and people. But don't box yourself into one Instagram strategy. Your story is constantly evolving, so your approach to Instagram should, too. Keep experimenting with new strategies, trying out new types of content, or even using features we haven't mentioned in this guide.

Remember, staying genuine is more important than getting the most views or likes. After all, authenticity comes with an added benefit: Your district's content ends up looking different than anyone else's. Anybody can post a graphic announcing a snow day or a group shot of a championship team—but no one else can showcase the special moments that make your schools unique. In a sea of content, your stories will make the biggest waves.

> Your story is constantly evolving, so your approach to Instagram should, too.

Tie Your Messaging Together with #Hashtags.

When you were young, it was simply referred to as the number or pound sign. But today the # symbol has become a cultural juggernaut, propelling brands and causes to new heights in the social media stratosphere. The hashtag has quickly taken its place for internet users of all ages as a simple and effective tool for bringing communities together online. And, believe it or not, choosing the right hashtags and strategizing their use can help you build your school brand, connect your stakeholders, and communicate important information to your community.

It may seem like an internet fad, but the hashtag isn't going away anytime soon.

> According to social media researcher Dan Zarella, tweets containing hashtags are 55% more likely to be retweeted. And Twitter's own research has found that engagement for brands that use hashtags is at least 50% higher than those that don't.

District Brand Breakdown, our 2019 SchoolCEO analysis of over 1,250 school districts' digital brands, revealed that 40% don't use hashtags at all. Of the 60% that do, only 16% use a branded hashtag consistently across all of their district media channels. If numbers like this reflect a national trend, then countless districts aren't taking advantage of this simple tool.

But a hashtag isn't as easy as just putting a # sign in front of a random word or phrase. You'll want to engage your audience with hashtags that speak to your vision and keep students front and center.

Getting Started

Originally created for use on Twitter, a hashtag is a word or phrase, without spaces, that's preceded immediately by the # symbol. Hashtags not only categorize and index topics, but also connect movements and communities online.

Fans of a television show, sports team, or political candidate can now find one another online through common hashtags—and fans of your schools can do the same. Here's some quick tips to get you started:

Step 1 - Create one hashtag to be the new online motto for your entire district. Choose something that speaks to your district's unity, vision, strength, promise, etc. For example: #NYSDTogether or #VikingStrong

Step 2 - Use your district hashtag on relevant social media posts across all platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.).

Step 3 - Encourage building leaders, teachers, and community members to use your district hashtag whenever they post.

#Unify

If you give your community a message they can rally behind, they'll do it. As you know, calling on your stakeholders as a team means using the right vocabulary—common words or phrases that unite everyone around your district brand.

When Superintendent Matt Schmidt of Michigan's Bangor Township Schools wanted to unify his district, he looked to hashtags. "When our marketing committee met for the first time, we said, Hey, we know teachers are leaving for the summer—what's one thing we can come up with and really commit to in order to keep our staff and students connected? And it was something as simple as a hashtag—so we came up with #bobcatnation to rally our community around."

Schmidt and his team don't just use their mascot-inspired hashtag on social media; they even give out #bobcatnation T-shirts to students and staff. "That has taken off like gangbusters," he tells us. "Sometimes it's the small things you don't want to miss—taking that small thing and committing to it and doing it really well. When it comes to marketing, there are a million things you could do—figure out which ones are going to get you a return on your investment, not just dollar wise, but time-wise." Sometimes marketing really can be as simple as a hashtag and a commitment to using it.

#Amplify

One of the greatest benefits to using hashtags in your social media posts is their ability to easily connect the stories you share to an overall theme. Many districts choose hashtags based around unity, strength, vision, or the future—bold, understandable themes that will earn buy-in from as many stakeholders as possible. By connecting these stories with a common hashtag, you're making sure your audience sees everything you share as part of your larger school story.

Dr. Nisha Patel, former superintendent of Fox C-6 School District in Missouri, inherited the district's #FoxC6Strong hashtag from her predecessor, but she found new ways to harness its power. "One goal was to really streamline things and make a laser-like focus on what was truly our belief as a district," she told us.

"Everybody in our district had a unique story. My communications director and I had been very strategic in sharing these stories. Every month, we would highlight a support staff individual," Patel shared. "My main, overarching goal was to increase collective efficacy in the district—meaning that if we believe our kids will be successful, they will be. We wanted to be able to amplify student voices as well as amplify our staff and community voices. And we did that by sharing stories with our #FoxC6Strong hashtag."

"We wanted to be able to amplify student voices as well as amplify our staff and community voices."

#Diversify

Hashtags may seem simple, but you can strategize their use to share a diverse array of content. Creating a story series that's connected by one common hashtag, for example, can point your audience in the right direction. Just don't overdo it. Twitter suggests using no more than two hashtags per post.

Virginia's Chesapeake Public Schools shares their most inspiring moments by creating unique hashtags for their serial posts. They use #InspireCPS to tie most district posts together, whether they're highlighting a teacher or showing off a new program. But for specific series, CPS uses hashtags like #CPSHolidayHappenings to set their posts apart and bring their community together.

In New York's Batavia City School District, former Superintendent Anibal Soler Jr. turned to hashtags to inspire hope in his community during the pandemic. The district launched #CantMasktheBataviaPride—a social media campaign which served to unify Batavia and its supporters. The district asked community members and businesses to share their support on social media by posting photos or videos of themselves with the hashtag. This didn't just inspire unity, it also amplified different stories from across the district. "We just tried to do anything we could to generate some kind of positivity," Soler says. "There was a lot of negative out there, so we were doing the best we could to keep spreading hope."

#Recap:

#Unify   your district by creating one overarching hashtag for your posts—something that ties your communications together and tells your audience who you are.

#Amplify   school and community stories by using hashtags consistently and across all platforms.

#Diversify   your posts by creating unique hashtags for serialized content or special campaigns.

TikTok for You

In her debut TikTok, Dr. Georgeanne Warnock greets her audience with her hair in a towel as she's getting ready for her day. Clearly, the superintendent from Terrell ISD in Texas isn't afraid to be real with her audience. "We are short on substitutes," she tells the camera. "We have teacher shortages. We have all of our central office out subbing. And today, I am subbing in a seventh grade class."

Warnock began the onboarding process for her new role as superintendent in January 2020, only a few weeks before COVID-19 started making headlines in the U.S. But with her community-building plans cut short by impending school closures and social distancing, Warnock knew she had to find a creative solution to connect with her community. As they scrambled to make plans over spring break of that year, Warnock and her then-Director of Communications and Marketing, Olivia Rice, both hoped that video content could help them connect with their district audience during the early days of the pandemic. Rice imagined well-lit, scripted videos filmed in Warnock's office—but the superintendent had other ideas.

"She sent me a video of herself sitting on the front porch of her rental cabin with a baseball cap on," Rice says. "I hadn't worked with her very long—I didn't know how to say, ''Absolutely not." But the more Rice watched, the more she realized the power of this authentic, vulnerable approach to messaging. "It just resonated with me so much," she explains. "And if it resonated with me, it was going to resonate with our community."

Although she originally joined TikTok to keep up with her sons, discovering videos from other educators and administrators inspired Warnock to create content of her own. So when she started subbing once a week at schools throughout her district, she used TikTok to share her experience as "The Subbing Superintendent."

In recent videos, Warnock also discusses mental health needs in schools, interview tips for aspiring teachers, and the various ways she connects with her community. Scrolling through her profile, you can also find TikToks about Warnock's personal life, including videos of her own children and how she spends quality time with her family.

Even without speaking with her face-to-face, it's easy to see that Warnock cares deeply about her community. Even more importantly, recording her growing involvement within her district's classrooms on TikTok has ultimately improved Warnock's relationships with her staff by opening new lines of communication. "Documenting my subbing journey has really shifted relationships in my classrooms," she says. "Now, teachers actually come to me and tell me their needs, and they trust that I'm going to take action."

You may associate TikTok with "devious licks" or other viral social media challenges, but as Warnock's story proves, the platform could be an extremely valuable tool for your district's communications. Like Warnock, you might even find your own voice on the trendy platform. But should you be using TikTok to engage with your community and build your district's brand?

Let's get into it.

Why TikTok?

> ...considering that its rapid growth has made it the world's seventh-most popular social media platform in terms of users, it's safe to say that TikTok is here to stay.

As you may already know from your students or even personal experience, TikTok is currently the most engaging app on the market. TikTok's average user session is 10.85 minutes—nearly four times that of Instagram. Even though Gen Z—the oldest of whom are now turning 25—uses the platform more than any other group, over half of all active users are over 30. Chances are, a surprising number of students, teachers, and parents in your district are on the app. And considering that its rapid growth has made it the world's seventh-most popular social media platform in terms of users, it's safe to say that TikTok is here to stay.

As a school leader, you've weathered immeasurable challenges over the past couple of years. As your families and faculty learned to navigate in-person and remote learning in tandem, you probably began relying on online communication and social media more than ever. Visibility and accessibility online aren't just essential for building and maintaining your district's current relationships—they're also crucial for marketing your schools to potential families and teachers.

The marketing industry also underwent some pretty dramatic changes during the height of the pandemic. According to research from social content marketing platform Stackla, consumers increasingly began

favoring intensely authentic brands that embrace imperfections and the messiness of life, rather than conventional "perfect and packaged" brands. We probably don't have to tell you that appearing relatable during chaotic times is better than appearing unfazed. And because TikTok is so personal and informal, it could help you create a casual, low-risk space for your community to engage with your content. All you need is a little creativity and a desire to play.

Play is a powerful aid for reinforcing positive associations with your schools, promoting your district's culture, and cultivating authenticity. Although it might seem ambiguous, it's actually pretty simple: Incorporating play is the same thing as incorporating fun. According to researcher Paul Lopushinsky, an expert in creating positive work cultures, play in the workspace, classroom, and other traditionally formal spaces is associated with higher engagement, bonding, solidarity, and a decreased sense of hierarchy. So, when schools incorporate TikTok into their marketing repertoires, they're diversifying their online communications toolkit to include play—and play, in turn, increases a brand's authenticity.

Simply put, highly authentic brands are transparent and emotionally available to consumers. They're also clever, engaging, and playful. With a little patience and consistency, TikTok could help show your community just how genuine and enjoyable your schools are.

Is TikTok Right for You?

As much as we love to see schools get creative on TikTok, it's also important to consider whether the platform is right for your district before diving in. Even though TikTok is user-friendly and free, using the app successfully comes with its own set of challenges.

For example, learning how to create a high volume of quality content is difficult. And because TikTok rewards frequent posters with higher visibility, posting sporadically won't get you very far.

In fact, Kate Rodriguez from Digital Marketing News claims that for growing businesses and brands, "it is a good general rule of thumb to post a minimum of one time per day."

Depending on your particular goals, posting everyday may not be necessary, but be aware that you probably need to share content at least weekly.

> Keeping up with current trends is time-consuming and requires a certain degree of social media literacy.

If you aren't using social media frequently, it's difficult to be "in on the joke" in time to produce engaging content. More than likely, you'll need additional help from your staff, faculty, or even students to keep your account active and current. If your district is well-resourced, you may already have a point person for your

socials. But if your district is unable to designate a specific position for managing your online presence, you might end up relying on staff and students who are already spread too thin. Your time, your staff's time, and your students' time are all valuable and need to be considered when weighing the pros and cons of pursuing TikTok.

It may also be a good idea to ask whether your students and parents are interested in consuming information through videos, especially in TikTok's format. TikToks are designed to be short and sweet, but maybe you've learned through experience that your community engages more with long-form videos on your Facebook page or website. Perhaps your families are more responsive to newsletters than videos. In these cases, it may be best to consult with other administrators or staff about whether or not to create a TikTok account. Your faculty knows students and parents better than anyone else; lean on their expertise.

You can also join TikTok without posting content to see whether it will be a good communication option for your district. Acclimate yourself to the platform, see how other educators use it, and decide whether it's right for your schools. If it's not a good fit right now, consider revisiting this conversation next year. But if you do make the decision to dive in, the sooner you get started, the better.

Ready to Get Started?

Although TikTok may feel more intimidating than some other social media platforms, its features are intuitive and beginner-friendly; more than 80% of users have posted at least one video. TikTok's format also inherently minimizes barriers between creators and viewers, helping you cultivate strong connections between your district and your community. And for better or worse, with consistency, TikTok's highly sophisticated algorithm will help your content reach your desired audience, especially if you encourage your community to "follow" you.

Perhaps the most attractive feature of TikTok is the "For You" page (or FYP)—the first page you see when you open the app. This is the endless feed of videos produced by creators you may or may not know, about topics you may or may not be interested in. When you "follow" creators or "like" videos, you tell the algorithm what kind of content you like to see.

According to Christina Newberry from social media management platform Hootsuite, the algorithm functions as a recommendation system, in which "no two users will see the
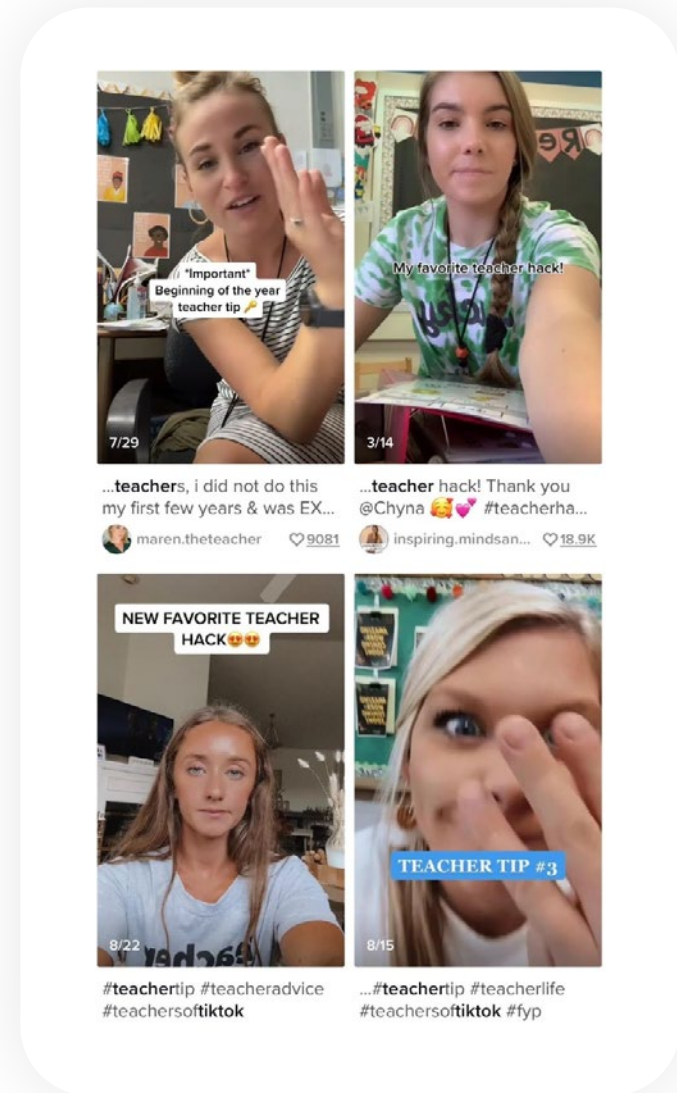
same videos…and the videos you see might change over time based on your viewing preferences." Because of this, any video has the potential to go viral; as long as the content is interesting and engaging, it can end up on anyone's FYP.

If you don't already know how to create and upload a video to TikTok, we recommend you start with TikTok support either online or through the app. Plenty of other guides are also available from sources like Hootsuite, Wired, and YouTube.

> Being intentional, consistent, and genuine with your presence on TikTok is undoubtedly the most important thing to consider.

We also recommend that you explore the app and get comfortable interacting with others' videos before you start creating content of your own. This is a great opportunity to see what's trending at the moment, and to get an idea of what to expect once you start posting. It's also not a bad idea to explore the non-education side of TikTok.

Take notes; investigate what makes successful content and what flops. Then, once you're ready to start sharing your content on TikTok, consider following some of these tips:

1. Use trending music or "sounds" in your TikToks.

Music and sounds are at the heart of TikTok, and using them appropriately and cleverly can make your videos sing. Think of music and sounds as inside jokes; the better— and timelier—the execution, the greater the response.

2. Talk about where you are.

We don't know much about TikTok's super secret algorithm, but we do know that it works to show you local content along with general content. As you can imagine, this is particularly helpful for small businesses, but you can make the algorithm work for your schools, too. Mention your location—like your school, city, state, or region—in your videos and captions. And remember: Hashtags are your friends!

3. Explore TikTok for Business.

TikTok offers a comprehensive website—TikTok for Business—detailing how to use the platform to your brand's advantage and promote your organization to your target audience. The site provides details about paid advertisements, as well as information on how to increase visibility without paid ads. Even if you're not interested in ads, we highly recommend exploring the site's blog for tips on marketing.

4. Incorporate student voices.

Your students are your best storytellers. Allowing them to share unscripted joys and successes about your schools is the key to building an authentic brand. Your students will also likely be in touch with current TikTok trends, helping your content stay relevant while providing the opportunity for spontaneity.

5. Don't delete videos—even if they flop.

Many creators suspect that deleting videos may result in a "shadowban," in which the algorithm begins to hide your content from audiences that you would otherwise reach. Shadowbans are designed to deter spammers and trolls, who frequently upload and delete content strategically. Fortunately, knowing that you shouldn't delete videos requires you to critically examine your content prior to posting. Before you upload, make sure you're confident in what you're saying and how you're saying it.

Being intentional, consistent, and genuine with your presence on TikTok is undoubtedly the most important thing to consider. Like Warnock says, "try to be mindful about maintaining authenticity, and keep it real." Whether you personally create content or encourage your teachers and students to post videos, the benefits are substantial. Take this as a sign— maybe TikTok is for you.

Final Thoughts on Social Media

It's safe to say that social media is no passing fad. It's become ingrained in nearly every facet of our culture, both at home and abroad. Gone are the days of wondering whether or not social media can impact our lives. We see that impact everyday, for better or worse, and the future certainly holds new platforms, trends, and connections we can't yet predict.

So, is it necessary to use social media to market your schools? That's for you to decide. But necessary or not—social media is inevitable. Your community is already using it to connect to the brands and organizations that mean the most to them. Shouldn't you be using this opportunity to tell the story of your schools? To build the kind of advocacy any successful school district needs, sharing your good work far and wide is integral. Simply put, social media has the potential to be a game changer when it comes to recruiting new teachers, staff, and students.

It's also important not to forget the power you yield with a solid social media strategy. Utilizing each platform's unique tools and metrics can help you cater your messages to the exact audiences you're wanting to reach. Furthermore, using social media to its full potential gives you the ability to tie multiple kinds of messages, across multiple campuses, back to your overall district brand.

In-depth, original research and content like **The SchoolCEO Guide to Social Media** is at the core of our work.

For more information, or to stay in the loop about upcoming projects, visit **www.schoolceo.com**

Epilogue:
Where Social Media Falls Short

We've covered the advantages of using social media to connect with families and staff, share stories, or build your brand identity—but there are many things social media still can't do. Are you putting the same amount of care and attention into your website? Where can parents find your ADA policy, parking permits, or bus schedules? What about your calendar, enrollment forms, or career opportunities? Your community should be able to find all this information—and anything else that doesn't quite belong on social media—by visiting your website.

Here, we'll explore the areas where social media falls short and make the case for prioritizing your district website as your most important communication resource.

Brand Management

There's no doubt that social media can be extremely advantageous for building your district's brand. Posting photos of pep rallies, talent shows, and athletic events is a great way to generate positive associations with your district's name. It also gives your families the opportunity to share your content with their own personal networks. But while this process of sharing and being shared is important for establishing your brand, social media is not always the appropriate place to share other information that your families, staff, and prospective employees need.

For example, it's probably not practical to share printable PDFs of registration documents to your socials. Instead, you might post a photo from last year's first day of school, captioned with a reminder of an approaching registration deadline and a link to—you guessed it—a "Documents" page on your website. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are great tools, but at the end of the day, your website is the core of your brand identity. Whenever possible, you should be using social media to redirect people to your site.

Unlike social media, your website can tell the whole story of your district's brand at one time, in one place rather than piece by piece as content is sorted through an algorithm. On your website, visitors aren't distracted by content from other accounts or pages. In other words, your website can illustrate the totality of your district's brand, culture, and values without engaging in overly performative behavior to boost likes—as you might feel inclined to do on social media.

Exclusion

When you make your socials primary sources for necessary information, you may unintentionally be blocking families who don't use social media. Even though it seems like everyone's online these days, 28% of adults don't use social media at all, according to Pew Research Center. That means that if you're using Facebook and Twitter as your primary communication channels, you're leaving a considerable portion of your community in the dark. Plus, features like Facebook groups may impose additional degrees of exclusion, especially if invitations are required in order to view or interact with content.

That's where your website comes in handy. There, anyone with internet access can browse your content without needing to create an account. And as consumers become increasingly concerned about privacy, data tracking, and social media's impacts on mental health, your website can be a safe and secure space for your district's families.

Control

Even though social media platforms have a range of advantages and rewards, they're still third-party communications tools and should be treated as such. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter will always have the last say over what content can or cannot be shared on their platforms, who sees what information, and which stories or posts take priority. All of these variables are beyond your control. But on your district's website, you decide where and in what order your information appears. Websites also offer districts a broader range of customizability than social media platforms do; at a glance, your socials may not look much different than those of competing districts.

> ...social media can also be a highly toxic space, and your families should not be forced to interact with these platforms to access information about your district.

Your website is also a place where your community can find information without the excessive noise of social media. For better or worse, your district's socials might draw a lot of attention, which could invite trolls and conflict into your online spaces. And if your socials become spammed with irrelevant comments and

counterproductive dialogue from community members or outsiders looking in, you may lose control over your district's narrative indefinitely. This, in turn, could compromise your district's reputation.

Social media is a powerful force that brings communities together by diminishing barriers between individuals and groups across time and space. It allows you to share information and stories about your schools playfully, in a way that has the potential to increase community engagement with your content. But social media can also be a highly toxic space, and your families should not be forced to interact with these platforms to access information about your district.

The goal here isn't to scare you out of using social media. Rather, we encourage you to utilize social media as one of many communications tools—as opposed to relying on social media as your primary platform. Families should trust that they can follow your socials for content about your schools, but Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter should never replace your district's website.

When families need to find lunch menus, details about after-school programs, or course catalogs, they should be able to find that information all in one place online. And they shouldn't need to take on privacy risks, sign up for an account, or accept an invitation to access it.

We don't mean to imply, though, that managing a website is a piece of cake. Each element of your total marketing and communications strategy takes quite a bit of thought, effort, and time. But in the end, your website provides you and your families with a sense of security, control, and functionality that social media can't offer. It's your website—not Facebook—that should be the end-all-be-all source of information about your district.