



This study examined how 135 New York State school districts used their websites to communicate and establish relationships with key stakeholders. Organizational websites ranged from basic information repositories to highly dynamic sites with information and features.

Strategic Communication Tactics of New York State School District Websites

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1. Introduction

This study examined how 135 New York State school districts used their websites to communicate and establish relationships with key stakeholders. Organizational websites can range from basic information repositories to highly dynamic sites with information and features that respond to questions, concerns or problems.

Broadly, this study examined school district websites for:

- Navigational tools
- Content variety
- Content about current educational topics
- Board of education information
- Financial information
- Key stakeholder information
- Leadership communication
- Social media links

This is a follow-up study to the 2003 “Establishing a Typology of New York State School District Web Site Home Pages from a Public Relations Perspective,” <http://www.utica.edu/instadvance/marketingcomm/news/index.cfm?featureaction=detail&id=276&archive=39> that looked at some of the same communication features, but the 2014 study expanded into leadership communication, board of education information, financial information and social media.

The study’s purpose is to describe how school districts are communicating through their websites. It also provides some suggestions to think more strategically about its communication.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sampling Frame

The sampling frame for this study came from a list of New York State school districts listed alphabetically on the State Education Department’s Elementary, Middle, Secondary and Continuing Education Web site. A stratified systematic sample was used. Each district’s website was located by entering the district’s name into the Google Internet search engine. New York City was excluded in this study because of its unique organizational structure that includes 10 regional school zones containing approximately 120 schools within each zone. Other large cities, known as the big four (Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Albany), were not part of the sampling frame. The sampling frame is available for review in Appendix A.

2.2 Population Characteristics

This study analyzed the characteristics of 135 (19%) New York State public school districts’ websites. Using the classifications used in the previous 2003 study, 9% (12) were classified as urban; 62% were classified as suburban (84) and 29% (39) were classified as rural.

Type of District	Count of
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	Type
Urban	12
Suburban	84
Rural	39
Grand Total	135

2.3 Content Analysis – A content analysis was used to examine the data. The researcher developed a 75-item coding book which is available for review in Appendix B. The raw data file is available in Excel by contacting Patricia Swann at pswann@utica.edu.

2.4 Coding

The unit of analysis was the school district’s website. Coding items were located by reviewing site links and searching for coding items using the site’s search engine and site map. The presence or absence of different features and types of content was recorded, but no interpretation of the substantive meanings of the features or page content was made, except in the school leadership communication segment that looked for educational themes.

Coding for Website Search Engine Optimization: Each district’s name was typed into the Google search engine and tested for Google search results. Districts listed on the first page of results were considered “optimized.”

Coding for Navigational Elements – The presence of website internal search engines and site maps (also called A to Z), were included in this study. Internal search engines make it easier for users to find what they are looking for by typing in keywords to locate information within the site. This makes sense, as many sites can be hundreds of pages. An internal search engine that is built into a website generally uses the same architecture as an external search engine, such as Google.com.

The presence of a website map, which is a visual representation of the website, was included. Site maps resemble a basic table of contents and show the navigational path of hyperlinks within a site. It is sometimes referred to as “A to Z” information.

A “home” button to help users easily navigate back to the home page was also recorded.

Other navigational issues on the home page included the use of a main menu bar, usually found at or near the top of the page, or the use of quick links, usually found on the left side of the home page.

The study examined the “fit to screen” to determine if the home page generally fit within a screen, eliminating excessive scrolling.

Coding for Homepage Segmentation of Publics – Each website district homepage was coded for the presence of constructed areas or sections that were devoted to specific publics: students, parents, teachers/staff, alumni, community/residents, prospective employees, and journalists. This coding included segmentation on the website’s main navigational menu bar or special section areas of the site that had either the exact description of these groups or analogous terms.

Coding for District Contact Information – Items included: district’s postal address, telephone phone number, and staff directory with names and contact information (telephone or email), central administration names with email address, and district email address.

Coding for Content Variety -- The district websites were coded for the presence of 75 content items. A content variety score was developed by assigning one point to each of the 75 items audited on school district websites. These items range from the presence of the school lunch menu to information about the anti-bullying legislation/school policy. Individual items are outlined in the codebook.

Coding for General District Information & Information Freshness – General district information was operationalized as the presence of a district profile, mission/vision statement. Information freshness included the presence of a calendar/upcoming events (with dates from August 2013 forward) and news announcements (with items dates from August 2013 forward and district newsletter (dated from May 2013 forward).

Coding for Current Educational Topics – This study looked for the presence of specific information about six current educational topics:

- Assessment related to the New York State Education Department’s Report Cards
- Assessment related to Common Core in generic terms, such as the presence of NYSED’s site Engage, or specific information relating to how the district was dealing with Common Core issues.
- Assessment related information about APPR, Annual Professional Performance Review, provided by outside organizations such as NYSED or parent-specific information about how parents could obtain the district’s state approved plan or how to obtain information about APPR ratings.
- Anti-bullying information provided by other organizations such as the NYSED or information provided about the district’s anti-bullying policies, reporting process, etc.
- Safety issues such as a school safety plan, safety tips for Internet safety, etc.
- Concussion management information provided by outside organizations such as ImPact and information provided by the district about its own concussion management policies, etc.

Coding for Parent Information: Parents are probably the most important public for school districts and are the most likely to seek out information on the district’s website. This study looked for the presence of the following items: Academic information (classroom updates, class descriptions/academic program information - excludes guidance, B2S); back to school information (information packaged specifically for back-to-school needs); parent/student portal link, bus routes, school lunch menu, special education, guidance information (grad requirements, testing dates, contact info, curriculum updates, etc.), nurse/health office information, school policies (such as a student handbook), sports (such as game schedules, forms for participation, tryouts, etc.), extracurricular/club information, new student registration, and parent organization links (such as PTA, PTO, etc.)

Coding for School District Leadership Communication – This study looked for website messages from the school superintendent and high school principal. The thematic categories included: assessment/NYSED report cards, assessment/Common Core, assessment/APPR, Anti-Bullying issues, safety issues, general welcome back to school, a mixture of themes and other topics. Only biographical documents were not included.

Coding for Board of Education Information – Three items in this category included the names of current board members, upcoming meetings and meeting minutes.

Coding for Financial Information – This study looked for the presence of school financial information on websites. One financial item was required. Financial information could include tax or budget information (excluding STAR information). Next, the study looked for the presence of two or more school budget items such as working or past budget documents, budget newsletters, budget fact sheets, etc. Finally, the study examined websites for the presence of information about the STAR school tax exemption program, such as links for application forms or deadline formation.

Coding for Employment Information – School district job announcements and information related to how to apply for positions (application forms or a link to a application site) were sought.

Coding for Alumni Information – Information about alumni was coded including alumni directories, alumni information such as upcoming reunions or information about alumni, and alumni newsletters.

Coding for Marketing Information – Information tailored to the needs of journalists included news release archives, image galleries (such as high resolution photos, logos, etc.) and a full-blown newsroom that contains multiple items (such as a news release archive, image gallery, media contacts, district profile information).

Coding for Social Media – This study coded for links to district social media platforms including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, leadership blog, and Flickr.

2.5 Reliability and Validity

No research project is perfect and this is no exception. This study used one researcher to code all of the websites, which limits its reliability since unintentional or intentional researcher bias can skew results. To counteract this potential problem, each district's home page and high school home page were digitally archived with Snagit (TechSmith) software. Additional web pages were captured as needed to illustrate certain coding items, which are available for public viewing. In addition, coding items and their definitions are outlined in the study's codebook and the Excel sheet that contains the raw data is available for public review by contacting the researcher Patricia Swann at pswann@utica.edu. The district data files also are available through the researcher.

As a disclaimer, the author of this study was employed for 10 years as a public relations director of the Oneida-Herkimer-Madison Board of Cooperative Educational Services and a former member of the New York School Public Relations Association. It is always possible that a subconscious bias may have crept into the design and data collection process.

For validity, audit items were developed by the researcher based on a review of the literature and public relations practices. Items were piloted to groups of parents and other users, including Board of Cooperative Educational Services Regional Information Center staff.

3.0 Results

3.1 Website Search Engine Optimization

This study examined 135 New York State public school districts (excluding large city districts). Each district (100%) had an operational website which was fully search engine optimized (SEO), which meant its name/link appeared at or near the top of search results in a Google search when the districts full name was entered into the search bar.

3.2 Navigational Features

This study looked at how easy it was to find information on district websites by the presence of internal search engines, site maps, home buttons/ page "crumbs", main navigational pull-down menu bars, and building/grade level links. Related to the idea of finding information on the homepage was if information generally fit on a screen as opposed to excessive scrolling.

Internal search engine: Eighty-one percent of districts had internal search engines. Low needs and average needs districts (83%) were the most likely to have internal search engines followed by high needs urban/suburban districts (78%) and high needs rural districts (76%).

Site map/index: Forty-five percent of districts had site maps. Average needs districts (48%) were most likely to have this feature followed by high needs rural districts (45%), low needs districts (42%) and high needs urban/suburban (22%).

Home button: Ninety-five percent of districts featured home navigational buttons on pages. Low needs school districts (100%) were the most likely to have navigational home buttons followed by high needs rural districts (97%), average needs districts (93%), and high needs urban/suburban (89%).

Homepage navigational bar: Ninety-five percent of districts had a homepage navigational bar with pull-down menus. High needs rural districts (100%) were the most likely to have homepage navigational bars with pull-down menus followed by low needs rural districts (97%), high needs urban/suburban and average needs districts (89%).

Links to district buildings: Eighty-seven percent of districts had building/grade links from their homepage. High needs urban/suburban districts (100%) were the most likely to have this feature followed by low needs districts (96%), average needs districts (86%) and high needs rural districts (79%).

Information fits on screen: Sixty-eight percent of districts homepages did not require excessive scrolling to view page items. Rural high needs districts were the most likely to format information to fit to the homepage screen (79%), followed by high needs urban/suburban (78%), average needs districts (70%) and low needs districts (42%).

	N-RC				
Navigational Features	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
Search Engine	78%	76%	83%	83%	81%
Site Map	22%	45%	48%	42%	45%
Home Button	89%	97%	93%	100%	95%
Main Navigational Menu	89%	100%	89%	96%	93%
Building/Grade Level Links	100%	79%	86%	96%	87%
Homepage Fits on Screen	78%	79%	70%	42%	68%

Discussion: Most districts are doing a good job of providing navigational tools and features for users to locate information on their websites. One feature, the site map, was used less frequently (45%). Site maps are visual representations of the website's organization. Some districts refer to their site maps as "A to Z" which shows page or section names alphabetically. Some districts continue to overload their homepages with information which causes excessive scrolling (defined here as about one or more screen lengths beyond the initial screen) which makes it difficult to find information easily.

Recommendations: Probably the most important navigational feature for a district is its internal search engine. Districts that do not have this feature should add it so that users can find the information they need quickly. Districts should also add site maps so that users who are unfamiliar with the proper search terms can possibly find what they are looking for from a range of terms or subjects. The excessive scrolling issue can be easily remedied by using hyperlinks. When attached to terms or phrases, (often colored blue and underlined) users can click on the hyperlinked material and be connected to a new page of material.

3.3 Homepage Segmentation of Publics

The concept of publics is important to effective organizational communication and relationship building. A public exists when it has an interest in the organization and/or is affected by the actions of the organization. Publics can be active, aroused, aware, and inactive. Every organization has stakeholder publics who can positively or negatively affect the organization's ability to meet its mission. Strategic organizations identify, establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with these groups on which the success/survival of the organization depends. Those key relationships can be established and maintained by frequent communication (one way from sender to receiver) and dialog (two way between the organization and the public).

This study chose the following stakeholder publics for their traditional importance to school districts. All of these publics have the potential to assert their power in positive and negative ways.

- Students
- Parents/guardians/new
- Staff/teachers/employees
- Alumni
- Prospective employees
- Journalists
- Community members (taxpayers, business owners, non-parents, etc.)

Data Analysis:

This study examined the district's home page main menu bar, usually located at the top of the page or on the left side, to see if a tab had been established for any of the stakeholder publics. Segmenting target publics such as students, parents and employees allows districts to create "neighborhoods" for these groups so that information can be efficiently delivered and tailored to their needs in one easy-to-find location. Information that might apply to more than one group can be easily duplicated within tabs. District websites can provide useful and dynamic information to various publics that build understanding and strengthen ties to these publics.

Segmentation of publics on district homepage – The most common public that school districts segmented for on their website homepage was parents (48%) followed by staff/teachers (47%), community (44%), students (34%), alumni (12%), prospective employees (6%); school districts in the sample did not provide a main menu navigation bar tab for journalists.

	N-RC				
Home Page - Publics	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
Students	56%	39%	32%	25%	34%
Parents	56%	52%	45%	50%	48%
Staff/Teachers	56%	58%	42%	42%	47%
Community	44%	55%	42%	33%	44%
Alumni	11%	18%	13%	0%	12%
Prospective Employee	0%	6%	8%	0%	6%
Journalist	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Home Page Parent Tab – Forty-eight percent of the school districts had a tab on their main navigation bar for parents. High needs urban/suburban districts were more likely to

have a tab for parents (56%) followed by rural high needs districts (52%), low needs districts (50%) and average needs districts (45%).

Home Page Students Tab – Thirty-four percent of the school districts had a tab on their main navigation bar for students. High needs urban/suburban districts were more likely to have a tab for parents (56%) followed by high needs rural districts (39%), average needs districts (32%) and low needs districts (25%).

Home Page Teacher/Staff Tab – Forty-seven percent of the school districts had a tab on their main navigation bar for teachers/staff. High needs rural districts were more likely to have a tab for parents (58%) followed by high needs urban/suburban districts (56%), low needs districts (42%) and average needs districts (42%).

Home Page Community Tab – Forty-four percent of the school districts had a tab on their main navigation bar for parents. High needs rural districts were more likely to have a tab for community (55%) followed by high needs urban/suburban districts (44%), average needs districts (42%) and low needs districts (33%).

Home Page Alumni Tab – Twelve percent of the school districts had a tab on their main navigation bar for alumni. High needs rural districts were more likely to have a tab for parents (18%) followed by high needs urban/suburban districts (11%), average needs districts (13%); low needs districts did not segment for alumni on its homepage (0%).

Home Page Prospective Employees Tab – Six percent of the school districts had a tab on their main navigation bar for prospective employees. Average needs districts were more likely to have a tab for community (8%) followed by high needs rural districts (6%); high needs urban/suburban districts and low needs districts did not segment for this public.

Home Page Journalists Tab – None of the school districts had a tab on its main navigation bar for journalists or a tab for a newsroom.

Discussion:

Many school districts did attempt to segment information for parents (48%), teachers/staff (47%), community (44%) and students (34%) by providing a tab on the main navigation bar on its homepage. Also common were tabs for schools (buildings), administration, board of education and athletics, although this study did not capture this information specifically. It's important that a district's key publics have a prominent place to find information on its homepage so that they are more easily engaged with what the district is trying to communicate with them. Districts may have many helpful information items available on their websites but if they are not located in one easy-to-find location, most users will not take the time to do searches. Segmentation of publics also conveys the recognition that different groups of people have different informational needs that an organization can meet by providing tailored information. Information for prospective employees (6%) was not always easy to find, although job postings and application forms were readily available on district websites.

Recommendations:

Districts who are not already segmenting their key publics should consider doing so to build and maintain positive relationships with these groups. Those districts already segmenting their publics should continue to add new and compelling information for them based on their particular needs. Those needs can be determined by surveys or other user feedback mechanisms. Districts wishing to attract top talent should make it easier to find the necessary information on their website's homepage. Also, school districts should consider packaging information for journalists (news archive, photo/video gallery, story ideas, contact information, etc.) See Appendix C for specific information that could be developed for key stakeholders.

3.4 Contact Information

This study looked to see if school district websites provided basic contact information in the form of a mailing address, telephone number, staff telephone/email directory and an administrative directory (for this study, combined staff and administrative directories were counted in both categories). The district's mailing address, telephone number and email had to be visible on the homepage and not linked to another page to be counted. Directories were linked documents off the homepage.

Data Analysis:

District's postal address: Ninety percent of districts had a mailing address available on their district homepage. High needs urban/suburban districts (100%) were more likely to provide this information followed by low needs districts (92%), and average needs districts and high needs rural districts (88%).

District's telephone number: Ninety percent of districts provided a main telephone number on their homepage. High needs urban/suburban districts (100%) were most likely to provide this information followed by low needs districts (92%), average districts (88%), and high needs rural districts (88%).

District Staff Directories: Districts that provided staff directories with either telephone or e-mail addresses were counted. Overall 83% of districts provided staff directories. Average needs districts (88%) were most likely to provide this information followed by low needs districts (79%), high needs urban/suburban (78%) and high needs rural districts (76%).

Central administration directories: Districts that distinguished between staff and central administration directories were counted. If districts combined central administration within a staff directory, both were counted separately for this study. Fifty-nine percent of districts provided a central administration directory of contact information. Low needs districts (71%) were most likely to provide this information followed by high needs urban/suburban (67%), average needs districts (61%), and high needs rural districts (45%).

	N-RC				
Contact Information	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
District Address	100%	88%	90%	92%	90%
District Telephone	100%	88%	88%	92%	90%
Staff directory	78%	76%	88%	79%	83%
Central Administration Directory	67%	45%	61%	71%	59%

Discussion:

Most districts did a good job of providing contact information for their constituencies. Districts were less likely to organize contact information for the district's central administration which includes contact information for the superintendent, finance officer, and all of the program directors such as the program director of special education services.

Recommendations:

As noted, school districts are doing a good job of providing basic contact information for their constituencies. Districts may want to think about the way they organize information

so that key decision makers, such as administrators and directors, can be easily contacted. While this study did not distinguish between types of directory information (telephone versus email) it is better to include both types.

3.5 Content Variety Score

District websites, at the very least, are massive archives of information. To get a better idea of the variety and amount of information provided on the district websites, a content variety score was developed by assigning one point to each of the 75 items audited on school district websites (Appendix B Coding Book contains all the content items).

Data Analysis

There were 75 items audited on this study's school district websites from lunch menus to concussion management information. Content included 75 items and the highest score with 55 with four school districts scoring at that point. Scores ranged from 19 to 55 with the average content variety score 38.13. At the lowest end, seven school districts reported scores of just 20-25 content items. The majority of schools scored between 30-50 with the mean score 38.13; median 39; and the mode 40. The wealth of the district did not provide any additional advantage for basic content variety. Low needs districts had the highest content variety score (39.38) followed by average needs districts (38.78) and high needs urban/suburban districts (36.67) and high needs rural districts (36.27). The size of the district did not affect the content variety score either. While this study did not examine the quality of the information provided, it does indicate that poorer districts were not disadvantaged in the variety and amount of information available to its publics.

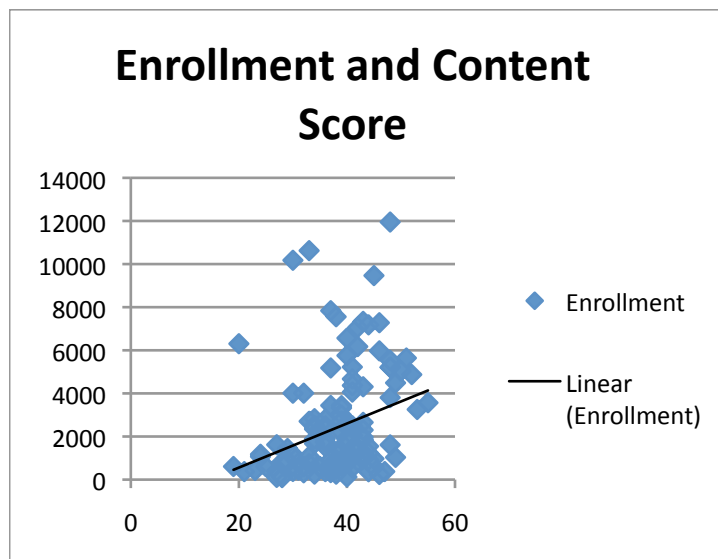
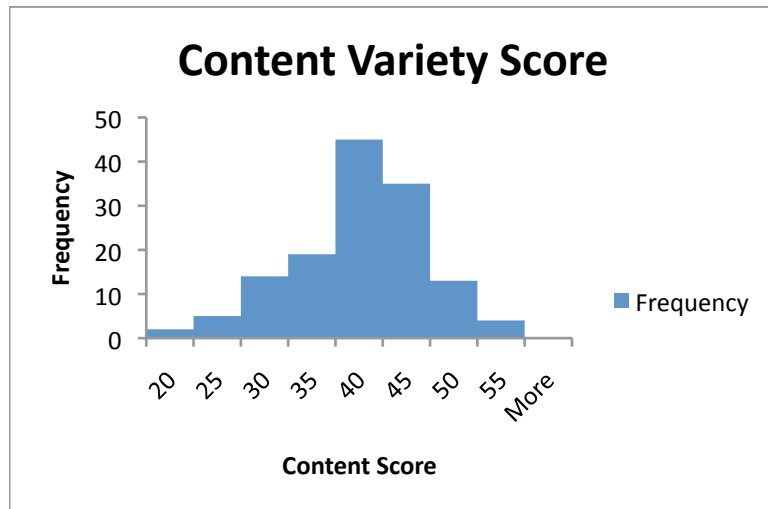
Content Score

Mean	38.13
Standard Error	0.60
Median	39.00
Mode	40.00
Standard Deviation	6.92
Sample Variance	47.91
Kurtosis	0.21
Skewness	-0.36
Range	36.00
Minimum	19.00
Maximum	55.00
Sum	5148.00
Count	135.00

Table: District Wealth and Website Content Variety

N-RC	Average Content Score
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1.00	36.67
2.00	36.27
3.00	38.78
4.00	39.38
Grand Total	38.13



Content Score: The majority of schools scored between 30-50 with the mean score 38.20; median 39; and the mode 40. Content included 75 items and the highest score with 55 with hour school districts scoring at that point. At the lowest end, seven school districts reported scores of just 20-25 content items.

3.6 General District Information & Information Freshness

This study examined the type of general information available about a district including a district profile (“about us”) and a mission/vision statement. Information freshness

(currency of information) was determined by the presence of an event calendar, news/announcements, and a newsletter(s).

Data Analysis:

District profile: Forty-four percent of districts had a section that included general information about the districts, sometimes called a “district profile” or “about us.” Average needs districts (54%) were most likely to have this information followed by high needs urban/suburban districts (44%), low needs districts (38%) and high needs rural districts (30%).

Mission/vision statement: Sixty-one percent of districts included their mission and/or vision statements. High needs urban/suburban districts (67%) were most likely to have this information followed by average needs districts (62%), high needs urban/suburban (61%) and low needs districts (54%).

Calendar/upcoming events: This study looked for current calendars of events and found that 100% were available on district websites.

News announcements: Nearly all districts (98%) had news announcements on their homepages. High needs rural districts (91%) were slightly less likely to have this information.

District newsletter: Sixty-one percent of districts had a recent newsletter (back to school budget, etc.) on their websites. High needs urban/suburban districts (78%) were more likely to have this information followed by high needs rural districts (64%), low needs districts (63%) and average needs districts (58%).

	N-RC				
General Information	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
Profile	44%	30%	54%	38%	44%
Mission	67%	61%	62%	54%	61%
Calendar	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
News/Announcements	100%	91%	100%	100%	98%
Newsletter	78%	64%	58%	63%	61%

Discussion:

Nearly all districts had calendar of events and news announcements on their district homepages and this information was current. It is important to have current information to encourage return users. Districts were less likely to provide district profiles (44%) and mission statements (61%). This information is important to users unfamiliar with the district, including journalists.

Recommendations:

Districts should consider adding a district profile to their website that contains the history of the district and current enrollment and other descriptive statistical information. Other unique features about the district should be noted. Districts should consider adding their mission statements and providing an archive of their district newsletters or e-newsletters.

3.7 Content: Current Educational Topics

The following current educational topics were examined for their presence on the school district website, which was operationalized as a topic that had its own web page or a web page link to downloadable material(s). Topics were chosen based on the prevalence in the news and educational media in 2013.

Data Analysis:

Table: District Assessment Information Available on School District Websites Summarized by N-RC

	N-RC				
Educational Topics	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
NYSED Report Cards	33%	27%	59%	83%	54%
Common Core - Non District Specific	67%	55%	65%	58%	61%
Common Core - District specific	22%	15%	17%	8%	16%
APPR - District Plan	33%	73%	68%	71%	67%
APPR - Parent Specific	11%	12%	23%	38%	22%
DASA - Non District Specific	56%	48%	54%	50%	52%
DASA - District Specific	44%	55%	48%	54%	50%
Safety - General	11%	21%	38%	29%	30%
Concussion - Non District	33%	39%	45%	58%	45%
Concussion - District Specific	11%	24%	28%	42%	28%

Assessment (NYSED Report Cards): Fifty-four percent of school districts had information or links to information about the NYSED Report Cards. High needs districts (urban/suburban and rural) were less likely to provide this information (33% and 27% respectively) than average to low needs districts (59% and 83% respectively.)

Common Core – Not Specific to District: Sixty-one percent of school districts carried information about the new Common Core standards. Many school districts provided the NYSED Engage New York informational multimedia site (<https://www.engageny.org/>). High needs urban/suburban districts were more likely to have this information (67%) followed by average needs districts (65%), low needs districts (58%) and high needs rural districts (55%).

Common Core – Specific to District: Sixteen percent of school districts carried information about the new Common Core standards that was customized to the school district. High needs urban/suburban districts were more likely to have this information (22%) followed by average needs districts (17%), high needs rural districts (15%) and low needs districts (8%).

APPR – Not Specific to District: Sixty-seven percent of school districts carried general information about the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) for rating the effectiveness of teachers and principals in New York State. The New York State law first required school districts to submit plans and then begin evaluating teachers and principals in the 2013-14 school year. Much of this content was APPR state approved plans for evaluating staff. High needs rural districts were more likely to have this information (73%) followed by low needs districts (71%), average needs districts (68%), and high needs urban/suburban districts (33%).

APPR – Parent Specific to District: Twenty-two percent of school districts carried parent-specific information about the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) for rating the effectiveness of teachers and principals in New York State. The New York State law first required school districts to submit plans and then begin evaluating teachers and

principals in the 2013-14 school year. Information that explained the APPR system directly to parents or provided step-by-step information on how to obtain APPR information was counted. Low needs districts (38%) were more likely to have this information followed by average needs districts (23%), high needs rural districts (12%) and high needs urban/suburban districts (11%).

DASA (Anti-Bullying) – Not Specific to District: Fifty-two percent of school districts carried information about the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA), a New York State 2010 anti-bullying law (which took effect in 2012) that was not specific to the school district. High needs urban/suburban districts were more likely to have this information (56%) followed by average needs districts (54%), low needs districts (50%), and high needs rural districts (48%).

DASA (Anti-Bullying) – Specific to District – Fifty percent of school districts carried information about the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA), a New York State 2010 anti-bullying law (which took effect in 2012) that was specific to the school district. This was normally names and contact information for DASA coordinators. High needs rural districts were most likely to have this information (55%) followed by low needs districts (54%), average needs districts (48%), and high needs urban/suburban districts (44%).

Safety (school safety and general student safety): The data collection occurred nine months after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Connecticut, near New York City, in which 26 were fatally shot by a lone gunman. Thirty percent of school districts carried information about school safety issues, such as school safety plans or general tips on how to keep students safe, including Internet safety. Average needs districts (38%) were most likely to have this information followed by low needs districts (29%), high needs rural districts (21%), and high needs urban/suburban districts (11%).

Concussion (non-district specific) - The Concussion Management and Awareness Act, specifically Chapter 496 of the Laws of 2011, requires the Commissioner of Education, in conjunction with the Commissioner of Health, to promulgate rules and regulations related to students who sustain a concussion, also known as a mild traumatic brain injury (MTBI), at school and at any district-sponsored event or related activity. These guidelines for return to school and certain school activities apply to all public school students who have sustained a concussion regardless of where the concussion occurred (NYSED).

Forty-five percent carried information about the New York State guidelines or provided other information such as a computer model called ImPACT (<https://www.impacttest.com/>) for post-concussion assessment. Low needs districts (58%) were most likely to have this information followed by average needs districts (45%), high needs rural districts (39%), and high needs urban/suburban districts (33%).

Concussion (district-specific) - The Concussion Management and Awareness Act, specifically Chapter 496 of the Laws of 2011, requires the Commissioner of Education, in conjunction with the Commissioner of Health, to promulgate rules and regulations related to students who sustain a concussion, also known as a mild traumatic brain injury (MTBI), at school and at any district-sponsored event or related activity. These guidelines for return to school and certain school activities apply to all public school students who have sustained a concussion regardless of where the concussion occurred (NYSED).

Twenty-eight percent carried district-specific information about the New York State guidelines or provided other information such as the district's policy. Low needs districts (42%) were most likely to have this information followed by average needs districts (28%), high needs rural districts (24%), and high needs urban/suburban districts (11%).

Discussion:

It was surprising that school districts did not make a more proactive effort to provide its constituents with information about some of these much discussed educational topics. Soon after this data was collected a firestorm of publicity surrounded the Common Core topic. Other assessment topics, particularly the NYSED Report Cards (which are released to the news media) and the teacher evaluation programs have attracted media attention.

Recommendation:

District stakeholders should be able to find information about important educational topics on their websites. Instead, it appear that most publics either get this type of information from the news media or from friends and neighbors...not primarily school districts. This puts schools in a reactive rather than proactive stance which prevents districts from performing strategically. District leaders and their boards of education should take a leadership role in providing more information about important educational topics. Their expertise can help build understanding and support for school initiatives. Districts can work together to develop general backgrounders on the topics, if resources are tight, that later could be customized to individual district needs. Districts should consider hiring public relations consultants, either from their Board of Cooperative Educational Services, or from local public relations agencies.

3.8 Parent Information

Parents are the most important public of school districts. This study looked for the presence of 12 items that parents were likely to need.

Data Analysis:

Classroom Updates/Academic Programs - General information about academic programs, excluding specific back-to-school information and guidance information, were present in 91% of district websites. Average needs districts were most likely to have this information (94%) followed by low needs districts (92%), high needs urban-suburban (89%) and average needs districts (85%).

Back-to-School Information: Forty-six percent of districts had information specifically tailored for getting ready for the start of a new school year. Average needs districts (55%) were most likely to provide this information followed by high needs rural (42%), low needs districts (33%) and high needs urban/suburban (22%).

Bus Routes: Seventeen percent of districts provided bus routes. High needs urban/suburban (33%) were most likely to provide this information followed by high needs rural and average needs districts (17%) and low needs districts (8%).

Lunch Menu: Ninety-four percent of districts provided lunch menus. High needs rural districts (97%) were most likely to provide this information followed by average needs districts (94%), low needs districts (92%) and high needs urban/suburban (89%).

Sports/Athletics: Ninety-two percent of districts provided information on sports and/or athletics. Average needs districts (94%) were most likely to provide this information followed by low needs districts (92%), high needs rural districts (91%) and high needs urban/suburban (78%).

Clubs and Extracurricular Activities: Fifty-eight percent of districts provided information about clubs and/or extracurricular activities. Low needs districts (75%) were most likely to have this information followed by average needs districts (58%), high needs rural districts (48%) and high needs urban/suburban (44%).

Guidance: Ninety percent of districts provided guidance information. Rural high needs districts (97%) were most likely to have this information followed by high needs urban/suburban (89%), low needs districts (88%) and average needs districts (87%)

Policies: Ninety percent of districts had school policies or student handbooks. Low needs districts (96%) were the most likely to have this information followed by high needs rural districts (91%), and high needs urban/suburban (89%) and average needs districts (88%).

Parent Groups/Booster Organizations: Sixty-eight percent of school districts provided information on parent or booster organizations such as Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) and athletic support groups. Low needs districts (92%) were the most likely to provide this information followed by average needs districts (71%), high needs urban/suburban (67%) and high needs rural districts (45%).

Special Education/Pupil Personnel: Sixty-seven percent of districts provided information on special education/pupil personnel or student support services. Average needs districts (75%) were most likely to provide this information followed by low needs districts (63%), high needs rural districts (61%) and high needs urban/suburban (44%).

New Student Registration: Forty-six percent of districts provided information on how to register a new student. Low needs districts (67%) were most likely to provide this information followed by average needs districts (49%), high needs urban/suburban (33%) and high needs rural districts (27%).

Nurses/Health Office: Sixty-seven percent of districts provided information about the nurse's or health office. Low needs districts (79%) were most likely to provide this information followed by high needs urban/suburban (67%), average needs districts (67%) and high needs rural districts (58%).

Parent/Student Portal Link: Eighty-seven percent of districts had a link to their parent/student portals, password protected sites such as Engage that provide classroom information such as grades and homework assignments. High needs urban/suburban districts (89%) were most likely to provide this information followed by high needs rural districts (88%), average needs districts (87%) and low needs districts (83%).

	Column Labels				
Values	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
Classroom Updates/Academic Programs (excludes B2S and Guidance)	89%	85%	94%	92%	91%
Back-to-School specific	22%	42%	55%	33%	46%
Bus Routes	33%	18%	17%	8%	17%
Lunch Menu	89%	97%	94%	92%	94%
Sports/Athletics	78%	91%	94%	92%	92%
Extracurricular/Clubs	44%	48%	58%	75%	58%
Guidance Office	89%	97%	87%	88%	90%
Policies/Handbook	89%	91%	88%	96%	90%
Volunteer/ PTA/Booster	67%	45%	71%	92%	68%
Special Education/Pupil Personnel Support	44%	61%	75%	63%	67%
New Student Register	33%	27%	49%	67%	46%
Nurse/Health Office	67%	58%	67%	79%	67%
Parent/Student Portal	89%	88%	87%	83%	87%

Discussion:

Data was collected during the first weeks of September 2013, near or during the time of schools starting a new school year. The low rate of districts providing “back-to-school” information on their websites (46%) may be due to districts mailing or emailing this information directly to households with school-aged children. Information about bus routes was low (17%). Districts may be mailing this information home too. Lunch menus (94%), sports/athletics (92%) school policies (90%), guidance (90%), and portal links (87%) were all common on websites. The difference between sports/athletic (92%) and club/extracurricular (58%) information is significant. Also, high needs urban/suburban were much more likely not to have sports or club information. Beyond bus routes (17%) and back-to-school information (46%), items less likely to be featured on websites were new student registration (46%), nurse/health office (67%), special education/pupil personnel (67%) and parent or booster organizations (68%).

Recommendations:

Districts should consider providing these basic parent informational items on their websites even if they are already providing the information by alternate means such as postal or e-mailings. These mailings are easy to misplace in the hurly-burly of back-to-school preparations. High schools should provide information about other extracurricular opportunities beyond athletics such as music, art or service clubs. Other items such as nurse/health offices, special education, new student registration and parent/volunteer organizations should be added.

3.9 School District Leadership Communication

This study looked at the communication of two school district leaders on the website: the school superintendent and the high school principal. The communication included the presence of school superintendent and high school principal messages and their content on the district website. It did not include messages that may have been contained within website publications such as e-newsletters.

School Superintendent Message: School district websites provide an opportunity for school leaders to provide context to complex educational issues such as student assessment, new programs, school safety, funding, capital projects, and many more.

High School Principal Message: School district leadership communication examined high school principal messages and their content on the district website. It did not include messages that may have been contained within publications such as e-newsletters.

	N-RC				
Leadership Message	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
Superintendent Message	22%	42%	52%	63%	50%
High School Principal Message	22%	33%	51%	58%	46%

Data Analysis:**Superintendent’s Message**

Fifty percent of school districts had a superintendent’s message on their website. Of those, the vast majority were general “welcome back to school” messages (60%); followed by messages with a mixture of themes (welcome back, assessment, Common Core, concussion

management, APPR, safety, or other) (16%); NYSED Report Card/assessment (10%); “other” (7%) and school safety (6%). The table below shows the breakdown by N-RC designation. High needs urban and rural districts were less likely to offer a superintendent message: high needs urban districts (22%); high needs rural (42%). Low and average needs districts were most likely to have some kind of superintendent message: low needs districts (62%); average needs districts (52%).

Superintendent	N-RC				
Row Labels	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
0 No message	7	19	33	9	68
1 Assessment - report cards	1	1	3	2	7
6 Safety issues			3	1	4
7 Welcome back	1	9	20	10	40
8 Mixture of themes		4	6	1	11
9 Other			4	1	5
Grand Total	9	33	69	24	135

High School Principal Message

High needs urban and rural districts were most likely *not* to offer a high school principal message: high needs urban districts (8 - 88%); high needs rural (22 - 67%). Average needs districts without a high school principal message: 35 (51%) and low needs districts without a high school principal message: 10 (42%).

Forty-five percent of the schools’ high school principals had a message. Of those, the vast majority were general “welcome back to school” messages (54 - 90%); followed by messages with a mixture of themes (welcome back, assessment, Common Core, concussion management, APPR, safety, or other) (3 - 5%); “other” (2 - 3%) and assessment (1 - 1%). The table below shows the breakdown by N-RC designation and NYSED Report Card/assessment. Low and average needs districts were most likely to have some kind of superintendent message: low needs districts 58%; average needs districts 49%.

Count of HSP-Content	N-RC				
High School Principal	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
0 No message	8	22	35	10	75
1 Assessment - report cards				1	1
7 Welcome back		9	32	13	54
8 Mixture of themes		1	2		3
9 Other	1	1			2
Grand Total	9	33	69	24	135

Discussion:

While there is nothing wrong with “Welcome Back to School” messages, it is just a starting point to engaging community stakeholders. Strategic public relations takes advantage of opportunities to build understanding and support of its mission. One such opportunity is its website.

What was surprising was the lack of information on anything of substance from these educational leaders on the district website. There was virtually no mention of Common Core standards, which became front-page news in 2013-2014, or little to no information on school assessment (NYSESED Report Cards or Annual Professional Performance Review) all of which were frequently reported in the news media. Instead of reacting to issues that are, for example, reported in the local and national news, it is more effective to discuss important issues before they become front page news.

District leaders, including board of education members, should actively take the lead on providing the district's perspective on important educational topics such as school financing, student achievement, and school safety issues. More potential topics are listed below.

Recommendations:

School district leaders, including board of education members, have a deep understanding of the issues facing public education today. Most are imminently qualified to share their opinions about various educational topics or can serve as a conduit to bring the latest research findings to parents and staff from other legitimate sources.

School districts should consider developing leadership messages on important topics in the district and in education. If these messages already exist in some other format, such as school district newsletters or letters to parents, districts should duplicate them onto their websites. These messages should build understanding for all district stakeholders. School districts churn out data reports required by the state and school board. Why not share some of them with the district stakeholders? There are many educational organizations, such as the National Educational Association, www.nea.org, the New York State Education Department, and PTA that provide educational research reports and data that can provide a springboard for school leaders to discuss various topics as they relate to the district. Schools can also pool resources through organizations such as New York State School Board Association, www.nyssba.org, and School Administrators Association of New York State, www.saanys.org, to develop key message documents that can be easily modified to school district situations. Finally, school districts can contract with Boards of Cooperative Educational Services for public relations professionals who can develop web content on behalf of administrators. See Appendix D Topics for Leadership Communication.

Limitations: School district leadership communication included an examination of the presence of a customized message to stakeholders by the school superintendent and high school principal. This study did not examine e-newsletters or other district publications that may have contained superintendent or high school principal messages.

3.10 Board of Education Information

This study looked for the presence of board of education members' names, upcoming meeting dates and meeting minutes. The district's average combined score on the three items was high at 2.85 out of 3.

Data Analysis:

Board of Education Members' Names: Ninety-nine percent of districts listed the names of board of education members.

Board of Education Meeting Dates: Ninety-five percent of districts provided meeting dates of upcoming board meetings. High needs rural districts (88%) were slightly less likely than other districts to offer upcoming meeting minutes.

Board of Education Meeting Minutes: Ninety percent of districts provided meeting minutes. Average needs districts (87%) were only slightly less likely to provide meeting minutes than high needs urban/suburban (89%), high needs rural districts (91%), and low needs districts (100%).

	N-RC				
Board of Education	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
BOE names	100%	100%	97%	100%	99%
BOE meeting dates	100%	88%	96%	100%	95%
BOE minutes	89%	91%	87%	100%	90%

Discussion:

School districts are doing a good job of providing basic information about their boards of education. Interested residents will know who their elected representatives are, when the next board meeting will be held (meeting dates) and what had happened at previous meetings (minutes). Many districts had a tab link on their homepage main navigation menu bar to make information seeking easier.

Recommendation:

Some school districts provided email contact information for board members, which should be encouraged for all districts. Other suggestions to increase transparency on governance issues include attendance and voting records of board members. Beyond meeting minutes, school districts should consider meeting transcripts and/or videotaped meetings. The board president should be involved in leadership communication (see Appendix D) to help build understanding and put difficult issues into context. The president should contribute to a district's management/leadership blog or write occasional messages for the district website.

3.11 Financial Information

Financial Information: This study looked for the presence of school financial information on websites. One financial item was required. Financial information could include tax or budget information (excluding STAR information).

Two or More Budget Items: Next, the study looked for the presence of two or more school budget items such as working or past budget documents, budget newsletters, budget fact sheets, etc.

STAR Information: Finally, the study examined websites for the presence of information about the STAR school tax exemption program, such as links for application forms or deadline formation.

Data Analysis:

Financial Information: Sixty-seven percent of all districts had at least one type of financial item on their websites. Low needs school districts (79%) were most likely to have at least one financial item on their websites followed by average needs districts (71%), high needs urban/suburban (56%) and high needs rural districts (55%).

Two or More Budget Items: Fifty-two percent of all school districts had at least two budget documents or links on their websites. Low needs school districts (67%) were most likely to have two or more budget items followed by average needs districts (58%), high needs urban/suburban districts (56%) and high needs rural districts (27%).

STAR Information: Twenty-five percent of all districts had some kind of STAR information available on their websites. High needs urban/suburban districts (33%) were most likely to have STAR information followed by high needs rural districts (30%), low needs districts (29%) and average needs districts (20%).

	N-RC				
Financial Information	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
1 Financial Item	56%	55%	71%	79%	67%
2+Budget Items	56%	27%	58%	67%	52%
STAR	33%	30%	20%	29%	25%

Discussion:

Most school districts (67%) had at least one piece of financial information on their websites. High needs districts, however, were much lower, at about 55%. When it came specifically to budget information however, the overall number of districts who had at least two budget items on their websites averaged 52%. High needs rural districts were much lower at 27%. Districts providing information about the STAR school tax exemption program was overall low at 25%, with average needs districts (21%) least likely to offer any information. Although data was collected at the beginning of the school year, when budget information is still in development, even past budget information was not always available. While the STAR school tax exemption program is a state-run program, it was surprising to see so few school districts (25%) with basic information about the program, particularly information on registration deadlines or links to the state's program website.

Recommendations:

As taxpayer supported institutions with budget votes each year, school districts should make budget information readily available, including past budgets, on their websites. Nearly half of the school districts did not have a minimum of two budget documents/links on their websites. Information was difficult to find, too. Few districts had a tab on their home page main navigation menus for financial information. When available, financial items were distributed in different areas such as "administration" or "board of education" instead of one, easy-to-find central location. Articles that may be archived within budget newsletters should be reformatted for the website's budget section. Districts should consider adding content to explain the factors driving budget costs as well as the efforts to contain expenses or grow revenue sources. If districts lack the staff to create the financial information, districts should contract with their Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) or public relations agency. Districts should also remember to place STAR information on their websites to help qualified homeowners register for the school tax exemptions. They'll be grateful.

3.12 Employment Information

School districts are often major employers in their communities. Attracting the most qualified applicants for jobs is important in delivering quality services. This study looked for the presence of two employment items: job announcements and application forms/centers.

Data Analysis:

Job list announcements: Eighty-four percent of districts had job announcements on their websites. High needs urban/suburban districts were the most likely to provide this information (89%) followed by high needs rural districts (85%), average needs districts (84%) and low needs districts (83%).

Job application forms/process: Eighty-two percent of districts provided application forms, explained the application process or provided a direct link to the application system. High needs urban/suburban (89%) were most likely to provide this information followed by average needs and low needs districts (83%), and high needs rural districts (79%).

	N-RC				
Employment	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
Jobs List	89%	85%	84%	83%	84%
Job Application	89%	79%	83%	83%	82%

Discussion:

School districts overall are doing a good job of providing information about job openings and the steps to applying for the open positions.

Recommendations:

Job opportunities should be prominently communicated on district websites. Because a high quality workforce is so important to overall organizational quality, districts should consider putting job announcements and applications on their homepage. Just 6% of districts had a tab on its main navigational bar for prospective employees (see “Homepage Segmentation of Publics”).

3.13 Alumni Information

Many alumni are interested in their alma mater and many want to stay connected to their schools and classmates. Alumni are also a great potential source of support in terms of budget support, financial donations and volunteer/booster support. This study looked for the presence of three types of alumni information items: alumni directories, general alumni announcements, and alumni newsletters.

Data Analysis:

Alumni announcements: Fifty-seven percent of districts had alumni news announcements such as upcoming reunions on their websites. Average needs districts (58%) and high needs rural districts were most likely to provide this information followed by high needs urban/suburban (56%), and low needs districts (54%).

Alumni directories: Thirty-two percent of districts had alumni directories on their websites. High needs urban/suburban (44%) were most likely to have this information followed by high needs rural districts (42%), low needs districts (33%) and average needs districts (25%).

Alumni newsletter: Fourteen percent of district had alumni newsletters on their websites. High needs rural districts (18%) were most likely to have this information followed by average and low needs districts (13%), and high needs urban/suburban districts (11%).

	N-RC				
Alumni Information	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
Alumni Announcements	56%	58%	58%	54%	57%
Alumni Directory	44%	42%	25%	33%	32%
Alumni Newsletter	11%	18%	13%	13%	14%

Discussion:

Many districts provided some alumni information. Several alumni pages were linked to off-site webpages. While alumni associations are often independent of the district it is beneficial to support their efforts since alumni can support the district in various ways.

Recommendations:

School districts should consider establishing a link off its homepage to an alumni page. Just 12% of districts provided a link to alumni from the main navigation menu on the homepage (see “Homepage Segmentation of Publics”). Districts should encourage alumni to connect by encouraging reunions, developing a directory and alumni newsletters. Because of their potential as voters, volunteers or donors to school related causes, alumni should be considered a key public of school districts. Districts should promote the accomplishments of their alumni (living and dead), especially alumni who are famous or have significant professional or personal accomplishments.

3.14 Public Information (Publicity)

This study looked at how districts actively promoted its activities and accomplishments to the outside community, particularly journalists. An online newsroom (defined for this study as a webpage that contains multiple items including a news release archive, important district publications, and contact information), a news release archive only, and an image gallery (photos, logos, etc.) only.

Data Analysis:

Online Newsroom: Four percent of districts had online newsrooms with high needs urban/suburban districts (11%) most likely to provide this information followed by average needs districts (4%) and high needs rural districts (3%). Low needs districts did not provide online newsrooms.

News release archives: Twenty percent of district had news release archives with high needs urban/suburban and average needs districts (22%) mostly likely to provide this information followed by low needs districts (21%) and high needs rural districts (15%).

Image gallery: Four percent of districts provided image galleries on their websites with average needs districts (6%) most likely to provide this information followed by high needs rural districts (3%). High needs urban/suburban and low needs districts did not provide this type of information (0%).

	N-RC				
Marketing/Publicity	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
Newsroom	11%	3%	4%	0%	4%
News Release Archive	22%	15%	22%	21%	20%
Image Gallery	0%	3%	6%	0%	4%

Discussion:

The relatively low presence of these informational items may be a resource issue; districts may lack time and/or expertise to develop the materials or districts may consider current publicity efforts such as the homepage news announcements sufficient. Most districts carry news announcements on their homepage to promote upcoming events, provide updates on programs or news about student and staff accomplishments. This proactive communication helps districts inform their constituencies, including journalists, about the positive work going on in the district. Taking these efforts one step further by tailoring information to meet journalism standards would benefit school districts. News releases are similar to news announcements but differ stylistically, in content and in format. Public relations professionals refer to news releases as information subsidies because they contain news values and are written in journalistic style so they can be used easily in a news article without much alteration. Image libraries offer high resolution photos and official logos for publication or broadcast. Backgrounders, such as executive biographies, and other information can be provided.

Recommendations:

Districts should engage in proactive media relations to promote the positive stories of their districts. News releases and online newsrooms containing news release archives, publication archives (newsletters, reports, etc.), an image gallery and contact information are useful journalist tools. This central location helps journalists and others interested in the district find information easily.

3.15 Social Media

Social media websites are characterized by attributes including their ability to network like-minded users (connectivity), create, organize and archive content that can be easily shared, and support collaborative tasks in real time or anytime. Often social media interactions encourage two-way versus one-way conversations that are open to contributions and feedback from anyone who is a member of the virtual community.

This study examined the extent to which school district websites linked to district social media. Specially, it looked for links to Facebook, Twitter, leadership-authored blogs, YouTube, Pinterest and Flickr on their homepages.

Data Analysis:

The majority of school districts (90 - 66%) did not have social media on their websites homepage. The most popular form of social media was Facebook, a networking site, with 35 districts (26%), followed by Twitter, a microblogging site, 21 districts (16%); leadership blogs, a web journal, 10 districts (7%); YouTube, a video sharing site, 7 districts (5%); and one district had Instagram, a photo/video sharing site. Pinterest, a photo and video archival site, and Flickr, a photo sharing site did not appear on any school district websites.

Social Media	
Facebook	35
Twitter	21
Leadership Blog	10
YouTube	7
Instagram	1
Pinterest	0
Flickr	0
Total	74

Districts' Social Media Variety: Ninety districts (66%) did not have social media links on their homepage. Twenty-five (19%) districts had one form of social media. Twelve districts (9%) had two kinds of social media; seven districts (5%) had three forms of social media; and one district (.07%) had four types of social media links on their homepage.

Social Media	Count of Sum of SM
0	90
1	25
2	12
3	7
4	1
Grand Total	135

Social Media Use and N-RC: Within this study, 3 - 33% of high needs urban/suburban districts, 10 - 33% of high needs rural districts, 23 -33% of average needs districts and 38% low needs districts had some form of social media present on their homepage.

	Sum of Social Media						
N-RC	0	1	2	3	4	Grand Total	
1	6	2	1			9	
2	23	6	2	1	1	33	
3	46	11	7	5		69	
4	15	6	2	1		24	
Grand Total	90	25	12	7	1	135	

	N-RC				
Type of Social Media	1	2	3	4	Grand Total
Facebook	22%	24%	26%	29%	26%
Twitter	11%	12%	19%	13%	16%
Leadership Blog	0%	9%	7%	8%	7%
YouTube	11%	6%	6%	0%	5%

Instagram	0%	0%	0%	4%	1%
Pinterest	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Flickr	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Facebook and N-RC: Thirty-six districts (26%) had a link to Facebook. Low-needs districts (29%) were the most likely to use Facebook followed by average needs districts (26%), high needs rural (24%) and high needs urban/suburban (22%).

Twitter and N-RC: Twenty-two districts (16%) had a Twitter link on their homepage. Average needs districts (19%) were the most likely to use Twitter followed by low needs districts (13%), high needs rural (12%) and high needs urban/suburban (11%).

Blogs (Management) and N-RC: Ten districts (7%) had a management blog on their website. High needs rural districts (9%) were the most likely to have a management blog followed by low needs districts (8%) and average needs districts (7%). High needs urban/suburban districts did not have a blog.

YouTube and N-RC: Seven districts (5%) had a YouTube channel link on their websites. High needs urban/suburban needs districts (11%) were the most likely followed by high needs rural districts (6%) and average needs districts (6%). Low needs districts did not use YouTube.

Instagram and N-RC: One district (1%), a low-needs district, linked to Instagram from its website.

Discussion:

Thirty-three percent of the school districts in this study had at least one link to a district social media site. In comparison, 73% of all adult online users use social media.

Social media is an easy, low-cost way to build relationships and encourage feedback and two-way conversations with key publics. School districts may be hesitant to embrace social media due to the many problems that social media creates among young users with their own personal social media sites such as Facebook. Another issue that may prevent social media adoption is the content creation and monitoring needed, which can be a resource issue. Districts who decide to engage in social media will need to have strong social media policies, monitor content frequently and accept the good with the bad when it comes to positive and negative feedback.

According to the Pew Research Internet project (2013, 2014), 73% of online adults use social networking sites: Facebook (71%), Twitter (19%), LinkedIn (22%), Pinterest (21%), Instagram (17%). Pew Research (2013) also found that 54% of Internet users have also posted original photos or videos to websites. In another study, Pew Research found that 72% of all adult Internet users have watched videos on video-sharing sites like YouTube.

Forty-four percent of the school districts in this study did have some link to social media (Facebook, Twitter, management blog, YouTube, or Instagram). Yet, the most commonly found social media site, Facebook, was present only in 26% of the schools' websites, much lower than the 71% of users nationwide. Twitter usage was more in sync with national online users (districts 16%; U.S. population 19%). Except for one district, Instagram was not present on school district homepages, although 17% of all U.S. adult online users use it. Pinterest, used by 21% of all adult online users, and Flickr were not present on district homepages.

Recommendations:

Districts that have hesitated in adopting social media are being left behind in the growing virtual community of conversations. These conversations are happening whether districts want them or not. It's better to join the conversation than be left out. After all, school

districts are major contributors to community life and they are dependent on residents' approval to survive (budget votes). Activists groups are demanding more transparency and more communication from taxpayer-supported institutions. Social media can help districts engage its publics in meaningful exchanges of information. Beyond survival, schools today need engaged parents and other supporters (alumni and boosters) to thrive.

Districts can ease into social media with networking sites such as Facebook to keep users informed on what the organization is doing. Archival social media, such as YouTube, Pinterest and Fickr are good ways to showcase outstanding work in the school district. Districts should have mobile apps for their sites to encourage usability. Finally, districts should promote their social media via the website and other district communication channels.

Like any public relations/marketing communication programs, school districts should consult with public relations professionals (district PR staff, Board of Cooperative Educational Services, and/or outside public relations agencies that specialize in K-12 education) when developing these new communication technologies. Clear social media policies should be adopted before any social media sites are created. Once created the district must frequently monitor the site and create new and interesting content. A social media crisis communication plan should also be developed to properly respond via social media and its website during a crisis.

Limitations:

This study did not include other forms of social media such as podcasts, discussion forums, wikis, or Tumblr, for example.

Appendix A School Districts

District Name	
Alfred-Almond	Elmira CSD
Amityville Union Free SD	Evans-Brant CSD (Lakeshore)
Argyle Central School	Farmingdale UFSD
Ausable Valley CSD	Floral Park -Bellerose UFSD
Bainbridge-Guilford CSD	Fort Edward UFSD
Barker CSD	Franklinville CSD
Bayport-Blue Point UFSD	Frontier CSD
Belfast Central School	Garrison UFSD
Binghamton CSD	Geneva City Schools
Brasher Falls CSD	Gorham-Middlesex CSD aka Marcus Whitman CSD
Brookhaven-Comsewogue UFSD1	Granville CSD
Brushton-Moira CSD	Greenville CSD
Canajoharie CSD	Guilderland CSD
Canisteo-Greenwood CSD	Haldane CSD
Cario-Durham CSD	Hamilton CSD
Cassadaga Valley CSD	Hannibal CSD
Center Moriches CSD	Hartford CSD
Central Islip Public Schools	Hempstead UFSD
Chautauqua Lake CSD	Heuvelton CSD
Chenango Forks CSD	Hilton CSD
Churchville-Chili CSD	Homer CSD
Clifton-Fine CSD	Hunter-Tannserville CSD
Cohoes City Schools	Indian River CSD
Cooperstown CSD	Island Trees UFSD
Cornwall CSD	Jasper-Troupsburg CSD
Deer Park UFSD	Johnston City CSD
Dolgeville CSD	Kenmore-Tonawanda UFSD
Dundee CSD	LaFargeville CSD
East Hampton UFSD	Lake Pleasant CSD
East Quogue UFSD	Lansingburgh CSD
East Williston UFSD	Levittown UFSD
Edgemont CSD	Little Falls City SD
Elba CSD	Lockport City SD
	Lowville CSD

Lyons CSD
Malone CSD
Marion CSD
Mattituck Cutchogue
CSD
Menands SD
Middletown City SD
Minerva CSD
Monticello CSD
Morrisville-Eaton CSD
Mount Sinai CSD
New Hartford CSD
New York Mills UFSD
Newcomb CSD
Niskayuna CSD
North Colonie CSD
North Shore CSE
Northeastern Clinton
CSD
Norwood-Norfolk CSD
Oakfield-Alabama CSD
Oneida City SD
Orchard Park CSD
Owego Apalachin CSD
Panama CSD -
Pearl River SCD
Penn Yan CSD
Pine Bush CSD
Plainedge CSD
Poland CSD
Port Washington UFSD
Pulaski CSD
Queensbury UFSD
Randolph CSD
Remsen CSD
Rocky Point UFSD
Roscoe CSD
Rush-Henertta CSD
Sag Harbor CSD
Sandy Creek CSD
Sauquoit Valley CSD
Schenevus CSD
Scio CSD
Sharon Springs CSD
Smithtown CSD
South Country CSD
South Lewis CSD
Southern Cayuga CSD
Spencerport CSD
Stamford CSD
Sullivan West CSD
Taconic Hills CSD
Tarrytown UFSD
Tonawanda City SD
Tuckahoe UFSD
Utica City SD
Valley Stream 30
UFSD
Vernon-Verona-Sherrill
CSD
Voorheesville CSD
Wappingers CSD
Waterford-Halfmoon
CSD
Watkins Glen CSD
Weedsport CSD
West Genesee CSD
West Seneca CSD
Westhill CSD
White Plains CSD
William Floyd CSD
Windham-Ashland-
Jewett CSD
Wyoming CSD

Appendix B Coding Items

General Content

(Website)

District name/searchable by Google –
result on first page
District's postal address
District's telephone number
Dist. staff directory contacts (either phone
or e-mail of key offices)
District e-mail address
Directions to district
Mission/vision statement
District profile / About Us
Board of education names
Board of education meeting schedule
Board of education minutes
Central administration info (must contain
at least one: names, contact info,
general info)
Calendar/upcoming events (Since August
– fresh content)
News announce. (August +)
District newsletter
Links to district buildings from homepage

Navigation:

Search engine (internal)
Site map/index/A to Z index
Home button (internal pages)
Main navigational bar with pull down
menus
Home pages fit on screen (no excessive
vertical or horizontal scrolling 1.5)

Publics with Homepage Menu

Information:

Students
Parents/guardians/new
Staff/teachers/employees
Alumni
Community (promotes community
attractions, historical, chamber,
extended learning, etc.)
Prospective employees
Journalists

Information for parents

Academic information
(classroom/programs info, not
guidance, not B2S)
Back to School info
(information section that brings
pertinent information in one
location)
Parent/student portal link
Bus routes
School lunch menu
Special education info
Guidance info (grad requirements, testing
dates, contact info, curriculum
updates, etc.)
Health/nurse info (required vaccinations,
health info, policies, etc.)
School policies
Sports info (game schedules, forms for
participation, tryouts, etc.)
Clubs and organizations
Register a new student
Volunteer/PTA/PTO, etc. link (any type of
opportunity for parents to get
involved in school)

Information for the Community

Community links (Area
information/history, chamber)
Volunteer/donate/ foundation,
opportunities, etc.
School budget/tax info (at least one item
on either budget or tax)
STAR registration information

Information for Prospective Employees

Job announcements
Job application forms, apply

Information for Journalists

Online Newsroom (one page that locates
all journalist info – NRs, district
NLs, backgrounders, image

gallery, contact info, key documents/reports, etc.)

News release archives

Image Gallery (high resolution photos, logos, etc.)

Alumni Content

Alumni directories

Alumni information

Alumni newsletter

Leadership Communication:

Superintendent message (Since August - traditional letter, message)

Superintendent message content

1. NYSED Report Cards/assessment issues
2. Common Core issues
3. DASA issues
4. Concussion issues
5. APPR issues
6. Safety issues
7. General/welcome back
8. Mixture of 1-7
9. Other

HS principal message (Since August - traditional letter, message)

HS principal message content

1. NYSED Report Cards/assessment issues
2. Common Core issues
3. DASA issues
4. Concussion issues
5. APPR issues
6. Safety issues
7. General/welcome back
8. Mixture of 1-7
9. Other

Hot Topics Addressed by School

Leaders (Superintendent/HS Principal):

Report Cards NYSED link or information

Common Core NYSED portal link

Common Core District analysis/ context

DASA – NYSED or other outside info/ link

DASA - District context/report form, building coordinators, etc.

District safety plan or student safety issues (internet, etc.)

Concussion – NYSED or other outside site

Concussion – Dist. info

APPR – General information, district plan or letter about plan, etc.

APPR – District information specifically for parents: parent request form, etc.

School funding/budget issues (more than 1+ documents on budget/funding)

Social Media:

FaceBook

YouTube

Twitter

Instagram

Pinterest

Blog - district

Flickr

N-RC Needs Resource Capacity

Categories

1 = Urban-Suburban

All districts at or above the 70th percentile (1.1835) that have: 1) at least 100 students per square mile; or 2) an enrollment greater than 2,500 and more than 50 students per square mile.

2 = Rural Districts

All districts at or above the 70th percentile (1.1835) that have: 1) fewer than 50 students per square mile; or 2) fewer than 100 students per square mile and an enrollment of less than 2,500

3 = Average N/RC Districts –

All districts between the 20th (0.770) and 70th (1.1835) percentile on the index.

4 = Low N/RC Districts

All districts between the 20th (0.770) and 70th (1.1835) percentile on the index.

Appendix C

Information for Parents, Students, Community, Prospective Employees and Journalists

While not exhaustive, below are suggestions for information to provide within “neighborhoods” for key publics.

Information for Parent

- Staff directory with contact information
- Academic information from classroom teachers
- Guidance (graduation requirements, testing dates, contact info, curriculum, updates, etc.)
- Portals for students/parents link (Infinite Campus, etc.)
- Special education
- Back-to-School
- Bus routes
- School lunch menu
- Health/nurse info (required vaccinations, health info, policies, etc.)
- School policies
- Sports (game schedules, forms for participation, tryouts, etc.)
- Clubs and organizations
- Registering a new student
- PTA/PTO, etc. link (any type of opportunity for parents to get involved in school)

Information for Students

- Portals for students/parents link (Infinite Campus, etc.)
- Links to district tutorial/learning resources
- Academic information from classroom teachers
- Back-to-School
- Guidance (graduation requirements, testing dates, contact info, curriculum, updates, etc.)
- School lunch menu
- Sports (game schedules, forms for participation, tryouts, etc.)
- Clubs and organizations

Information for the Community

- Community links (area information/history, chamber)
- Volunteer/donate/ foundation, opportunities, etc.
- School budget/tax
- STAR registration

Information for Prospective Employees

- Job announcements
- Job application forms, apply

Information for Journalists

- Online Newsroom (one page that locates all journalist info – NRS, district NL, backgrounders, image gallery, contact info, key documents/reports, etc.)

- News release archives
- Staff directory with contact information
- District profile
- Board of education – minutes, etc.
- Reports – key performance indicators on assessment, budget, etc.

Appendix D

Topics for Leadership Communication

Achievement Gaps
Alumni Achievements, Support
Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR)
Assessment: NYSED Report Cards, Common Core
Athletics
Capital Projects
Career and Technical Education
Charter Schools
Child Nutrition
College Affordability
Common Core State Standards
Curriculum: Common Core, etc.
Early Childhood Education
E-Rate Program
Finances: School Budget, Taxes, etc.
Green Schools & Environmental Education
Higher Education/Student Loans
IDEA / Special Education
Reading
Rural Schools
School Safety: school safety plan, anti-bullying policies (DASA), concussion management/policies
Science, Technology, Engineering & Math
Special Education
STAR
Student Achievement
Teacher Quality
Teacher Achievement
Technology
Testing
Transportation
Vouchers