
Patrick Larkin

GETTING connected



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Social media tools offer principals powerful ways to connect to their peers and model productive technology use.

That the world outside schools is changing faster than ever is old news. Unfortunately, that the world *inside* schools is changing at a glacial pace is even older news. As school leaders, we have an important choice to make as we move into the second decade of the 21st century: Will we head into our schools each day and relish the insulation that a traditional schoolhouse has afforded its occupants for well over a century? Or will we embrace the new technological tools that offer us opportunities to communicate, connect, and collaborate with educators from all over the world?

Although the right choice is obvious, considering that we, as educational leaders, have made a commitment to provide relevant and engaging environments for our staff members and students, the path to adopting some of these new tools can be overwhelming. But considering the words of Will Richardson, who said at a conference I attended last year, “If you’re comfortable with education today, then you’re not paying attention,” we can gain a small bit of solace in the fact that we are paying attention.

Begin With Communication

One of the easiest ways to jump into the world of social media is to start a blog. Most of the news about public schools that is reported in traditional media outlets is negative, but we school leaders have the ability to offer a preemptive strike. We need to stop waiting for the media to call us and instead create our own daily account of all of the great things happening in our schools. People want news delivered in real time and not after the fact, something that has clearly affected the newspaper industry. How are you delivering news to the stakeholders in your community?

For the past three years, we have delivered news and information to the Burlington High School community through the Burlington High Principal’s

As a connected principal, I come across so many resources, articles, videos, and blog posts that I share with our staff. If our staff is exploring a topic, like tech integration, I can access information we can consider as we develop our collective wisdom.

Karen Szymusiak
Principal
Glacier Ridge Elementary
Dublin, OH



Administrators need to lead by example. Our world is driven by the use of technology. Our students and staff use social media regularly, and we need to model its productive use. Social media is the best way to communicate to our parents and community all the great things that happen in our school.

Bill Burkhead
Assistant Principal
Plymouth North High School
Plymouth, MA

If we are going to encourage and lead learning organizations, we must be doing so ourselves. Social media allows anytime, anywhere learning that can increase the capacity of a principal.

John Bernia
Assistant Principal
Waldon Middle School
Lake Orion, MI

Blog (www.burlingtonhigh.blogspot.com). The feedback from parents and students has been tremendous because we have used the blog to brag about our students and teachers, pass along news and updates, and discuss local and national educational issues. In fact, the blog has also changed the way that the school community communicates with the media. Gone are the days where we need to call the local papers to tell them about a story—instead, they now call us when they read about something on our blog. The realization of this shift hit us when local newspapers started asking whether they could link the blog feed to their online news pages.

A Powerful Learning Network

Although blogs offer a great way to increase communication within your school community, other tools can help administrators communicate and connect with other amazing school leaders every day. I am talking about Twitter, a tool that has offered me some of the finest professional development that I have ever received. My personal learning network (PLN) on Twitter allows me to get instant feedback 24-7 from educators all over the world on issues and initiatives that concern my school.

Let me relay a firsthand example of how building a PLN on Twitter supported Burlington's improvement efforts: A couple of years ago, we made a decision to move to a one-to-one computing environment in which every student has his or her own device in and out of school. Because no public high schools around us have adopted this model, however, we were forced to look outside of our area for guidance.

Fortunately, Deron Durlinger from Van Meter, IA, one of the principals in my PLN, invited me to a free conference in his state where there were more than 30 one-to-one schools sharing their experiences. The confer-

ence, which was sponsored by Iowa State's Center for the Advanced Study of Technology Leadership in Education, was the impetus we needed to get the ball rolling back home. Back at school, we were able to keep the conversation going with via Twitter. My PLN has also helped me begin to change the way my staff members and I look at professional development, rewrite our acceptable use policy for technology, and start a discussion about a later start time for Burlington.

The Importance of Modeling

School leaders have a moral obligation to connect and collaborate to help all students. U.S. schools simply cannot go where they need to go if school leaders do not model the expectations that they have for staff members and students. How can we be upset with teachers who are hesitant when using unfamiliar technology if we do not participate ourselves? Besides, it's not about us; it's about the students and ensuring that we are doing all we can to best prepare them to compete for jobs that have yet to be created.

According to Wagner (2008), students need seven key skills to be successful, whether they are headed to college or the workplace:

- Thinking critically and solving problems
- Collaborating and leading by influence
- Being agile and adaptable
- Showing initiative and entrepreneurialism
- Communicating effectively
- Accessing and analyzing information
- Being curious and imaginative.

Clearly, educational leaders can improve their own skills in all seven areas by utilizing social media tools for collaboration. In fact, a strong case can be made that they will fail in regards to adaptability, initiative, and curiosity and imagination if they do not start to embrace those tools.

When others ask me a question that I don't know, I can find the answer through my PLN.... For instance, a building principal asked me a couple of weeks ago for any information I might have on parent information for Facebook.... Within 10 minutes I had 10 responses.... I had quality resources to pass on to the principal in need. Everyone in my district benefits from my PLN.

Dodie Ainslie
Coordinator of Instruction
Vestal Central School District, Vestal, NY

For a concrete example of leaders modeling the seven skills daily, turn to the Connected Principals Blog (www.connectedprincipals.com), which was started in August 2010 by George Couros, a principal from Alberta, Canada. More than 30 principals from all over North America use this blog to lead by example every day. They have also started a hashtag (#cpchat)—one of the most widely used education-related hashtags in the world—so that all school leaders can join in the conversation. Twitter enables you to share resources, ask questions, and join in conversations with Diane Ravitch (@DianeRavitch), Daniel Pink (@DanielPink), and Mel Riddile (@PrincipalDiff), among others.

In fact, the number of tweeting administrators has grown exponentially in just a couple of years. When I started using Twitter in spring 2009, the only other administrators to be found were Eric Sheninger (@NMHS_Principal) from New Milford (NJ) High School and Chris Lehmann (@ChrisLehmann) from the Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia, PA. Word has spread, however, and the number of school administrators on Twitter has risen into the hundreds.

Making Time

The problem of finding time for social media comes up quite often when discussing the use of social media tools and building a PLN. We are all well aware of the long list of tasks that we have as building leaders, but in my book, social media is a priority. Some members of my PLN choose a specific time of day that they set aside for social media use, and others reserve time before or after school. Regardless of when we use social media tools, we all have found that connecting with other educators is a tremendous time-saver, and we know firsthand that the collective intelligence of a PLN cannot be overestimated.

Burlington High School

BURLINGTON, MA

GRADES

9–12

ENROLLMENT

1,111

COMMUNITY

Suburban

DEMOGRAPHICS

78% White, 12% Asian, 6% Black, 3% Hispanic, 2% other;
9.6% free and reduced-price lunch eligible

ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM

1 principal, 2 associate principals, 1 student service coordinator,
1 data managers

FACULTY

86 members



As Shirky (2010) said, “The opportunity before us, individually and collectively, is enormous” (p. 212).

What will you do with your opportunity? **PL**

REFERENCES

- Shirky, C. (2010). *Cognitive surplus*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Wagner, T. (2008). *The global achievement gap*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Author's note: The quotes used throughout this article are from members of my PLN.

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