

## Digitizing Family and Community Engagement Connecting with Stakeholders on Their Terms

by Willard R. Daggett, Ed.D.

When I began teaching in the 1970s, buying school supplies and back-to-school night were the hallmarks of a new school season. Forty-six years later, tablets have replaced most of those school supplies—yet back-to-school night remains the same. We're still asking parents to engage with us on our terms—one evening at a time we select, without their input. We hear all the time that schools cannot get parents to attend these events anymore. The waning of family/community engagement in schools is worrisome—what gives?

The answer to this question—amid more and more reports of dwindling family/community-school interaction—is something schools simply have to come to grips with. The positive correlation between strong family/community-school engagement and both school improvement and student success is too established to ignore (Van Roekel, 2008).

### Technology and the Changing Face of How We Interact With Others

When you were a student, your parents went to back-to-school night because occasional in-person meetings were the most efficient means for parents and teachers to communicate. So parents would tolerate any inconveniences—perhaps leaving work early, getting a babysitter, or leaving the kids with the neighbors for the evening—because back-to-school night presented the most convenient and only option to schools and parents. But any relative convenience to parents of this standardized model is now often viewed as just plain inconvenient.

Like most every facet of industry and society, technology has disrupted our relationships and how we interact with others. The widespread adoption of social media has upended our perceptions of convenient communication. But it hasn't stopped there. Social media has upended even the nature of our relationships with those we communicate with on social media and, as a byproduct, the nature of all of our relationships.

Historically, we've had three categories of relationships:

1. *The Inner Ring*: Our closest and most intimate friends and family members, those with whom we communicate frequently and share our deepest thoughts, hopes and fears.
2. *The Middle Ring*: Those we are in regular and close proximity to, such as the people we work with, neighbors, and extended family members. We know details of their lives, their general personalities and preferences. We can have intelligent conversations with them, but likely won't share to the extent we would with those in the inner ring.
3. *The Outer Ring*: Acquaintances, people with whom we have a common interest but seldom see or communicate with. An example would be math teachers from different schools who only see each other once a year at a math conference.

In the pre-Internet world, proximity played a huge role in who was in which ring of the relationship circle. If we couldn't routinely engage with someone, odds were low they'd ever move much beyond the outer ring. Technology, and social media in particular, has turned this historical norm on its head. Social media has closed the physical space between us, allowing frequent interaction with people as far away as across the world.

Perhaps most interesting is that social media is beginning to push some people who would ordinarily have stayed in the outer ring into the inner ring. Through social media, people who share values or missions are able to find each other, interact, and build a relationship on a common belief system. In other words, social media has allowed monolithic ideological connection to bridge people who might not have otherwise ever crossed paths. When this connection happens along deeply meaningful issues to those involved, those relationships can jump from the outer to inner ring.

To a degree, social media is also supplanting the middle ring. When a person is devoting more and more time to engaging with peers over social media, there's less time and need to interact in person with the neighbor or coworker.

Data shows that parents are already well accustomed to tapping online social networks for advice, information and support related to their kids. A Pew Research study found that 59 percent of parents used social media at least once in a 30-day span to find parenting support and information (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe & Ellison, 2015). A full 76 percent of parents (compared to 73 percent of their non-parent counterparts) said they consider their Facebook friends to be “actual” friends (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe & Ellison, 2015). A preference for online interaction is no more pronounced than with today's teens. A range of data reveals a generation that draws primary social support from large online networks that include many people they do not see in person (Lenhart, 2015). The merits of this can be debated, but the significance cannot; social media is changing our perceptions of friendships and connection, and it's changing our preferred ways to interact with others.

### **What Does This Mean for Schools?**

This shift in how and with whom we now develop close ties has not been evolutionary. It's happened so quickly, it's been *revolutionary*, so much so that many have not yet recognized it for what it is and what it means.

What does it mean for schools? It means back-to-school night is officially only convenient for schools. It means the occasional in-person, on-campus model of engaging families and communities is outmoded. It means that schools must not only meet parents and the community where convenient for them, they must also meet them where they are increasingly forming meaningful bonds over shared values. Despite your current level of engagement with families and communities, they all do share in your mission to help students succeed—it's of utmost importance to them. This creates an enormous opportunity to find them where they are increasingly forming connections of utmost importance to them: on social media.

When in-person meetings are necessary, like back-to-school night, social media can still play a vital role in maximizing convenience for families and communities. The preferred location and dates can be crowdsourced via social media. If your community tells you meeting at a local firehouse is most convenient, why not listen to them? If they tell you they prefer three different date and location options for an event, they are spoon-feeding you exactly how to get them to attend. By putting the location and date question to your community via social media, your acknowledgment of

and respect for their busy schedules will be heard and appreciated. And the feedback they provide you can be invaluable.

### **Schoolwide Social Media Use**

An unprecedented opportunity for regular family/community engagement, the benefits of direct social media communication with families and community extend far beyond back-to-school night. A handful of ways social media can be a powerful tool for schools include:

- Frequent and ongoing interaction with parents and community about school happenings, initiatives, goals, successes and events
- Opportunities to provide regular study and homework tips for parents, e.g., how to ask their children leading questions, a tip for helping children with their math homework, etc.
- The ability for routine updates about what was done in school to help parents engage with their children, e.g., “Dinner topic tip: Ask your child about the solar panel experiment we did in science today.”
- Brand-building opportunities for your school where school staff, students and community members foster a positive presence for which they are proud

### **Leaders Must Model Smart Social Media Use**

The role of leadership in schoolwide use of social media cannot be underestimated. Social media as an engagement tool is only as valuable as its application. All leaders need to ask themselves if they and their staff are taking advantage of social media to engage families and communities. And if so, are they doing so strategically and wisely? Is it being used to disseminate information of value, or is it merely noise about what's on the school menu? Is it being used to connect with the community and parents on the issues they care about and attempt to form a more meaningful bond? While social media does open up countless opportunities to deepen relationships with the community and families, it also has risks, as does any degree of exposure. Leaders must identify these risks and walk staff through how to avoid and mitigate them.

Leaders *must* model for staff strategic, smart use of social media that shifts the community and family conversation to the shared mission of student success. This can include:

- Demonstrating frequent, effective, respectful use of social media on topics pertaining to

increasing the rigor and relevance in learning so all students can succeed

- Modeling how to use social media and specific verbiage to build a school's brand
- Showing how to move social media use beyond mere dissemination of information into an interactive, values-based conversation
- Illustrating how to encourage, monitor and manage a civil online discourse, particularly how to moderate an escalating conversation

Finally, for social media engagement to work, it must be through the modes parents are already using. Leaders would be well served to research which social media outlets are most popular amongst its community members and using all the modes that make strategic sense. Surveys and data on social media usage by demographics are great tools to this end. (See "Parents Use a Range of Social Media Platforms; Facebook Tops List" [Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe & Ellison, 2015], at right.)

What's your district or school's M.O. when it comes to family and community engagement? Are you stuck in the 20th-century, one-size-fits-all model and asking parents to meet you on your terms? Or are diversifying your approach and finding parents where they are and when convenient for them?

It's time to think differently about communication and move from your stakeholders' Outer Ring to their Inner Ring, in the name of student success.

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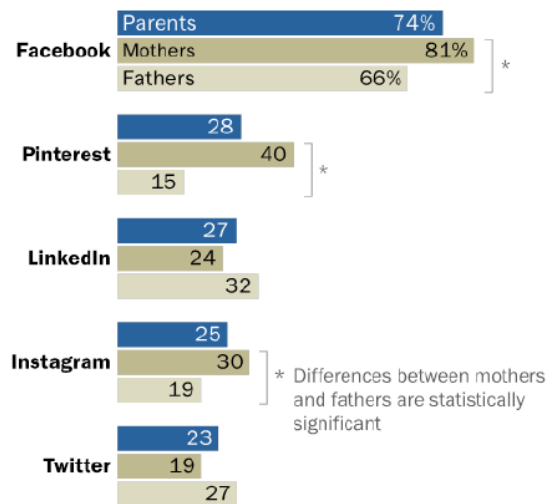
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## Parents Use a Range of Social Media Platforms; Facebook Tops the List

*Among all internet users, the % of parents who use each social media platform*



Source: Pew Research Center surveys, Sep. 11-14 and 18-21, 2014. N=1,597 internet users ages 18+. The margin of error for all internet users is +/- 2.9 percentage points. Parents in this survey were defined as those with children under age 18.

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## About the Author

**Bill Daggett** is the Founder and Chairman of the International Center for Leadership in Education.