

TRANSPARENCY PROJECT 2010: Where Alabama's School District Web Sites Are Now

April 2010



Alabama School Connection - www.alabamaschoolconnection.org

What Is The Transparency Project?

In May of 2009, the Alabama School Connection (ASC), formerly known as the Alabama School Community Information Network, conducted a review of Alabama's 132 school district web sites. That review found that while types of information on the school districts' web sites varied widely, most of Alabama's school districts maintain web sites with much useful information. The amount of information available online is impressive when recognizing that the effort to post information on a district web site is voluntary, with the exception of posting financial statements.

A new review of the state's school district web sites was conducted during the month of January 2010 to determine if districts had added information since the first review was conducted. All 132 school districts maintain web sites in accordance with Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) requirements. While the ALSDE requires that school systems maintain a web site, as of January 31, 2010 (the date the review was completed), the ALSDE required school systems to post only two pieces of information: monthly financial reports and check registers for the district (but not for individual schools). Dom Martel, senior program analyst with the ALSDE told the ASC that the ALSDE does not provide any guidance to any local school systems with respect to their web sites.

The ASC looked for the same 34 pieces of information it sought last year and added one piece of information to the list, the Student Handbook or Code of Conduct. Two totals are reported for each district: one total represents the 2010 total of the original 34 pieces of information, and the second total represents the 2010

total of the 35 pieces of information found on the web site during the review. [See Table 1 for full district results.](#) [Table 2 defines the information the ASC sought.](#)

Since the 2009 review was conducted, the State Board of Education began requiring all school districts to post their "check register" online. Prior to this requirement, the 2009 review showed that only one district, Bessemer City Schools, posted its check register online. The current review found that 107 of Alabama's 132 districts posted the required financial reports and 107 posted the required check registers. Since the January 2010 review, 18 school districts have added check registers to their district web sites. Those districts not yet posting check registers online have indicated to Peyton Wolcott, a national commentator who has been the driving force behind posting check registers online, that they intended to comply by March 2010 ([Peyton Wolcott's website](#)).

As public institutions supported by taxpayer dollars, school districts must be responsive to the concerns of various groups to build and maintain positive reputations and open communications, and district web sites are an important tool for doing so (Swann, Patricia. ["Got Web? Investing in a District Website"](#), *School Administrator*, May 2006). Even though only 55 % of Alabamians are currently "online" (Murtaugh, Dan, "Internet Access Hardest to Come by in Mississippi," *Mobile Press-Register*, February 18, 2010), web sites are an organization's public face to their communities and the world.

In March 2010, the Pew Research Center determined that the internet has surpassed newspapers and radio in popularity as a news platform on a typical day and now ranks just behind TV (Pew Research Center, ["The New News Landscape: Rise of the Internet"](#)). With more

Americans looking to the internet as a source of information, school districts would be well-served by developing an effective informational web site to communicate with their larger school community.

Who Is Served by a District Web Site?

School district web sites are communication vehicles that serve many different local, regional, and national public audiences. The local public audience includes all of the various stakeholders for the school district, not only families who have students enrolled in the school system but also business owners, community members, media outlets, and local government, to name a few.

Web sites are not only created to communicate with the local school community but also with organizations that can offer support to a school district, from local and regional grant makers to national scholarship organizations. The more information that can be provided online to an organization searching for possible recipients of monies they wish to grant, the more likely the district is to be well-matched with these types of opportunities. With the current state of the economy, school districts can certainly benefit from the increased exposure to revenue sources that a district web site allows.

Families looking to relocate are also likely viewers of school district web sites. (Wohlleb, Jennifer L. ["Twelve Essentials of a School District Website,"](#) School Administrator, May 2006.) The 2009 Transparency Project [listed a number of national web sites](#) that present school information for families wishing to compare schools and districts within Alabama. Without knowing from where these national web sites get their information, it is important for school districts to ensure accurate information is published on their web site to offset possible unintended misinformation on national sites.

Relationships with the media can be enhanced if information is easily accessible on the internet. Maintaining public information online can free up those school officials who may have to respond to ordinary information requests from the print and television media. With personnel stretched to the limit due to budget constraints, having as much public information online as possible is beneficial to all in the district.

What Do Other States Require for School District Web Sites?

In a review of southern and southeastern region state departments of education, the ASC found that only Arkansas has put together a list of requirements for web site postings for school districts (http://desarc.wmsc.k12.ar.us/web_requirements/default.htm) and mandated that all school districts maintain web sites.

Texas mandates that certain information be posted, but *only if* the district maintains a web site (<http://www.esc11.net/8234812414641/site/default.asp>).

Oklahoma, while not mandating specific types of postings, has a monthly contest for its school districts to recognize one district web site "based on how informative, creative, and user-friendly it is" (<http://sde.state.ok.us/Services/WebContest/default.html>).

South Carolina, in the Educational Accountability Act in 2009, required that a state report card of school and district performance be posted on district and school websites and that the "percentage of new trustees" that has completed the "orientation requirement" be posted on the district website (<http://www.ed.sc.gov/agency/Innovation-and-Support/documents/AppendixE.pdf>).

Georgia has made no mention of district requirements, except in a [letter](#) that stated that districts must post Supplementary Educational Services (SES) providers in districts that must provide them due to failing Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards. North Carolina required similar information regarding SES providers, but also requires districts to post the number of students who were eligible for and who participated in choice and Supplementary Educational Services (SES) as well as a list of the choice schools for the current school year (<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/nclb/communications/news/2009/200902.pdf>).

Mississippi has issued general guidelines, but does not require specific information be posted. The ASC could find no written information regarding mandates for district web site postings for Virginia, Florida, Tennessee, Louisiana and Kentucky.

What Information Should a School District Web Site Contain?

Surprisingly, there is very little information available regarding specifically what pieces of information a school district web site *should* contain as a best practice. The ASC found a number of articles (referenced at the end of this paper), but no general consensus. It appears that suggestions about what information should be included on a school district web site depend on who is making the suggestion. We found that suggestions came from two distinct groups: transparency advocates and public relations professionals. This further proves that web sites reach multiple public audiences and serve multiple purposes.

The Sunshine Review, a transparency advocate, has published guidelines for [School District Websites](#) and suggests the following information should be posted on a school district web site:

- (1) Budgets, present and past
- (2) School district agendas/meetings and minutes

- (3) Board members names and contact information, length of term and, if elected, party affiliation.
 - (4) School district administrators contact information and position
 - (5) How to file an open records request
 - (6) Teacher contracts
 - (7) Vendor contracts
 - (8) Audits, present and past
 - (9) Tax burden structure, i.e., which taxes support the school system
 - (10) Criminal background check policy
 - (11) Academic Performance
- All of these are public information and are available to school districts for posting.

The [National School Public Relations Association](#) (NSPRA) advocates creating a meaningful school district web site as part of a larger communication and public relations strategy. The NSPRA is an online resource for school communicators and has materials available to help districts build and maintain their web sites.

Because no "list" exists as a blueprint for a school district web site, it is left up to local school boards to determine what information should be posted on their web sites. NSPRA advises local school boards to determine what content is on their web site by interviewing key stakeholders to get their input (Piper, [The Only Way to Overhaul Your District's Site](#), www.nspr.org).

NSPRA suggests that one of the key questions in further developing a school district web site is answering the question "Who do we choose to serve through our web site?" (Piper, [The Only Way to Overhaul Your District's Web Site](#), www.nspr.org). Districts should then ask those key public groups what information they would like to view on the district web site as a starting place for ensuring the site truly serves the school district's target public audiences.

Keeping Information Current – A Word of Caution

Putting up a web site hastily and not maintaining it well can cause more problems than benefits for districts. Keeping information current is a must for school districts. Displaying last year's school calendar, or worse, last year's lunch menus, can raise questions in people's minds (Wohlleb, ["Twelve Essentials of a School District Website,"](#) School Administrator, May 2006). Assigning the duties of webmaster to a specific employee within the school district is the most streamlined way to ensure information remains current.

Compiling Information from Other Sources

Alabama school districts can easily link to much of the information the ASC sought from the [ALSDE web site](#). This includes: [report cards](#), [test data](#), [financial reports](#), and [budgets](#). In many cases, the information sought by the ASC is readily available within the district as the result of ordinary district processes. School calendars, mission statements, strategic plans, continuous improvement plans, enrollment information, lunch menus, lunch costs, free and reduced lunch applications, bid information, student handbooks, board policy manuals, board meeting times, minutes and agendas...all of this information is already produced as a matter of daily business and simply requires someone to post it to the web. Other public information, such as Student Incident Reports (SIR) and yearly audits, are produced as a matter of business and could easily be posted to the district's web site after being converted to Portable Document Format (PDF).

Since all of Alabama's school districts are required to maintain a web presence, each district most likely already has a person or department charged with maintaining the web site. It is important, however, that some organizational structure is provided to ensure that updates and additions to the web site information are routinely and promptly made. Access to current, relevant information online will offer the school community a greater insight into school district operations, successes and struggles. In turn, this openness will build trust and support, strengthening key partnerships within the school community.

Enhancing the Site Beyond the Facts

While the ASC simply looked at facts contained on Alabama's school district web sites, Swann makes a strong case for providing information far beyond the facts. Strategic school districts use their web sites to emphasize the *why* behind their stories in addition to the *what*. For example, school administrators should explain why the school board adopted a new graduation requirement for a course on study skills because simply stating facts does not convince the public that the decision was a wise one. Every web site posting should have a logical connection to some organizational goal (Swann, Patricia, ["Got Web? Investing in a District Website"](#), School Administrator, May 2006).

Review Findings

The 2010 review found much to celebrate. In 2009, only 12 districts had 20 or more pieces of the information the ASC sought. In 2010, the number of districts posting 20 or more pieces of information (the

criteria used to create our Top 12 Districts from 2009) has jumped to 35 districts! Eight systems have added *more than ten* pieces of information since the 2009 review and 30 systems have added six to ten additional pieces of information. [The full rankings of all 132 school districts are found in Table 3. Table 3.5 lists districts in order based on the original 34 pieces of information.](#)

Regarding specific types of information being made available online, the most progress was made in posting district check registers, which is now mandated by the ALSDE. The following other types of information also saw an increase in being posted online: district budgets, demographic information about school districts, standardized test data, curriculum standards by grade, lunch menus, parent links, and requests for proposals and/or bids. [Table 4 delineates progress from 2009 to 2010 by information type.](#)

In conducting its review, the ASC recognizes that some of the information sought may actually be present on a district's web site but was missed due to human error and difficulty of navigation. Some of the continuing struggles with conducting the review result from links to documents that are not standardized or expressed in user-friendly language. Another problem encountered is broken links. The ASC acknowledges that district web sites are works in progress; information that could not be found in January 2010 may now be more easily accessible. Such is the fluidity of working with the internet.

Regarding Terminology Used on District Web Sites

The ASC would be remiss if we did not request districts to please consider clarifying the educational jargon used on their web sites. While educators may understand that "BBSST" and "504" have to do with Special Education, that language is unfamiliar to families and other laypersons viewing the web site. Utilizing family- and community-friendly language on district web sites should be a goal of every district. For example, most districts post their check registers under the name "Accountability Report", which is the term the district uses, but most viewers simply refer to them as Check Registers. The better the partners in education understand each other's communications, the better the relationship can be among the partners.

Another problem the ASC uncovered is having to click multiple times to access a piece of information that could be retrieved with one click. For example, to look at Financial Documents on one web site, the viewer had to click on "Business Department", then "Finance Department", then "Documents", then "FY09",

then the unintelligible name of "Exhibit F-I-A" to get to the actual financial document. Another district appropriately utilized a "Financial Quick Link" to speed the process. For too many districts, however, such important documents as Free and Reduced Lunch Applications and Budget Documents are hidden under "Document Uploads".

Assistance Is Available

If your district would like a full web site review, complete with suggestions for how to make your site more user-friendly, both with language and navigation, the ASC is offering our services to Alabama's school districts at no cost to your district. Please contact the ASC through the [Alabama School Connection web site](#) or via e-mail at ASC@alabamaschoolconnection.org.

Summary

Since the original March 2009 review, tremendous progress has been made in the sheer amount of information available through Alabama's 132 public school district web sites. Knowing that the effort to post more information has been entirely voluntary and has been undertaken in an economically volatile time for school districts, the effort put forth by school districts is that much more impressive. It is apparent that many of Alabama's school districts fully recognize the advantage incurred by maintaining a web presence and the relationships enhanced by sharing meaningful information among a district's stakeholders. However, improvements can still be made to make the sites more user friendly, audience focused, and goal oriented. The ASC stands ready to serve Alabama's school districts by offering free services to districts wishing to enhance their web sites even further.

References

- Murtaugh, Dan, "Internet Access Hardest to Come by in Mississippi," *Mobile Press-Register*, February 18, 2010. [NSPRA web site](#)
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- Piper, Michael, [The Only Way to Overhaul Your District's Site](#), www.nspr.org
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