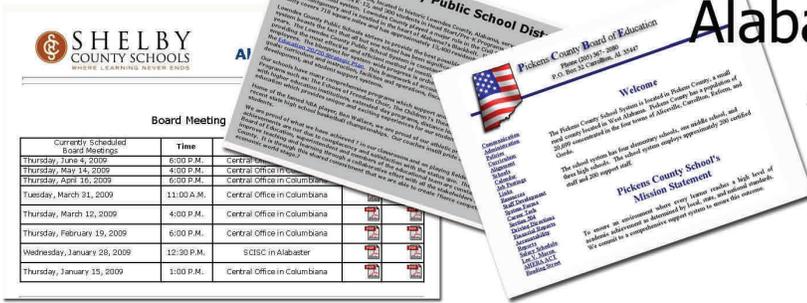


THE TRANSPARENCY PROJECT:

What Kinds of Information Alabama's School Districts Are Sharing With Our School Community

May 2009



Purpose of the Project

In recognition of Sunshine Week 2009, the [Alabama School Community Information Network \(ASCIN\)](#) conducted a review of Alabama's 132 public school district web sites. [Sunshine Week](#) is a national initiative designed to stimulate dialogue about the importance of open government and freedom of information. While the ASCIN was not a formal participant in the Sunshine Week activities, this review was conducted with Sunshine Week in mind.

From March 14 through April 5, 2009, the ASCIN viewed each available school district web site and searched for 34 specific pieces of information. That information ranged from simple contact information for district and school-level personnel to notices of board meetings to financial data and online grade links.

Despite the ease of distributing information to school communities through the World Wide Web, the ASCIN found that the amount and types of information shared on Alabama school districts' web sites varies widely. Of Alabama's 132 public school districts (67 county districts and 65 city districts), **all but one web site could be located.*** Our review located no evidence of guidance from the State Department of Education or other state authority as to what information school district web sites should contain, except for the requirement that a school district must post both their current budget and their most-recently-approved set of financial statements on their web site. (School Fiscal Accountability Act, Section 16-3A-6(d).)

The purpose of this review was not to evaluate web design effectiveness, but rather to focus on availability of information on the district web site. A number of vendors sell pre-packaged software programs for school district web site design

and hosting in the state of Alabama. SchoolINSites was the most popular among Alabama school districts, with 42 school systems utilizing their services. EdLine was used for four school systems' web sites. Other vendors include CommToolz and SharePoint. Most school district web sites had no indication of what program was used to design and support their site.

ASCIN did not assess the number of school community members able to access the Internet. Through our review, we simply noted the availability of easily posted public record information on school district websites. We recognize that posting such information meets an increasing need for school districts to be responsive to requests for information and creates an improved climate of good will and trust among school communities.

Usefulness of a School District Web Site

The potential usefulness to a school community of a district web site is virtually unlimited. The information shared on the web site can build community relationships, satisfy fiscal accountability requirements, promote the district's goals, attract new families to the community, and create an overall climate of openness and trust.

Not only do individual district web sites provide useful information specific to that district, but many national web sites offer comparisons among school districts. These sites compare such data as amounts spent per pupil, test scores, teacher-student ratios, and population demographics. [Table 1](#) contains a list of national web sites providing information on Alabama school districts.

"School district sites are a critical tool for getting information to those who need it, but they can also exist as true central

community hubs, capable of building better relationships and positive interactions among students, parents, faculty and the greater community," says Jason Mueller, communications manager at SchoolFusion, a web design and hosting service for school district. (Bona, "District Web Site Essentials", [District Administration](#), January 2009.)

With the increasing demand for fiscal accountability and transparency in public school transactions, a district's web site has the potential to create a climate of openness while also reducing the number of information requests to district and school employees. With ever-increasing economic pressures on our schools in terms of revenue, a district can quickly share information on school budgets and teacher units directly with families, rather than relying on the local media to accurately report those figures.

Besides being responsive to community requests, a district has the ability to be proactive in providing information to its school community through its web site that furthers the schools' goals. For example, if a school district wishes to raise the level of property taxes to improve the physical state of their schools, a district web site is a fast and effective way to distribute information in both written and visual form about the condition of the schools. If a school district needs to rezone students, a school's student achievement and class size data posted to the web site can be reassuring to families who know little about the new school to which their child may be rezoned.

In addition to serving the existing school community, the information posted to a school district's web site can also draw new families to the community. When families must relocate to a new area, the district web site can attract the new resi-

*This sentence was changed on June 9, 2009, to better reflect that the Wilcox County school district site could not be located during the review. We apologize for the error.

dents to their district by sharing information similar to the national comparison web sites. More often than not, the local school district can provide more up-to-date data than the national web sites, thereby highlighting recent school improvement efforts.

Finally, sharing of meaningful information by school districts, such as that for which the ASCIN looked in our review, enhances an overall climate of openness and trust within the community and increases positive feelings toward district administrators.

Methodology and Results

ASCIN undertook this Alabama school district web site review to determine if specific types of information were available to individual school communities via their district's web site.

[Sunshine Review](#) states that school districts should have the following [information](#) on their websites:

- Budget
- School district government meetings/agendas
- Elected officials of the school district
- School district administrators
- Lobbying/advocacy
- Access to government records and public documents
- Contracts with teachers and support staff
- Contracts with vendors
- Tax burden
- Criminal background checks
- Academic performance

ASCIN utilized Sunshine Review's proposal when determining which information to seek.

The information ASCIN sought can be grouped into seven categories, each containing a varying number of specific types of information, totaling 34 types altogether, as follows:

District: Mission Statement, Strategic Plan

Contact Information: District Personnel, School-Level Personnel, Board of Education

Public Documents: Board of Education Meeting Schedule, Current Board Minutes, Archived Board Minutes, Policy Manual

District-Specific Information: Curriculum/Standards Framework, Standards by Grade, Demographic Information, School Calendar, State Report Card, District Test

Data, Student Incident Reports

School Lunch Information: Lunch Menus, Lunch Cost, Free/Reduced Lunch Application Information

Financial Information: Required Financial Statements, Archived Financial Statements, Fiscal Year 2009 Budget, Check Registers/Cash Disbursements, School District Audit, Requests for Proposals/Bids, Expenditures by School, Employee Salary Schedule

Links and Resources: Student Links, Parent Links, Community Links, Teacher Links

In addition, we looked for whether a district utilizes electronic "emergency notification" procedures, whether online grades are available to students and families, and whether instructions are given regarding how to enroll in the school district. If a specific vendor's name for the web site design and support is mentioned, that was also noted.

Each Alabama school district's website was viewed and scored with either a "1" or a "0". A "1" means that the information could be found on the district's website. A "0" means the information could not be located on the district's website. No weight was given to any particular piece of information. [Table 2](#) contains the specific information by district. [Table 3](#) contains totals by information type.

Total scores were assigned to each school district. [Table 4](#) contains the total point scores by district. [Table 5](#) contains a breakdown of total point scores by district in rank order.

Twelve of Alabama's 132 school districts had 20 or more of these informational items posted (see sidebar). None had all 34 types of information. Shelby County Schools scored the highest with 27 of the 34 types of information posted on their district web site.

Summary

While some of Alabama's school districts are making a concerted effort to provide their community with information about their public schools, it is apparent from their current district web sites that other school districts have not yet made online communication a priority.

It was outside the scope of this review to identify what roadblocks may prevent school districts from offering more information on their websites. Determining how best to assist Alabama's school districts with making the most effective use

THE TOP TWELVE

The following districts posted 20 or more of the 34 pieces of the information HSCIN sought:

[Shelby County Schools](#): 27

[Madison City](#): 24

[Blount County](#): 22

[Mobile County](#): 22

[Montgomery County](#): 22

[Elmore County](#): 21

[Florence City](#): 21

[Hoover City](#): 21

[Baldwin County](#): 20

[Calhoun County](#): 20

[Huntsville City](#): 20

[Morgan County](#): 20

of their information resources will require additional research. Expanding online sharing of data requires building organizational skills and creating efficient work flow.

Expanding District Web Sites

To further community engagement by providing our larger school community with meaningful information about their schools, the authors of this study offer our services, **free of charge**, to any school district interested in posting more of their community's information online. Please contact ASCIN@ASCIN.org for more information on the services the ASCIN offers.

Further Reading

[District Web Site Essentials](#), Laura R. Bona, [District Administration](#), January 2009.

[Build It Better](#), Michelle R. Davis, [Education Week's Digital Directions](#), January 16, 2009, online.

[School District Websites](#), Sunshine Review, <http://sunshinereview.org>

Where to Find the Tables

On the [ASCIN website](#):

[Table 1—National District Information Websites](#)

[Table 2—Information by District](#)

[Table 3—Information Type Totals](#)

[Table 4—District Point Scores](#)

[Table 5—District Point Scores in Rank Order](#)

Complete information can be found at:

www.ascin.org/TransparencyProject.htm

THE ALABAMA SCHOOL COMMUNITY INFORMATION NETWORK was formed to engage Alabama's families community in our children's education.