A Web Content Primer

➜ Choose a Web presence that matches your resources.

When you review the school and district Web sites that are currently online, you find a wide range of Web site sizes and styles, ranging from one-page sites to multi-level marketing tools. There is value in maintaining a presence on the World Wide Web at any level, so long as that Web presence represents you well.

To ensure that your Web site presents your school or district in a professional manner, it is important that you choose the level of Web presence that matches your resources. While a very basic Web site lacks the depth of information found in larger sites, you can maintain a basic Web site on even the smallest budget and you can grow the site over time.

As a Web site gets larger and more detailed, so does your commitment of resources to its maintenance. You should ensure that you have the ongoing maintenance resources available before you engage in an expansion effort; these resources may be in the form of devoting additional staff time or contracting out the maintenance of your Web site. You will find that these additional resources are somewhat balanced over time by a reduced workload in other areas, which happens as people learn to rely upon your Web site for information that they would have stopped by or called for in the past. It takes time for this effect to emerge, however, and if you cannot budget for the ongoing maintenance, then it is not yet time for expansion.

➜ A basic Web presence is the online equivalent of a listing in the phone book. This type of site would generally include only the most fundamental information:

- Contact information for at least each main office and department heads (including addresses with maps and directions, phone numbers and e-mail addresses);
- Mission statement and organizational focus;
- Basic community description; and
- Basic school or district facts: student and staff demographics, general student services information, recent test scores, and other largely static information.

The advantage to such a site is that it requires minimal maintenance to keep this information current.

➜ An intermediate Web presence serves as a resource and includes the above as well as more extensive and time-sensitive information:

- Menus (a very popular addition, which should be made easy to find);
- Regular and late-start school schedules;
- Emergency information (procedures for school delays and closures, etc.);
- Board member bios, meeting agendas and policies;
- Message from the principal or superintendent (regularly updated);
- Athletic schedules and student activities opportunities;

- Bus schedules;
- Upcoming events, including appropriate community activities;
- Budget and financial data: how schools are funded and where the money goes;
- Historical or background information about your school or district and your community;
- Links to outside organizations which serve the same students and families you do (little leagues, libraries, parks departments, non-profit youth organizations, etc.);
- A section for the download of commonly used forms;
- Parental online access to grades and student progress information;
- Employment and professional development opportunities;
- Employee online access to e-mail and/or grading programs; and
- Complete staff lists with contact information. (This should only be added if this can be maintained automatically or you have the resources to ensure this remains up-to-date.)

This added depth entails a greater commitment to upkeep, but establishes your site as a more useful resource to your constituents.

➔ At the highest level, your Web site can serve as a powerful and interactive communications tool that your audiences will turn to when the stakes are high. These types of Web sites include all the above information as well as:

- Regular updates about the issues facing your school or district;
- Highlights, kudos, and human interest stories (which are changed as often as your resources allow … weekly is good, every day or every other day is better);
- Opportunities for community input; and
- Critical/immediate information (such as information about a weather delay or school lock-down).

If you update your site regularly with accurate and timely information about the issues that are important to your audiences, people will grow accustomed to checking it for the latest information on developing or critical issues.

Content Guidelines for Web Sites of Any Size

After you determine the scope of the Web site that best matches your resources, there are some basic guidelines to remember when establishing or reviewing the content of your Web site.

➔ Update or Delete! One of the worst mistakes Web publishers make is to create a Web site that is too large for them to maintain properly. Readers will forgive a little outdated information in a brochure because of production timelines, but there is no excuse for obsolete material on your Web site. It is far better to have a basic, but current, Web site than to have a large and detailed, but outdated, site. Outdated pages cast doubt over the accuracy and legitimacy of all the information in your Web site.

If you are just starting a Web site, start small; only establish pages for content that you know you can maintain. You can always add new features and increasingly detailed content over time.

If you already have a Web site that includes pages you have not updated even though the information has changed, remove the old pages. You can add them back when you have more time or additional resources to devote to your site.

➔ Consider your audience. Think about your site from the perspective of each of your various constituent groups. What do they want from your Web site? As a

parent or family member, what would you look up most often? As a community member, taxpayer or voter, what would you want to know about your area's schools? As an employee, what types of resources would make the Web site most useful? With those perspectives in mind, ensure that the items that are of the greatest interest are the easiest to find.

Be mindful of your area's technological infrastructure. Keep image and file sizes to a minimum whenever possible; mark large files with their file type and size so people know how long a link will take to fully open. This is a good practice for all sites, but it becomes critical in rural areas and areas where many of your constituents will be viewing your site over a slower dial-up connection.

➔ Ensure your design supports and enhances your content. A good, clean design will lend credibility to the content you post and will make it easier for your constituents to find what they are looking for; a bad design will distract and detract from your content.

Your design should be consistent throughout your Web site. Avoid the temptation to have a different look for each section of your site; it will make your site seem choppy and amateurish. In addition, people often surf into the internal pages of your site without going through your home page, so take care that each page can stand alone. Include only one subject or idea per page and make sure your design includes room on all pages for your school or district name, logo, and a link to your home page.

➔ Stay out of jail!

- Do not post or use copyrighted materials without the author's written permission. It is also a good idea to maintain a current copyright on your site to give you some added control over the use of your logo, images and content.

- Establish an attorney-reviewed board policy regarding the posting of student photos, and then follow that policy scrupulously. Always have written permission to post anyone's image on your site (including that of staff members), and remember to give photographic credit as appropriate.

- Follow your board's policy regarding the inclusion of advertising or the promotion of commercial, for-profit activities.

- If you are going to store or transmit confidential information via your Web site, you are responsible for the proper encryption and protection of this data.