

State education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) made clear in a recent Reform Support Network (RSN) survey and follow-up interviews that staff must have the capacity to successfully engage stakeholders through social media.¹ This is not a new challenge for government; staff capacity – the number of staff and their access to training and technology – determines whether the SEA can drive innovation.

SEAs and LEAs listed staffing and lack of training as their top two concerns when the RSN asked them about social media implementation challenges, trumping worries about negative comments and privacy issues. The impact of this capacity challenge is direct; State and local agency communicators state the following:

- The Minnesota Department of Education would like to expand its successful efforts into photo- and video-sharing services such as Instagram, YouTube and Vine, but won't launch until it has the capacity to properly support the extra work.
- The Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) would like to better track the success of its social media engagement through monthly metrics reports that track followers, reposts and comments, among other items. These reports could help DDOE find areas for improvement, but it doesn't have the capacity to do the work in house or funds to hire an outside tracking firm.

¹ The Reform Support Network (RSN) conducted research to develop the series of social media tip sheets. First, the RSN conducted a social media questionnaire in January and February 2013, completed by 23 SEAs and 11 LEAs. The RSN then conducted follow-up interviews in September and October 2013 with representatives from eight SEAs and two LEAs.



- The Kentucky Department of Education believes that if it had the additional capacity, it could be far more creative with using video to create compelling content now being posted to TeacherTube.

Small in-house communications offices coordinate communications and social media within most SEAs and LEAs. While they have some internal support and use information developed by colleagues in many divisions throughout the agencies, these are public entities utilizing public dollars, so hiring more staff or contracting teams of outside partners is not typically an acceptable solution.

States working to succeed in the face of these challenges have instead looked in house and outside their agencies for innovative solutions. As part of its continued support for States, the RSN is creating a series of social media tip sheets to highlight some of these innovative practices, including building capacity, the subject of this social media tip sheet.

Most States and districts contacted by the RSN report that the responsibility for social media is spread across several staff members. As noted in the first tip sheet on innovative engagement, some agencies are breaking with traditional strategies and tactics to grow audiences by asking their department chief to lead social media efforts, using different social media platforms and engaging with non-traditional media such as bloggers to help showcase efforts. Similarly, States and districts are implementing innovative practices to build the capacity of their agencies to successfully engage stakeholders through social media.

Some of the innovative activities being used to build capacity include the following three activities.

Innovation One: Sharing Content Creation

Most States and districts house and control social media efforts within their communications offices. Content leads within departments help provide ideas and materials to post to social media and, in some cases, draft the posts themselves. Some agencies are being more aggressive, using staff far outside the communications team to create and post content on their own.



The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) has at least eight separate accounts on Twitter in addition to the **main news**

Twitter account. GaDOE's Twitter accounts include separate accounts focused specifically on topics such as **special education**, curriculum topics such as **mathematics** and **English language arts** and State standards and **migrant education**. Since the accounts are specialized, they deliver the content that their audiences care most about and save these same

audiences from having to sift through information from much lengthier GaDOE posts to get what they need; however, the department's main news account and the superintendent also copy tweets from these accounts to amplify the voice.

Georgia officials worked with GaDOE policy and content leaders who expressed interest in using Twitter to create the pages, develop content and begin using social media. They opted to trust content creators to post and manage the sites themselves, without oversight or review by the communications team.

Enlisting a group of dedicated staff to create content to be posted on social media isn't unique among State government entities. The challenge for in-house communications teams is ceding control of content creation to allow them to better engage with certain elements of the audience (for example, by having GaDOE's curriculum director create content that is more appealing to teachers who are interested in curriculum issues). There is also a risk that adding accounts for each topic area within an agency could ultimately dilute its overall message or brand.

Innovation Two: Sharing Duties, Creating "Beat" Reporters

SEAs that choose to keep content creation in the communications division also have increased capacity by spreading the responsibility for social media across the division. Rather than rely on one social media manager, some communications divisions split content creation among various staff members. Because of the constant demands of social media, some departments have taken a week-on, week-off approach among their communications staff.

Nathan Olson, communications manager for the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), said that the four-person communications team initially handled social media as a free-for-all, updating social media accounts when

they had time to do so. OSPI recently adopted a staffing plan that allows staff members to rotate on and off as point person.



The State of Maryland implemented a hub-and-spoke social media strategy where a central office within each State agency includes

several social media managers (the hub). Each manager is responsible for social media accounts radiating out to key audiences (the spokes), according to the State's *Social Media Handbook*. These managers rotate weekly to ensure that none of them feels overwhelmed by the responsibilities.

Olson of the Washington State OSPI said that while the week-on, week-off model of management is better than having no real coordination, it is proving difficult to manage given the unpredictability of communications issues within the communications division. He is contemplating a reporting system where each person in the division takes on a different content area and manages that content full time.

Creating this type of beat reporting system is similar to the systems that newspapers and other media adopt. They often hire specialists to cover particular topics, such as education policy, health care, politics or specific sports. This system allows those in the communications division to become experts in those topic areas, mine specific content areas within the department for news and

anticipate potential problems or questions that key audiences might have.

Innovation Three: Looking Outside, Creating Brand Ambassadors

The communications efforts of education agencies are even more effective when those outside the agency echo and amplify the core messages. Many SEAs engage directly with district offices in their State, seeking content and collaborating on material to post on social media. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) uses key moments like State Board of Education meetings and legislative debates to inform and engage its audience. TEA posted "day and night" throughout the debate around testing and graduation plans, reaching 250,000 people through "likes" and "shares" by others.

District agencies find that they have a slightly easier task than SEAs in creating content that will be shared because it is topical to a general public (for example, items such as weather-related closings, bus delays, even school menus).

Rather than hope that allies will share social media content, some States have formalized the request, providing regular updates to groups, organizations and individuals who they specifically ask to share content on their own social media channels. The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) has activated a group of social media "ambassadors" and engaged teachers, district leaders, advocacy and education partner organizations such as the Colorado School Public Relations Association. CDE trains ambassadors on key issues and, when events warrant, the social media manager sends information encouraging those organizations to share and amplify the core messages.

Recently, *The Denver Post* authored a story highlighting district-level changes in school curriculum. CDE forwarded the article to illustrate the hard work that teachers in Colorado are doing to make the new standards a reality, and encouraged





ambassadors to share the article on Twitter. Included in the email were three potential draft tweets, complete with shortened Website addresses to limit the

characters on Twitter and appropriate hashtags (for example, #EdColo or #CommonCore), which helped collate and monitor key social media topics.

Amy Skinner, director of communications at CDE, said that the ambassador program has helped the department significantly increase its social media voice. For the fourth month in a row, CDE reported a dramatic increase in engagement; in January 2014, Twitter followers were up 4 percent, Twitter engagement was up 10 percent and Facebook likes were up 16 percent.

By using a Web address shortening service, Bitly, which can track the number of clicks, CDE found that its link was clicked through 74 times when it shared *The Denver Post* article. Because shortening services such as Bitly allow the user to track specific information about who shares each post, CDE determined that the most shares came from people copying or responding to a tweet from an elementary school principal in Craig, a small city in northwestern Colorado. This information will help CDE engage with that principal or others in the future, Skinner said.

Key Takeaways

Building capacity to use social media effectively remains a key priority for State and local education agencies. Several agencies are achieving success by asking multiple employees to create content for social media postings, creating beat reporters within the agencies and asking ambassadors from SEAs and LEAs to amplify the messages.

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