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State education agencies are investing more time and effort to communicate effectively and engage with district, school and classroom leaders, parents, students and other key audiences about the important changes happening in their States. They are using myriad tools to do so, including forums, meetings, direct contact, mainstream and social media.

State and district education agencies have high hopes for their social media use. They are investing increasing amounts of resources, time and energy to communicate effectively through social media. The Reform Support Network (RSN) survey of State education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) found more than 95 percent of the agencies use or plan on using Twitter or Facebook, 8 in 10 use or plan on using YouTube and more than half are either currently blogging or plan on blogging.<sup>1</sup>

It is critically important for States and districts to get the most out of their social media efforts. Many SEAs and LEAs are finding new and innovative ways to use social media to inform, involve, prompt inquiry and inspire their key audiences.

### **Innovation One: Utilizing the Voice of Chiefs**

Elliot Krieger, public information officer for the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), sees their social media policy as a simple matter –

<sup>1</sup> 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.



people don't follow institutions, they follow people. The person, in this case, is Rhode Island Education Commissioner Deborah Gist.

Since taking over in Rhode Island four years ago, Gist has amassed an **impressive 9,056 followers on Twitter** as of March 2014, the primary social media tool used by RIDE. The number of people who are following Gist eclipses the numbers following many other SEA chiefs and entire State agencies on Twitter.

Krieger said that RIDE decided to utilize Gist as their primary social media voice because people are always more compelling to follow than a faceless institution, and Gist is a social media natural. She came to Rhode Island interested in using technology to help convey the SEA's key messages and uses her smartphone and laptop incessantly to communicate, insisting on personally responding to each email she receives. The result is a flurry of content that drives interest and followers. Gist has tweeted more than 10,000 times and will tweet, on average, at least six or seven times per day.

It's clear that Gist embraces the theory of social media that the best way to attract viewers and engage audiences is to be interesting. Krieger said that Gist doesn't worry about straying off message or wandering into trouble (although she has spawned her own sparsely viewed parody site on Twitter).

"The real question is 'How do you engage your audience?' Having something interesting to say. Some edge, some wit," Krieger said.

One recent day, Gist tweeted 45 times. Many of the tweets were part of Ed Chat Rhode Island, during which Gist answered questions from fellow tweeters about education communications and policy, and quoted everyone from George Washington Carver to Mike Tyson.

Krieger said that having social media sites has allowed the Rhode Island commissioner to stay engaged and offer a constant stream of messaging through several controversies around assessments and graduation requirements. In the absence of social media platforms, she would have had to communicate through mainstream media or press releases.

New York, Ohio, Kentucky and other States also use their superintendent or commissioner as a lead storyteller. New York State Education Department Commissioner John King has more than 6,700 followers on Twitter, and Kentucky Commissioner Terry Holliday has more than 4,100 followers (as of March 2014).

Utilizing the voice of chiefs does come with a challenge. The challenge for RIDE or any agency relying so prominently on an individual voice will be starting over when that

leader ultimately departs, Krieger suggested in his interview. "That is a challenge around building up social media platforms around



a single personality," he said. "If [Gist] left today, we would need to build a whole new brand. Her followers would follow her."

Some States solve this by creating generically-named accounts for their education chiefs, which are utilized like personalized accounts. This way, an account such as @KYCommissioner, currently being used as the Twitter platform for Kentucky Commissioner Holliday, can be transferred seamlessly to Holliday's successor.

## Innovation Two: Trying New Platforms

Facebook and Twitter are ubiquitous now among SEA and LEA communicators. The truth is that many agencies have a hard time keeping up with the demand required by these simple micro-blogging platforms, reporting that capacity challenges are always present within SEAs and LEAs.

But many education agencies are still seeking other platforms and strategies to attract key audiences. One fast-growing segment is Pinterest, which Edutopia reported receives a half-million posts about education topics daily among its 48 million users – many of whom are teachers. SEAs and LEAs know that they must reach teachers with key messages and on critical issues. SEAs, in particular, report difficulty finding the right vehicles with which to reach educators (whether through messaging delivered to teachers through district and school leaders or via outside groups such as educators' unions).

Social media allows agencies to connect more directly and use less formal formats to provide information on the topics that educators care most about.

Georgia, among other States, is experimenting with posting materials for teachers on Pinterest to amplify communications already being delivered by superintendents, principals and advocacy groups. The [Georgia Department of Education's \(GaDOE\) Pinterest page](#) features 24 boards with different topic areas such as "GA's Awesome Teachers," and separate folders for Common Core Georgia Performance

Standards (CCGPS) in mathematics, English language arts and others. It features 140 different pins (documents, photos and other materials) – much of it geared toward educators. The content, featuring more images and graphics than dry text, is very user friendly.



The topics embedded in the **CCGPS English language arts** board include materials that range from the essential (resources for explaining the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards for reading) to the informative (plans for analyzing plot, character and theme for second grade) to the entertaining (15 grammar goofs that make us look silly and 8 phrases we owe to William Shakespeare).

Other States are joining in the use of Pinterest, including **Alabama**, **Florida** and **Arizona**.

### Innovation Three: Engaging Directly With Non-Traditional Media

All agency communication offices work directly with members of the traditional media, informing and engaging them on key topics, and offering proactive and reactive communications. But the changing mainstream media landscape means that more and more of the key audiences of SEAs and LEAs are turning to non-traditional outlets for information, including social media platforms and bloggers.

Typically, SEAs and LEAs have kept an eye on non-traditional education blogs, but not through any kind of formal monitoring or engagement. However, Ohio is an exception. It has engaged with and monitored bloggers who write about education in the Buckeye State. Michael Sponhour, executive director of communications and outreach at the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), says that its monitoring of blogs and interaction with bloggers revealed that many of the most involved education bloggers are educators themselves.

ODE hasn't gone so far as to encourage bloggers to cover certain stories or topics; however, after actively engaging bloggers at a statewide conference, Sponhour's team created the **Ohio Education Blogroll** on its Website. The blogroll currently lists 38 blogs, many of them authored by and for teachers. Sponhour says that listing the bloggers on the Website in such a high-profile manner encourages them to be more accurate and accountable, and to blog more frequently on important topics.



### Innovation Four: Keeping It Social – and Fun

One of the best ways to engage key audiences on social media is by consistently posting interesting and relevant material. The easiest way to drive success on social media is by posting content that others will find so compelling and interesting they will share it with their followers. While sharing resources or other content will happen because some just want to spread the word, many will share or retweet something primarily because they agree with the statement or sentiment—a fact of social media that shouldn't be lost on users.

States are working to find ways to be compelling and even humorous (but still informative) on social media, realizing that social media attracts the most interest when it is compelling. Posting consistently compelling and engaging material is never easy when the topic at hand is a matter of public policy.

Many agencies have begun hosting and participating in regular Twitter education discussions (most frequently called Ed chats) where topics of interest are discussed online at a certain, sometimes regular time. Users are able to follow along, send questions or make comments in the public discussion. State departments in Ohio and Colorado have, among others, had success with Twitter Ed chats.



To remain interesting, some agencies are using aggressive tactics. The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), for instance, created a literacy mascot, a stuffed frog named “Read-It,” who travels the State and promotes literacy efforts on social media. “Social media

can be used to push news out, but we also need to create a way that people are getting something that they can’t get anywhere else,” said Josh Collins, director of communications for MDE, of the use of a stuffed animal to make the topic light, humorous and

engaging. “Read-It is a way to engage people of all ages in person and through social media and creates an opportunity for conversation around reading and education”

## Key Takeaways

When it comes to innovative engagement on social media, SEAs and LEAs can and are making strides by utilizing the voice of their chiefs, trying new platforms, engaging directly with non-traditional media and keeping their communications fun, lively and social. The agencies executing these innovative forms of engagement are finding continued success in reaching key audiences on the important topics of ongoing reform.

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