• Creating a successful social media policy

Social media is an important tool that can enhance learning, but it must be used carefully to protect student and staff privacy and ensure online safety. This tip sheet has legal guidelines and tips for parents. It is a follow-up to the October issue, *Communicating effectively through social media.*

• Hold an open house for calm and fair public involvement

Some hot-button issues can hijack normal public proceedings. Districts can minimize disruption and conflict by implementing effective communication channels and planning old-fashioned open houses to discuss the issues that need extra discussion with the community. Read how and why to plan an open house for your board.

• Image isn’t everything. Except when it leads to persistent under-enrollment.

Some schools get a bad rap based on widespread and inaccurate community perceptions. Read one parent’s efforts to rebrand his neighborhood school and reverse the under-enrollment trend.

• Think outside the box to engage volunteers

Most schools want more volunteers. Here are tips to find, motivate and recruit new volunteers for your school.

• Update for parents on Common Core and Smarter Balanced

The first Smarter Balanced test scores are in, and the results are better than expected. Read key points for parents and a list of resources to share about Common Core and Smarter Balanced.

• Insights for Parents: Setting limits on screen time

Students and adults alike spend a significant number of hours every day with digital gadgets. Read tips for age-appropriate media consumption and why parents may want to monitor their children’s screen time.
Creating a Successful Social Media Policy

Social media is a hot issue in school administration today. Districts and schools are developing unique ways to use social media to reach out to the community, engage students outside the classroom, and even provide new and exciting teaching material by connecting students across the globe for live discussions of current events. (See Communicating effectively through social media, October 2015 issue).

The other side of this coin is, of course, privacy concerns when students and teachers are engaging with each other and the world outside the classroom.

Safety is the first priority

Cyber security experts suggest starting with social tools developed specifically for education. Leslie Bowman, an online professor and author with a background in private security focusing on child abuse and school violence prevention, says this is step one. She advocates using social media in K-12 classrooms with the caveat that the sites are private, secure, education-oriented and supervised, and monitored by teachers or administrators.

Social media sites designed for classroom use, such as Edmodo or Edutopia, provide a protected social environment similar to the classroom, where young students can share ideas and collaborate on projects under the watchful eye of the teacher. These tools also help students learn online etiquette.

Consider the legal issues

Bowman says there is legal liability to consider when allowing students to go online during school. When most people think of social media, she said, the sites that immediately come to mind are Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest, which are open to anyone. (Read more: www.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=3758300)

“With stalking and bullying and sexual predators, you just don’t want to have K-12 students doing collaborative projects on public social-media sites,” she said.

The minimum age for most social media accounts is 13 years, which is the age set by Congress in the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). This prohibits websites from collecting information on children younger than 13 years without parental permission. The minimum age to open an account on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, Kik, and Snapchat is 13. For Vine, Tinder and Yik Yak, it’s 17. For YouTube the age is 18, but a 13-year-old can sign up with a parent’s permission. Despite these clearly stated and published age restrictions, large and growing numbers of children 12 and under are using social media networks, often with their parent’s knowledge and consent. http://huff.to/1vW69NS
According to The Social Age Study by knowthenet.org.uk, approximately 59 percent of children have already used a social network by the time they are 10. Facebook has the most users under the age of 13 – 52 percent of 8 to 16-year-olds admit they ignore Facebook’s age restriction. http://bit.ly/1ixoVmo

Nearly three-quarters of teens have or have access to a smartphone. Aided by convenience and constant access provided by mobile devices, 92 percent of teens report going online daily, including 24 percent who say they go online “almost constantly,” according to an April 2015 Pew Research Center study. www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015

Facebook is the most popular and frequently used social media platform among teens, with 71 percent of all teens using the site. Half of teens use Instagram and four-in-ten use Snapchat.

School districts are missing out on opportunities to engage with students and parents if they’re not using social media as an outreach tool. Parents of schoolchildren use social media more than ever before, with 74 percent of parents using Facebook and 94 percent of those parents sharing, posting and commenting, as opposed to simply viewing and scrolling. Parents and Social Media, Pew Research, July 2015, www.pewinternet.org/files/2015/07/Parents-and-Social-Media-FIN-DRAFT-071515.pdf

Expand your policy beyond the classroom

What all this social media use means is that a dedicated social media website for students is only one of the elements necessary for the protection of students, staff and board members. A robust social media policy needs to consider all interactions that take place on social media sites where parents, students and teachers congregate.

What is the school district policy on teachers communicating on Facebook with students? What about former students? And what is the policy for tagging student athletes in postings of school photos of sports events? Your staff needs to able to access the school’s policy on these thorny questions easily.

Steven Anderson, author of How to Create Social Media Guidelines for Your School published in collaboration with Edutopia and Facebook, offers advice for districts that are interested in creating an exciting, social online environment for children without compromising on safety.

Anderson, also the director of instructional technology for North Carolina’s Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, suggests a simple seven-step process to create the right plan for your district.

1. Consider your district’s culture.
2. Organize a broad-based team.
3. Research various viewpoints on the issue, both nationally and locally.
4. Draft a policy.
5. Get feedback from your community as well as your school board and school attorney.
6. Introduce the new policies to the community.
7. Review the document periodically to keep up with the rapidly changing social media environment.

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Educate your parents

Also, a certain amount of parent education needs to be a part of the plan. Parents need to be aware of the risks of youth using social media, such as being subject to cyberbullying and online harassment, placing inappropriate content online, Facebook depression and decreased sleep. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than 2 hours of screen time per day, which includes time spent watching television, playing video games, or surfing the net. (See Insights for Parents in this issue.)

Social media is a rich and varied landscape with an almost unlimited environment for learning. This limitless landscape includes risks. With the help of your community, you are in a position to create a social media policy that protects your students from abuse, your teachers from having to guess at how to interact with students, and your school district from risk.

Quick tips for parents from HealthyChildren.org:

- Learn about social media technologies first hand. There is no better way to understand social sites than to have a profile yourself. It will also enable you to “friend” your kids and monitor them online.
- Let your children know that their use of technology is something you want and need to know about.
- For kids of all ages, ask daily: “Have you used the computer and the Internet today?”
- Technology use will vary by age. Tweens are likely to use more instant messaging and texting, while teens use those technologies and also networking sites such as Facebook. Ask daily how your family used those tools with questions such as: “What did you write on Facebook today?” “Any new chats recently?” “Did anyone text you today?”
- Share a bit about your daily social media use as a way to facilitate daily conversation about your kids’ online habits.
- Get your kids talking about their social media lives if you can, so you know what they are doing.
- Keep the computer in a public part of your home, such as the family room or kitchen and check on what your kids are doing online and how much time they are spending there.

www.pedialliance.com/socialmediaguide

Contributed by Gay Campbell, communications consultant Megan J. Wilson, freelance writer and communications consultant, Los Angeles, Calif.
Hold an open house for calm and fair public involvement

Have you witnessed a special interest group “take over” a public hearing or meeting? Most seasoned board members have. Districts can minimize disruption and conflict with effective communication channels and designing smoothly operating decision-making processes.

If your community expresses frustration at decision points, you may want to consider hosting a school board open house. As the steward of your taxpayers’ investment in education, you owe it to anyone who elected you to make it as easy as possible to engage with you – without letting certain groups dominate, monopolize your limited time, or drive others away.

You can level the playing field with an old-fashioned open house, especially for issues that you expect to be contentious, like budget cuts, boundary decisions or sex education.

What is an open house?

An open house, or open forum, is an opportunity to share the facts and get input in an informal, non-threatening setting. It is designed to accommodate different communication styles – comfortable communicators and introverts who do not like the spotlight. It allows participants to be outspoken or discretely leave a note.

The format is not a big open meeting with a formal agenda where people line up at the microphone. That’s the typical public meeting format. In an open house, participants may drop in at their convenience and stay as long as they like. Leaving a comment is not required. It’s okay to just come learn and say nothing. Knowledgeable staff are on hand to greet people, share information, explain details and answer questions.

Key features of an open house

There is no set time; people can drop in during the timespan.

Consider offering refreshments, possibly hosted by a high school culinary class.

You can do more than one open house on the same topic, giving the public more choices that fit into their schedule to attend.

There are no formal presentations or discussions – just casual, face-to-face discussions and displays, handouts or exhibits. Be sure to have staff on hand to explain them.

There are no audience seats – just tables with chairs and staff/board members available to answer questions and take feedback.

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Attendees are encouraged to give opinions, comments and preferences, orally or in writing. Include one table with laptops opened to a site with background information about the topic/issue you’re gathering feedback on. Encourage people to leave comments online by including an email address. Or post an online poll to get input about whether the event was effective. This may appeal more to younger “tech savvy” citizens and parents, but it shouldn’t replace face-to-face discussions.

Open Forum Room Arrangement

Information sharing

Information is presented buffet style, including graphics, charts and related documents – on the wall, on tables or in displays.

Staff are present to answer questions.

With no fixed agenda, people can drop in at their convenience, usually during a two-hour time.

Written take-home materials or postcards with websites addresses are available.

Decision-makers (board members) attend to allow citizens who are uncomfortable with “going on the record” to simply sit and talk. There should be a method of capturing comments and opinions by decision-makers. Make a transcript of comments or feedback summaries available to interested citizens after the event.

Why is this model useful?

Open forums are done in an informal, friendly atmosphere where decision-makers sit face to face with citizens rather than behind a table facing a larger audience.

They encourage participation to “go deeper” into the community, rather than staging traditional forums that are more suited to those who are comfortable speaking at hearings or board meetings.

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It’s an inexpensive but effective way to disseminate information and get feedback prior to formal board discussion and voting.

Participants have many opportunities to get information and clarifying answers straight from the source, rather than rely later on rumors, second-guessing or on social media posts and news stories.

They help board members focus on issues, not political positions. This focus allows participants to consider strategies to help propose solutions.

**Inviting participants**

Use normal communication channels to invite community members to an open house. Use news releases, fliers, e-blasts, posting on Facebook/twitter, district and school-based newsletters if you still use them. Include the fact that you take public comment at each board meeting, too, which will send the message that you always seek public opinion and operate with transparency. Always include your website and contact information. Include a website with an online poll the public can take if unable to attend.

Board members can also send personal invitations, whether through old-fashioned letter, phone calls or posting on your own social media. Superintendents should send invites to their Key Communicator Network, if they have one.

**Follow up**

Assign someone – usually a staff member – to take notes at each table. Include at least one table where people can write comments that they can leave anonymously or, preferably, with their names, so you can follow up personally with them. Provide comment cards that allow a choice, but encourage people to leave their names if they’d like you to follow up.

**On the record?**

Check with your district’s legal counsel to confirm exactly what information emerging from an open house is considered public record. Be sure to tell participants at the open house how you plan to share information from the meeting. You may post updates during the open house, either as part of a display or in conversations. If a quorum of your board isn’t present, the rules about what constitutes a public meeting may not apply, although we encourage the results of these open houses be made public. Your citizens – your taxpayers – should have access to concerns, input and comments made during these sessions because board members are likely to use this information to make decisions affecting their schools!

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*Contributed by Shannon Priem, APR, communications consultant; and Claudia Stewart, APR, communications director, Newburg (Oregon) School District.*
Rebranding your school to improve public perceptions and reduce student transfers: A parent shares a first-hand account of how he used his expertise in marketing to help revitalize and reverse declining enrollment at his neighborhood high school. The Go Mad! – Madison High School Open Enrollment Marketing Campaign received the Golden Medallion Award this year from the National School Public Relations Association. Read more about the campaign on NSPRA’s website: http://bit.ly/1Q2ScWC.

When I was in tenth grade I returned to my neighborhood high school, which I had transferred out of my freshman year because it was, by most accounts, a “bad” school. Although I had never actually visited the school, I was told I could expect less rigor, less opportunity, and more of the kind of disruptive, good-grades-are-for-losers attitude among the student body that would hinder my chances of thriving academically and getting into a good college.

Fortunately, after schlepping all the way across town every day for a year to attend the “good” high school, I finally visited my neighborhood high school. A few teachers there encouraged me to ignore the conventional “wisdom” and actually pay attention to what the school had to offer. That’s when I discovered it was the only high school in town to offer four years of Latin – taught by a Rhodes Scholar, no less. It had by far the strongest theater program in town, the speech-debate team was a state contender, and the students were just, well, kids. There were some who were overachieving, some barely attending, and everything in between.

I ended up having a great experience at my neighborhood high school. I was challenged, there were more opportunities than I could possibly take advantage of, and I met many wonderful people whose friendship I enjoy to this day, some 30 years later.

Indeed, even before I graduated, I came to understand that I was having a much better high school experience than I likely could have had at the “good” school, which, due to its stellar reputation, was woefully overcrowded.

How absurd, then, that my neighborhood high school should have been so maligned, so widely considered sub-par and a place to be avoided, even if it meant driving all the way across town every morning and starting over with a whole new cohort. Such is the power of image, of unexamined collective opinion, to shape our perceptions and, as the case may be, misdirect us away from something good.

Twenty-five or so years later, as my oldest child neared high-school age, my wife and I faced a dilemma, or so we thought. Do we send our son to the “bad” neighborhood high school or
do we cook up some scheme to get him enrolled at one of the “better” neighborhood schools?

What was bad about Madison, our neighborhood school? It wasn’t at all clear. Some people said it was “rough,” full of gangs and otherwise disruptive kids. Some said it lacked academic rigor and opportunity. Others simply cited Madison’s reputation itself, as if a commonly held negative opinion was reason enough to avoid the place.

But few of the people eager to share their low opinions of Madison had ever actually been inside the school. And when my wife and I pressed them for specifics, their response was generally along the lines of, “I don’t really know the specifics…but everyone knows Madison is a bad school.” In other words, it’s bad because it’s bad. Total hearsay.

Meeting with the principal and a handful of teachers quickly disabused us of this prejudice. Here were these bright, totally engaged educators eager to tell my wife and me about all the cool things they were doing at Madison, how invested they were in their students’ success, and how pleased they were to work there. We learned about innovative new CTE programs and Madison’s impressive range of AP courses (many unique to Madison), their award-winning music teacher, the longest continuously published student newspaper in the state, and two 3D printers.

And this is to say nothing of the remarkably collegial, mutually supportive atmosphere we witnessed among students. It was the opposite of what we had come to expect based on what we had heard.

We enrolled our son, and my wife and I got involved with PTSA to try and compensate in some small way for the fact that our school district, like so many in this country, is woefully underfunded. The need was especially acute at Madison, which, like a couple of the district’s other high schools, had a disproportionately high percentage of students who qualified for free-and-reduced lunch.

As president of Madison’s PTSA, I asked principal Petra Callin what the most pressing problem was at the school and her answer was unequivocal: under-enrollment. Although it had been designated a “comprehensive” neighborhood high school by the district, Madison was losing a huge portion – nearly 50 percent – of eighth-graders from its feeder schools. This meant that Madison was perpetually in danger of dipping below the “viability” enrollment number and thus losing critical funds from the district. A downward spiral was looming, and, ultimately, this meant that despite an abundance of high school-age students within Madison’s boundaries, Madison could one day be shuttered.

A branding problem

Madison's old visual identity looked dated, homemade, and incoherent, at best—not the image Madison needed to project to counteract negative perceptions of the school.

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So, why were so many would-be Madison parents applying for transfers or lying about their addresses to get their kids out of Madison? You guessed it: the prevailing – and apparently unexamined – perception that Madison was a bad school.

We had a branding problem. The prevailing Madison narrative was inaccurate and, on the whole, negative. And it had been allowed to fester uncorrected and to proliferate throughout the neighborhood -- indeed, the city -- to the point where Madison was “bad” simply because it was “bad.”

What could be done? How could we begin chipping away at this undeserved reputation and replace it with real insight into the myriad ways that Madison is, in fact, a really good school – Portland’s “best kept secret,” as one parent reviewer put it?

As a branding guy, the answer was obvious to me: We needed to re-brand Madison high school. More specifically, we needed to rewrite the Madison story and develop a new visual identity that would immediately signify that Madison was worth a second look or, for some, a first look.

Madison’s new “logo” is intended to help convey the school’s commitment to academic rigor and preparation for college.

Fixing the Madison narrative would be a fairly straight-forward project. First, we needed to make it clear that, as a comprehensive high school, Madison offered all of the same core programs as the other comprehensive schools. Beyond that, it was a matter of identifying what made Madison special: welcoming, mutually supportive atmosphere; more AP classes than any other Portland public high school; CTE programs in Sustainable Agriculture, Engineering, and Biological Sciences; low student-teacher ratio; etc. Then articulating these “selling points” in a way that would resonate with skeptical (I won’t say prejudiced) parents and students.

Principal Callin and I spent a long afternoon working out the bones of a messaging platform. This would serve as the foundation for Madison’s new “marketing” materials, which I would produce with the help of the district’s print shop. But Madison’s story also needed visual punch, a bit of eye candy to call attention to the new narrative and perhaps convey a sense of investment and revitalization. So I set to work designing a comprehensive visual-identity system for the school, with a level of refinement that would explicitly contradict, or at least undermine, whatever negative misperceptions the viewer had of Madison high school.
Madison’s polished new marketing materials begin shifting perceptions of the school almost immediately.

Overhauling a school’s “look” may sound like a superficial undertaking. In the context of perpetual budget shortfalls, where there may not be enough textbooks or graphing calculators to go around, it may even seem extravagant. However, based on my professional experience re-branding private companies, I knew that a polished and cohesive visual identity could have a profoundly positive effect not only on outsiders’ perceptions of Madison, but also on the Madison community’s collective self-image. Well-designed newsletters, course catalogs, campus signage, team uniforms, bumper stickers, and other Madison ephemera would send a subtle but unequivocal message that Madison had reason to be proud and wanted people to know about it.

Plus, Madison could get all of the design work for free. As a Madison parent, I was happy to do it. And the district, acknowledging that Madison doesn’t have the benefit of a large, parent-funded foundation to bridge the gaps left by short-sided voters, offered to foot the bill for any production costs – printing, etc. – beyond the norm.

A comprehensive new visual-identity system gave Madison teachers and administrators an easy way to spruce up their communications and signal the school’s investment in students’ success.

Madison’s “brand revitalization” – Go MAD! – effort is only about 18 months old. But already there are signs of improvement. At our first PTSA meeting this year, principal Callin reported that this year’s freshman class is the largest she’s seen during her six-year tenure. And two parents who had recently moved to Portland explained they had looked into all of Portland’s public high schools and had chosen Madison based on all the good things they heard and read about it. This would have been unlikely just two short years ago.
Madison’s new “look” has been applied to a wide variety of student swag. The popularity of these items seems to indicate an increase in school pride among students.

Most of the credit for these apparent and, admittedly, incremental shifts in the way Madison is perceived is due to principal Callin and her staff, who have worked tirelessly over the past six years to shore up Madison’s course offering and secure vital funding for attractive, college- and career-oriented programs like its three CTE tracks. But the fruits of their labors are perhaps slightly more visible now and more likely to be perceived at all because a concerted effort was also made to articulate and broadcast Madison’s advantages and then present them with a degree of visual style and polish that makes it difficult to believe the “bad school” narrative.

Contributed by Brian Rupp, co-founder of audio branding company, Brand Timbre. His extensive branding experience includes work for corporate clients such as Kodak, Intel, Microsoft, and Portland’s own award-winning public transit agency, TriMet. He is a Madison High School parent in Portland, Ore.
Think outside the box to engage volunteers

The stronger your volunteer program, the stronger the community support for your school will be. People support things they have ownership in. A volunteer program can encourage a sense of ownership for parents and non-parents. It can help educate people whose only knowledge of schools is based on their own long-ago experiences.

Think of it as an interactive public relations activity, one that will help tell your school’s story to broad audiences through a variety of activities while helping to improve students’ academic achievement.

Volunteer engagement can be difficult. The demands of modern life continue to reduce free time. Volunteer activities compete with family, work, hobbies and limited do-nothing time.

On the other hand, there are likely many people who would like to help out but just don’t have the time to participate in traditional volunteer activities within the school building.

How can you develop or revamp a volunteer program to include opportunities for those who want to help your school and students but are unable to make major time commitments?

The ideas in this tip sheet are designed to spark “outside the box” thinking about creating a volunteer program and engaging community members in non-traditional ways. Every contribution of time and talent they make will directly – or indirectly – impact student success.

Generate ideas

Survey your current volunteers. What brings them to your school? What do they do at or for your school? Why do they do it? How long have they volunteered? How many hours a week do they volunteer? What restructuring suggestions do they have for you? Do they have ideas for other ways volunteers could be involved?

Solicit ideas from all staff members. Have a brainstorming session at an all-staff meeting to generate ideas about volunteer tasks. Include grounds and maintenance staff, custodians, bus drivers and non-classroom, non-certificated staff members in this session. All ideas should be listed on whiteboards or flip charts. Keep in mind that the volunteer will want to feel he/she has made a meaningful contribution. And because this is a brainstorming session don’t discount or rule out any ideas–refining ideas comes later.

A few out-of-the-box ideas to use to kick off that brainstorming:

Are there opportunities to help a volunteer who is helping at your school? For example, could someone seeking clerical work use some volunteer work hours in the school office to make their resume more current while performing much needed office assistance?
Are there college students looking for internships who could provide valuable volunteer assistance in the classroom, technology lab, library, health room or other areas?

Do you have volunteer tasks that someone could do at home? Are there projects that could be completed by a stay-at-home parent such as newsletters, flyers or school website updates?

Can you enlist Chamber of Commerce members or others in the business community to testify about the importance of an educated work force when education bills are being considered by your state legislature?

Can local businesses commit a certain amount for their employees to volunteer at your school? Could they commit to a set number of hours for a month?

Do you have a horticulture or gardening club in the community that could adopt some planting beds on your school grounds or work with students to plant and maintain the beds?

Does a local company have a community service day when they paint, clean, build or plant? If so, could your school be the recipient of their labor one year?

Could a leadership development training company in town offer training to the officers of your parent groups or help your staff in a goal/mission setting exercise?

Is there a quilting store in town that would donate some time to setting up an afternoon quilting class after school?

Could you develop a volunteer activity to use the talents of retired professionals in your community or a program to link the senior center and the classroom?

Is there a parliamentarian expert in town who could volunteer to teach a session on parliamentary procedure to your parent group officers?

Are there ways to tap into the cultural and ethnic diversity resources in your community and bring speakers into the school who might lead a session on their culture’s foods, lifestyles, music, etc.?

**Put a plan into action**

Once the brainstorming and research is completed, analyze the results and draft a plan that has both traditional volunteer activities and incorporates a few new ideas. In its introductory stages, keep the plan manageable both in type of volunteer activities and the number of volunteers you hope to involve.

Once you’ve got a tentative list of activities, make note of staff time involved in supervision, and/or training of volunteers as well as the labor requirements involved, such as fingerprinting or conducting background checks as required in your state for volunteers.

Further refine your list by number of hours required. Include short, one-time activities like reading a book on Dr. Seuss Day for one hour, a three-hour field trip chaperone activity and once-a-week, long-term commitment activities such as a mentor or lunch buddy activities.

For each task, include a few sentences explaining what is expected of the volunteer and any
special requirements, including second languages and security background checks. Note where the task would be performed, whether in the classroom, on school campus or away from the school.

Get the word out

Once you have a plan, begin publicizing your needs to your parent and non-parent communities. Talk about opportunities for involvement everywhere you go, whether standing in the grocery store checkout line or speaking before the PTA or Rotary Club. Talk about it at business organizations, the senior center, churches and religious organizations, civic and social organizations. Develop flyers to promote volunteer opportunities and have businesses display them in your community. Meet with the CEO of any large companies in your area – talk about ways they or the corporation could become involved in your school.

Don’t forget that some of the easiest volunteer recruitment is in asking a person face-to-face if they could lend a hand.

Once the program gets under way, it will need to be nurtured. Volunteers need to feel like their efforts are making a difference. Have volunteer name badges for those who are in the school. Make a point to greet them and ask how the experience is going every time you see them. Send thank you notes or letters of thanks to all, especially those you don’t see regularly who are performing tasks away from the school. A quick phone call just to say thanks is always going to be appreciated.

Give back – volunteering works both ways

There is no better recruitment tool for enlarging your volunteer pool than getting out into the community and being a volunteer yourself. When you think you don’t have the time, just think about those who make time for your school and then try to find a few hours in your schedule to give back.

Make your volunteer presence known – offer to cook pancakes at a civic fundraiser breakfast; get a team of school staff members to run in a charity race or help with a local environmental cleanup effort. Once people see representatives of your school giving their time to help in the community, they will be more willing to share their time at your school.

**Contributed by Jackie Smith, communications consultant**
Update for parents on Common Core and Smarter Balanced

The results are in from the first year of testing with the more rigorous Smarter Balanced Assess-ments, and there’s good news to share: Students are rising to the challenge.

Students overall did better than anticipated on the new exams that are part of the Common Core curriculum. As students and parents get used to the new tests, scores should continue to increase. That’s what happened in Kentucky, the first state to move to the new standards in math and Eng-lish language arts. The percentage of Kentucky high school graduates ready for college and ca-reer has increased from 34 percent to 62 percent in four years.

Common Core standards encourage depth, rather than breadth, in mastering topics. They also emphasize a student’s ability to analyze and explain answers rather than simply knowing how to come up with the correct ones.

It’s a new way of learning. Instruction in subjects like math for skills like fractions and division may look really different to many parents. It is not how they learned it, which can be frustrating to parents who no longer know how to help their kids with their homework.

It should all pay big dividends for kids, though. Before these standards, all 50 states had differ-ent sets of expectations for what students should know and be able to do in each grade. Now there is a consistent set of standards across the states. That’s a good thing. For the first time, stu-dents should be learning the same educational essentials, regardless of whether they live in Kentucky or Maine.

Many educators believe Common Core is an opportunity for higher level education than schools have delivered before, and colleges are recognizing that. Colleges and universities in six states – California, Washington, Oregon, Hawaii, Delaware and South Dakota – are using Smarter Bal-anced exam scores as evidence that students are ready for entry-level classes. That’s a huge shift. In the past, many students had to take remedial courses in math, English or both before they could take credit-earning classes. In Oregon, that was the case for two-thirds of students who went on to community colleges. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/ curriculum/2015/04/sbac.html

What Parents Should Know

Parents have had a love-hate relationship with Common Core and Smarter Balanced due, in part, to a lack of information. A Gallup Poll in April 2014 found that 37 percent of public school par-ents had never heard of Common Core or didn’t know enough to have an opinion.

Schools can help fill that void by communicating often to help parents understand the new standards and tests. Include items in the school newsletter. Post information on the school
website. Talk about it at parent meetings. There is a lot of information available, starting with the national Common Core and Smarter Balance websites.

**Some key points for parents:**

The Common Core is not a curriculum. Curriculum remains a local school district decision. The Common Core standards are simply the standards outlining what students should know and be able to do at various grades. Locally adopted curriculum allows for teacher flexibility and creativity in the classroom.

Common standards help ensure that students receive a high quality, rigorous education from school to school and state to state. They provide a clear, consistent understanding of what students are expected to learn in K-12 math and English.

This year’s assessment scores should not be compared to previous scores. As with any change, there is a period of adjustment as teachers and students get used to the new standards and tests. This year’s results set a new baseline, and scores will increase over time.

Children need to be prepared for college, career and future success. We need to ensure that all students, no matter where they live, are prepared for the opportunities and challenges they will face after high school.

Closing the achievement gap is a priority. The new standards promote equity by ensuring all students, especially historically underserved students, are offered access to high-level content.

**Resources for parents**

Schools can help parents become more informed by steering them to up-to-date, useful information about Common Core and Smarter Balanced Assessments. A good starting point is the standards for each child’s grade level. The National PTA has created short, easy-to-read guides explaining the standards for each grade level. The documents also provide tips on how parents can help at home.

National parent guides explaining standards by grade level
www.pta.org/parents/content.cfm?ItemNumber=2910

Ready Washington
www.readywa.org/common-core.html

5 things parents need to know about Common Core
www.today.com/parents/common-core-5-things-parents-need-know-1D80018501

Be a Learning Hero
www.bealearninghero.org

Common Core State Standards Initiative Myth-Fact Page
www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/myths-vs-facts/

NEA-PTA Parent Guides - Families and Educators Working Together for Student Success
www.nea.org/assets/docs/NEA-PTA-CCSS-Student-Success-Brochure.pdf

*Contributed by Connie Potter, chief of staff, Forest Grove School District, Forest Grove, Ore.*
A 2014 Neilsen study found that American adults spend an average of 11 hours per day with electronic media. That includes radio, TV, smartphones, Internet, game consoles and DVDs or Blu-Ray. Most people would agree that 11 hours is an enormous amount time. http://on.mash.to/1hfe8Si

Additional studies have shown that children are following in the footsteps of their parents. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) estimates that today’s children spend an average of seven hours a day on electronic media.

Even when accounting for multi-tasking, this is, by any measure, a lot of time to devote to gadgets. Health experts suggest limiting the time children spend on digital activities and finding a balance with other activities.

Making wise choices for our children’s media diet

The AAP provides guidelines for media consumption that include:

- Monitoring entertainment to ensure age appropriate use and avoiding inappropriate content such as violence, sexual content or tobacco and alcohol use.

- Establishing “screen-free” zones at home, defined as no TVs in the bedroom and turning off television during dinner and homework time.

- Limiting screen time (television and smartphones) to not more than two hours per day and avoiding it altogether for infants and toddlers. http://bit.ly/1LXkyCm

Additional guidelines and resources are at SafetyNet.org, sponsored by the AAP. Topics include:

- Talking to Kids and Teens about Social Media and Sexting
- Keeping Kids Safe in Cyberspace
- The Internet and Your Family
- Media Time Family Pledge http://safetynet.aap.org/

Harmful effects of too much screen time

There are many reasons to step back from electronics. Reducing use of electronic devices through reasonable limits could make a big difference in students’ academic and social skills by freeing up more time for studies and other pursuits.
There is another important reason to look at the big picture of students’ digital activity. Too much digital time may impact our ability to focus.

**This is your brain on social media**

Consider this headline: “Thanks Social Media – Our Average Attention Span is Shorter Than Goldfish.”

> “According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, at the U.S. National Library of Medicine, the average attention span of a human being has dropped from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8 seconds in 2013. This is one second less than the attention span of a goldfish. That’s right, goldfish have an attention span of 9 seconds – 1 second more than you and I.”


The scientists suggest that the external stimulation from sites like LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat and more every day, is causing us to divide our attention.

> “Attention span is the amount of concentrated time on a task without becoming distracted. Most educators and psychologists agree that the ability to focus attention on a task is crucial for the achievement of one’s goals. It’s no surprise attention spans have been decreasing over the past decade with the increase in external stimulation.

Additional statistics on attention spans:

- 25% of teenagers report forgetting important details about their friends and family.
- 7% of people forget their own birthdays from time to time.
- The average office worker checks their email 30 times every hour.
- Typical mobile users check their phones more than 150 times per day.
- Content on the internet tripled between 2010 and 2013.
- Social media sharing has doubled from 2011 to 2013.”

**Emotional impact:**

In addition to social media-related distractions, other side-effects include increased narcissism, antisocial behavior and aggressive tendencies, susceptibility to anxiety and increased depression, and lower grades among students who check their statuses too often.


**Balance is the key**

Social media interactions can be positive if there are limits on online activity. The Pew Research Center’s Report, Teens, Technology and Friendships, suggests that social media can have positive effects on teens actual social lives. Many teens report making new friendships online – 57 percent have developed a friendship through a social platform. Friendships can be strengthened through social media environments.