

Building Enduring Race to the Top Education Reforms:

Using Social Media to Engage With and
Communicate to Key Stakeholders



A Reform Support Network Guide for States

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Introduction

With aggressive reform agendas and sweeping change initiatives throughout the K-12 system, many Race to the Top States are considering new avenues for successfully communicating with and constructively engaging key stakeholders. New social media tools present potentially promising opportunities for States to inform and connect with more educators, parents, business leaders and community leaders as well as engage with them by seeking feedback and ideas.

This guide is designed to help State education leaders weigh the benefits of social media and consider when and how to use them effectively as one facet of a broader public engagement strategy.

With one in five people worldwide predicted to be using social media by the end of 2012,¹ this tool is an increasingly important one for government agencies to consider as they build public involvement

in implementing reforms. Currently, the use of social media by State education agencies (SEAs) varies greatly: Some States are taking aggressive steps to fully use social media, in addition to other communications efforts, and have already experienced success in reaching audiences via Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Others are developing or have no plans to begin such efforts.

As an emerging communications vehicle — and one that emphasizes two-way communications — social media come with new challenges. States that use social media found that their stakeholders and the general public have been given a greater opportunity to express their thoughts on those social media sites. But some States have decided the benefits — of reaching more people in a more targeted way and with genuine opportunities for feedback and dialogue — outweigh the risks.

To help State education leaders navigate these choices, this guide:

- Describes different forms of social media and how they are used, with a focus on emerging efforts among SEAs and other governmental organizations.
- Suggests key steps and considerations for State education leaders thinking about using social media to advance reform initiatives.
- Offers examples of how States have started using social media to communicate with and engage the public as part of overall communications efforts.

Social Media Use Among State Education Agencies (SEAs)

- 35 SEAs use Facebook.
- 36 SEAs use Twitter.
- 20 SEAs use YouTube.
- 7 SEAs maintain a blog.
- 6 SEAs use other social media sites, such as Google+, Vimeo or a dedicated Race to the Top site.

Source: Reform Support Network research of websites

Defining Social Media and Their Potential Impact

By design, social media transform more traditional communications from a monologue (where institutions speak to their audiences to share specific news or points of view) to a dialogue or, more accurately, a multi-logue (where institutions and their audiences engage in conversations about information, events and ideas). As such, many SEAs and other State government agencies nationwide are finding that social media can be an important avenue for getting key messages out to both targeted and general audiences, promote news and engage with key stakeholders on important issues.

The table at right summarizes the largest and most popular social media outlets. The sheer breadth of social media's reach — in education, government and elsewhere — is impressive and daunting:

Nearly one-third of online adults use digital tools other than websites to get information from governmental agencies or officials, according to a 2010 Pew Research Center report.²

Specifically in education, researchers found that 61 percent of teachers, principals and librarians are active in at least one social media space. Many of those educators say they use it for professional development purposes by participating in webinars, watching YouTube videos, listening to podcasts or reading and contributing to blogs.³ The Pew Research Center report also found that:

- Fifteen percent of Internet users watched video on a government website, and the same percentage of email users signed up to receive email alerts from a government agency or official.
- Thirteen percent of Internet users read the blog of a government agency or official.
- Nine percent of social media users follow or have become a fan of a government agency or official.⁴

The Largest and Most Popular Social Media Outlets

Fifty-eight million Americans (22 percent) report that they use social media "several times a day." Here are the primary vehicles they use:

Facebook

Users: 955 million

Uses: People connect with friends, family, brands and institutions — sharing and viewing brief status updates, photos, videos and more.

www.facebook.com

Twitter

Users: 500 million

Uses: People, brands and institutions broadcast updates of no more than 140 characters, often with small links to Web content or videos that can be read and shared by others who follow the account.

www.twitter.com

Blogs

Users: More than 100 million blogs on Tumblr and WordPress sites alone

Uses: Blogs are spaces where unique content, reporting and other thought leadership can be posted, shared and commented upon.

www.tumblr.com

www.wordpress.com

YouTube

Content: Streams more than 4 billion videos daily

Uses: Subscribers post short videos that can be shared and commented upon. They can also create sites that can host all videos in that series.

www.youtube.com

LinkedIn

Users: More than 150 million

Uses: People can connect with individuals, brands and institutions to find and engage with others in their field or with similar interests. It is primarily used for professional development but is growing in its use of status updates and other sharing similar to Facebook and Twitter.

www.linkedin.com

Sources: Edison Research Group, "The Social Habit," (June 2012); Individual websites listed

Social media's growth is continuing, and research shows use of social media is lasting. Nearly one-third of Facebook users have been members at least three years.⁵ And social media's usage is growing far beyond the young people who pioneered its use and fueled its early growth: The fastest-growing segment of social media users are persons aged 45-54.⁶ This growth is important to SEAs, in particular, considering the potential audience of parents, educators, administrators and other stakeholders who now use tools such as Facebook and Twitter to communicate and engage with institutions such as government agencies.

Some States already actively using social media primarily employ it to share information and news; they report social media are helping them communicate about complicated matters of public policy that have a direct impact on educators, students, administrators and the general public. Other States are using social media to specifically reach certain audiences, such as parents, with only targeted information they need and want. A few States are now learning to use social media not only to post news reports, letters or statements but also to engage with their audiences directly by actively soliciting opinions, asking for comments or responses and responding to queries.

This publication describes strategies for State agencies to use social media in all these ways.

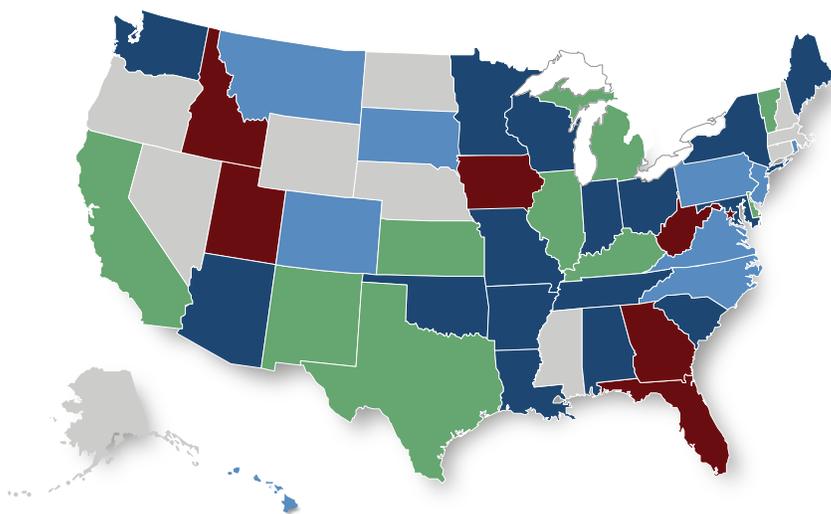
Social Media Use in Public Education

Social media are best known for their personal use, but, over the last decade, public and private organizations have increasingly used emerging social media platforms to complement and enhance existing communications and engagement strategies.

The Pew Research Center findings cited above underscore the significant growth in social media use among government entities in recent years, following the lead of businesses and brands that use social media as an essential part of broader communications and marketing plans.

A State-by-State review by the Reform Support Network shows that many SEAs are using more than one form of social media. For example, 34 of 51 States (including the District of Columbia) use Facebook, and almost as many (33 States) use Twitter. That said, just six States maintain blogs or use other websites such as Google+ or Vimeo.

Of the SEAs that have launched social media efforts, some have already experienced success in using these new tools to communicate about their reforms around complex agendas and to engage with teachers and other key stakeholders through formal and informal dialogues on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and elsewhere.



Social Media Use Across SEAs

Number of Channels Used by SEAs, September 2012

- Does not currently use social media
- Currently uses at least one social media channel
- Currently uses at least two social media channels
- Currently uses at least three social media channels
- Currently uses four or more social media channels

Source: Reform Support Network research of websites

For example, in Ohio and Tennessee, social media are being used to encourage collaboration among the various groups involved in Race to the Top reforms in an effort to ensure that the public fully understands all upcoming reforms as well as shapes and informs key decisions as they are made. For an example, see the sidebar on this page.

New York State Education Department has used Twitter to promote materials for its Network Team Institutes, which involve nearly 800 individuals working statewide in small groups on implementing of Race to the Top reforms. Through its social media communications efforts, the New York State Education Department has encouraged collaboration and feedback about materials at Network Team Institute meetings, which State leaders say have been invaluable.

For example, when the department announced via social media a draft mathematics instructional toolkit available on its website for an upcoming Network Team Institute meeting, State leaders immediately received feedback via Twitter about exemplary resources that were missing from the toolkit, said Emily Sandefer, project assistant for the New York State Education Department. "Using Twitter, the creators of the toolkit were able to engage with educators about the resources and work with the webmaster to include those resources in the toolkit," Sandefer said.⁷

The sections of this report that follow detail steps SEAs can take to consider whether to follow the lead of States such as New York, Ohio and Tennessee and begin using social media. For States that decide to move forward, this guide also contains concrete ways to get started, monitor progress and successfully maintain the effort.

Unique Events

Challenge. Many organizations find the day-to-day aspects of social media (posting articles, comments, blogs and other content) do not grow a large audience or always reach their key audiences. Although their audiences are growing incrementally, they seek bigger ideas to move ahead.

Opportunity. Some organizations have created events and gatherings that are focused on one key audience or stakeholder group as a way to galvanize interest in a cause or campaign.

Example. Tennessee SCORE (State Collaborative on Reforming Education), an independent, non-partisan, non-profit research and advocacy coalition focused on education reform issues, created the SCORE prize, which annually awards \$10,000 to the elementary, middle and high school and \$25,000 to one district that have most dramatically improved student achievement. While that monetary prize is guided by specific data, SCORE also created the Rise to the Challenge prize to celebrate teachers, school administrators, parents and education reform activists.

SCORE asked those groups to submit entries via email, tweet summaries with a specific hashtag so the submissions could be viewed easily, post to the dedicated Facebook page or leave a comment on the SCORE blog. SCORE highlighted submissions every day on Twitter and Facebook to encourage more participants and then published three stories on its blog highlighting the finalists before public voting for a winner.

More than 1,000 people responded within 72 hours. The key to success, organizers said, was that the process gave teachers an opportunity to talk about the great things going on in their classrooms, according to David Mansouri, director of advocacy and communications for SCORE.

"You can never do enough of letting people talk about what they are doing and sharing best practices," Mansouri said.⁸ "And social media and online tools in general are incredible ways to do that."

<http://tnstest.wordpress.com/2011/08/29/rise-to-the-challenge-share-your-success-stories/>

Step 1: Listen and Plan

As in all successful communications efforts, the first step — for any organization but certainly for government agencies — to using social media well and effectively is not just to jump in, but to take the time to listen and plan.

Listen by monitoring what's on social media. Agency officials can pay attention to what is said, posted and discussed about public education issues in their State and elsewhere on Facebook and on the blogs or Twitter accounts of any key education advocacy, advocacy or research organization. SEA officials using social media report that watching the online conversation in other States, in certain districts, at schools and/or among partners helped inform their own efforts by allowing them to build on smart strategies that others have used and to flag strategies or topics to either approach cautiously or avoid altogether.

Keep the needs of your key audiences in mind.

Agency officials can determine which communications vehicles or social media tools to use to reach specific audiences by first considering how each audience gets its information and what each needs to know.

Map out a social media plan. States also can map out a social media plan (see questions to consider in sidebar on this page) that fits within the structure of an existing communications and public engagement strategy. This plan could be as simple as planning to use social media to reinforce the current communications strategy by posting specific material to online pages, including press releases, newsletters or public engagements. Or the plan could be as complex as planning for regular updates to blogs, creating and posting videos, and conducting online surveys to gauge support and generate input and feedback.

Education leaders know that effectively reaching teachers, parents and thought leaders involves differentiating the message to meet the unique needs and concerns of each group, and social media are a set of tools SEAs can use to do this effectively. For example, as States have started designing and

Key Discussion Questions to Consider When Developing a Social Media Plan

1. Who is the audience?
2. Where do they get their news, what platforms do they use?
3. What are the key messages we want to promote?
4. What do we want our key audience to do once they are engaged?
5. What information will populate our social media platforms?
6. Who will manage the effort and create content, and who must approve posts?
7. How will we engage in a meaningful way with our audiences?
8. How will we prepare for managing challenges?

implementing new evaluation systems to better assess and support teacher performance, teachers have said they want to know the specifics on exactly how they will be evaluated, what support they will receive, what they will need to do differently and how the outcome will affect their job. In addition, parents want to know if their children's teachers are effective and, if they aren't, what will be done to fix inequities. Some States, such as Ohio, have addressed parents' concerns by, for example, creating a Facebook page specifically for parents, answering questions posed on Twitter, or consistently updating a blog targeting teachers to respond to common issues and questions.

Social media provide the tools that organizations can use to engage directly, and meaningfully, with these and other audiences.

Smart Engagement

Challenge. Many States work to have a dialogue with teachers about various State reforms underway that will affect educators. States work to keep teachers informed and hope that upcoming reforms can reflect meaningful input from teachers across the State.

Opportunity. EngageNY uses more traditional forms of outreach and education, including monthly trainings for teachers from around the State at the capital in Albany, but it also took to Facebook to help spread the word. The State eagerly responded to teachers who commented on regular postings, and the results were, in several cases, appreciative teachers who felt they were being heard.

Example. On July 12, 2012, EngageNY announced draft Year-Long Curricular Maps for English Language Arts and mathematics, which were posted to the EngageNY Facebook page on July 16. Later that evening, a teacher wrote complimenting the maps but expressed concern about the detailed specificity for the texts, activities and assessments and wondered if the maps were meant to be guidelines or a State mandate.

The EngageNY team wrote back publicly to the poster, answering her specific question and offering links for more information. A back-and-forth discussion emerged that led the same poster to praise EngageNY for answering and noting that the page is “an excellent resource for lesson planning and for creating the proper assessments.”

<https://www.facebook.com/EngageNY>

Step 2: Create Content

Once State agencies decide to use specific social media vehicles, they can consider what material to post to these sites and develop a plan to create it.

Post ideas and information in a central place on the Web. Agencies that decide to incorporate elements of social media into an overall engagement and communications strategy have, in some cases, established a vehicle or platform to allow them to speak directly to key audiences and offer thoughtful leadership.

For example, some States, such as New York and Utah, have either used an existing segment of their agency website to host a blog or created a new site dedicated to discussions and information. Both options provide these States with one dedicated place to house resources and information, which they then link to by using other social media vehicles. By doing this, stakeholders who are more likely to monitor social media than websites are still drawn in and directed to a central location that provides them with access to all key messages, information and data.

To get started, States such as New York and Utah have followed a path of gradually adding more and more communications through social media channels, such as:

1. Creating a blog and posting to it regularly on a topic of interest to target audiences. To start, the blog can incorporate all information about the reform agenda, but, over time and with proper content written by multiple contributors, the initial blog could transition into a blog that focuses exclusively on specific areas of reform.
2. Creating social media sites where material from the blog can be posted and referenced in compelling ways (such as Facebook and/or Twitter because they are the most popular and easier to use than other forms of social media) to drive readers back to the blog.
3. Using social media sites to post other items of interest or news stories that provide more information about the agency’s agenda.

- Using social media sites to offer surveys and respond to issues of interest or concern raised by audiences.



The New York State Education Department further enhanced its efforts by creating a separate website, www.EngageNY.org, which provides a one-stop source of information and resources on all key Race to the Top reforms. The site includes two blogs and a “News & Events” page.⁹

The New York State Education Department posts new material from EngageNY to the Facebook and Twitter pages to inform and engage key audiences on specific topics. It also provides an RSS feed that can be subscribed to, allowing people to immediately access any new articles posted to its website. All of these efforts help drive traffic to the website and the resources posted there, increase the number of people seeing new content and expand the level of engagement on issues with stakeholders.

In the year since launching the site, the New York State Education Department reports EngageNY received nearly 1 million visits, with more than 4 million pages viewed by those visitors. State education officials are now revamping the website to allow users to search for specific materials on the site with more ease and to

allow users to create online working groups in order to share best practices and experiences as reform measures are implemented. Organizers hope to draw in many more stakeholders when the website is relaunched in fall of 2012, said Anu Malipatil, a fellow with the department’s Common Core and Educator Engagement Team.¹⁰

Direct unique information to different audiences.

Several States have successfully targeted messages to important and unique audiences using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

For example, the Ohio Department of Education created separate Facebook pages to simultaneously communicate directly to teachers and parents, their top two audiences, with the Ohio Teachers’ Homeroom page and the Ohio Families & Education page.¹¹ Each page is designed to provide detailed information to parents and educators.

For parents, there are posts featuring students in a community service project and reminders about teacher and bus driver appreciation days and parent information events. Teachers learn about best ways to navigate the summer licensing process, can view videos on the State’s new education evaluation system and review details of votes taken by the State Board of Education. The department’s Facebook audiences are engaged by the department’s staff, which respond to questions from the public, encourage participation and solicit opinion.

Michael Sponhour, communications executive director for the Ohio Department of Education, said his department is also successfully reaching key audiences on Twitter, a platform that teachers there are using more and more to stay on top of education policy news and issues. The combination of the two platforms has enabled the Ohio Department of Education to reach audiences even more frequently and effectively by providing them with information and links to new resources, gauging opinions and reactions to issues, and promoting full engagement on specific areas.

Of the two, Sponhour said Twitter has proven most effective. “For a variety of reasons, getting an organization or brand to engage with people on Facebook is very hard,” he said. “On Twitter, we are reaching teachers, principals, the front-line people that we want to reach more than anyone else. We can put the same amount of time into Twitter as Facebook now and get 10 times the payback.”¹²

Sponhour said that the department’s Twitter account, @OHEducation, with its 8,435 Twitter followers (as this publication was being finalized), is second only to the Texas Education Agency among SEAs (@TEAinfo has 15,462 followers). He hopes to achieve 10,000 followers by the end of 2012.

Sponhour said collecting data drives the Ohio Department of Education’s measurement of success and impact, in addition to providing valuable anecdotal information. Some examples follow:

- One educator recently missed the department’s e-newsletter in his email, but he saw it on Twitter, commented on it and shared it with his peers.
- The Ohio Department of Education recently offered a symposium, which was attended by 2,200 people in person. An additional 17,000 visited the event’s dedicated website. That kind of reach could be attained only through social media, Sponhour said.

Creating an Army of Followers

Challenge. States often face the challenge of finding compelling information and issues to populate social media pages. It is the compelling material that can, when posted on various social media sites, drive interest in programs, propel reform campaigns and drive key messages forward.

Opportunity. The Ohio Department of Education found success on Twitter but wanted to significantly build its audience, so it seized a big opportunity to draw in many more followers and engage them in the conversation.

Example. The department’s May 2012 conference about its new teacher evaluation system was attended by more than 2,200 educators from around the State. It included breakout sessions designed to explain the new system and encourage educator feedback.

The department made Twitter a part of that effort, assigning staff to author updates from the opening sessions and breakouts and to reach educators who could not attend. Staff also authored summaries of breakout sessions for a blog

in real time — material that was then promoted on social media to those at the event and those who couldn’t attend.

“The live Tweeting at this event helped us connect with people in ‘real life,’” said Michael Sponhour, communications executive director at the department. “In the eight weeks before and after the event, we added more than 600 followers and the momentum has sustained — we are on our path to double our Twitter followers by the end of this year. We are also deeply engaging — ODE had a 55 percent retweet rate in June.”

The department is now looking to build on that success, applying lessons learned in May to a larger conference planned for November. It intends to increase access to Internet to facilitate social media usage throughout the event.

<http://ohioeducatoreval.wordpress.com/>

<https://twitter.com/oheducation>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Ohio-Teachers-Homeroom/303190473049852>

Step 3: Meet Communications and Engagement Goals

Once agencies take these first steps to plan, choose sites and create pages, they can follow three general rules of thumb to develop relevant and useful content, provide ongoing management and monitoring of their social media efforts and successfully manage challenges when they arise.

Follow Best Practices

As with any other media or publication created by a State agency, social media need unique content that is timely and newsworthy to the audience. Social media use commonsense language and deliver smaller, bite-sized pieces of information and news that are memorable and easy to comprehend. Lessons and best practices from States and other organizations for maximizing the unique attributes of social media are described below.

Make information easy to find and easy to navigate.

State government entities say they have achieved greater success by making their efforts visible, easy to find and simple to navigate. They say it is important to showcase the social media pages with easy-to-find buttons, links and gadgets on department materials and websites and to integrate them fully with all other communications efforts (links to sites on press releases, in marketing materials, etcetera).

Be interactive. Forty-one percent of customers in one survey said they engage with a brand or institution on social media because they “want to be heard”; 60 percent of customers said they would be more likely to “like” or “follow” a brand or institution if they have the opportunity to interact, not just with those who run the page but with other users.¹³ In public education, teachers, administrators and other key audiences will connect with social media efforts only if they see a response, have questions answered and can connect with their peers.

Recognizing this dimension of social media, some States have worked to make interactivity a key facet to their efforts. Audiences on social media expect that if an agency is using Facebook or Twitter, it is ready to engage with members of the public, not just speak to

them. Although posting materials, statements, press releases and newsletters is important and will help to educate key audiences, these efforts are not typically enough to get audiences to engage in a conversation or offer feedback about key topics.

As Race to the Top States implement new college- and career-ready standards for students and schools, some have found social media to be helpful — as an addition to forums, community meetings and other traditional forms of feedback — to gather comments from teachers and administrators about needed resources and supports and also to respond to questions from parents and the general public about the timeline and impact. States say that connecting directly with the audience (asking questions, responding to comments, addressing queries) can lead to continued readership and deeper, more meaningful engagement.

Using social media to help with transitions and implementations of key reforms can be — for example — as straightforward as the Georgia Department of Education quickly answering basic questions posed on Facebook about its testing system or as complex as the back-and-forth interaction with a New York State teacher described previously (see sidebar on page 8).

Simple Rules of the Road

- Many governmental organizations have created clear objectives (for example, fostering dialogue around meaningful reform).
- They have then set clear guidance for behavior not tolerated (that is, profanity, slurs, personal attacks).
- Once the policy is in place, States have worked to ensure that the policy is visible to all.

Maintain Strong Efforts

After initially launching a social media effort, those who manage them say the most important ingredient for continued success is maintaining a high and engaging level of content. One challenge States face

Lessons From Public Health: A Review of Florida's Social Media Outreach Efforts

Among State government entities, several public health departments have been early adopters of social media. Their experience can be instructive because, similar to education agencies, public health entities typically engage with passionate and concerned audiences on a large public stage about complex matters.

One notable example of a successful user of social media is the Florida Department of Health, which — on its main website — provides large, easy-to-find boxes for information, segmented by the department's key audiences (Floridians and Visitors, Healthcare Professionals, Business).¹⁴

The agency places Web buttons linking to its Facebook, Twitter and YouTube pages prominently on the main Web page — encouraging interaction and allowing users to easily find information.

"Because social media is predicated on convenience and timeliness, we wanted to position the links in a location on our landing page that make the pages easy for the public to grab-and-go," said Christie Goss, assistant deputy communications director for the Florida Department of Health and the sole manager of the agency's social media efforts.

Goss said the department saw value in showcasing its efforts to remind members of the public of its commitment to providing up-to-date information and participating in active health conversations with them. "Even for those who do not personally use social media or those who do not visit our branded social media sites, this reminder helps shape our brand as modern and engaging to any visitor of our website," she said.

For the Department of Health, which has a primary mission of encouraging healthier living and informing the public about health-related issues, that means targeting key audiences on Facebook with information they will find useful — and, more than anything else, compelling, Goss said.

"On Facebook, we concentrate on information and resources that we believe families, especially those with children, will find impactful, such as back-to-school immunization requirements, ways to poison-proof your home, and how to prevent drownings year-round," Goss said. "We seek a more emotional appeal through inclusion of materials that reinforce our brand in an emotional way, such as human interest stories and public health achievements."¹⁵

For education departments, that theme of connecting with audiences through emotional, close-to-home topics can be instructive. SEAs can use social media to link the often complex world of education policy directly back to the classroom and student learning by, for example, highlighting stories of student success, hailing the good work of high-performing educators and providing guidance or details on how new policy decisions will affect instruction.

<http://www.doh.state.fl.us/>



is ensuring that proper staff time is allocated to keep any social media material fresh and updated. A likely way to lose followers is for content to get stale and for a teacher, administrator or member of the public to happen upon an SEA's Facebook page or Twitter feed

to find that the last posting was from three months ago and is no longer relevant. States using social media have found that monitoring their social media sites at least several times per day is sufficient to keep up with comments and questions.

Depending on each State's social media goals, SEAs can assign appropriate staffing and resources to ensure that someone thinks about the agency's social media presence every day. If resources allow, that could mean a dedicated staff member, ideally someone with experience in social media and communications who also understands the values and mission of the organization and can be entrusted to speak for the entity.

"A lot of State (education agency) communications departments don't have robust staffs," said Kelli Gauthier, director of communications for the Tennessee Department of Education. "If there is one person who can be dedicated to this, that's when there is more growth. The reason we had a one-way conversation (previously) is that I didn't have time." Recently, Gauthier was able to hire a deputy, who has spent more time making social media a priority and seen an impact in increased posts, followers and engagement, Gauthier said.¹⁶

But many States have had success with even limited capacity — focusing, first, on creating compelling content that can be posted to social media sites and, second, on finding ways to engage with key audiences and stakeholders.

States have found that monitoring progress and, where possible, quantifying success, has helped them to maintain their social media efforts. State agencies using social media can gauge impact, measure success, improve and truly become part of the conversation by setting up a monitoring plan. Most States use a formal or informal in-house program to get basic statistics on social media use (tracked by the number of likes, items shared on Facebook or the number of followers, or copied tweets on Twitter). The reports can also be used for more complex analysis of whether key messages are penetrating the dialogue or being picked up by the mainstream media, advocates and other thought leaders.

Only through constant analysis can successes and weaknesses be identified, State agency officials report. For instance, one reason teachers may feel disengaged is if their questions they pose on social media go unanswered. Or parents may lose interest if they feel the information is too teacher focused or technical. By establishing regular monitoring as

part of a system of continuous improvement, States can identify concrete refinements and enhance and strengthen social media efforts.

Manage Challenges

Despite the many upsides of using social media, SEAs, like other government entities, have struggled with the challenges presented in communicating through social media. These challenges could include everything from a negative comment posted on an agency's Facebook page to the launch of a Twitter campaign opposing a major policy shift.

Many government organizations have found that the best way to manage social media conversations is to set clear online rules for those who might comment and post them directly on the social media sites. This approach will give the audience a clear sense of proper etiquette and alert them about possible consequences should the rules be violated with inappropriate language or comments. For an example, see the [Ohio Teachers' Homeroom Facebook page](#).

Handling negative comments is the most typical challenge organizations face, and many agencies have found creating a plan to manage such comments is advantageous. This plan can include the process to manage negative comments, determine what criticism will prompt a response or be left unanswered and decide who, exactly, is authorized to respond.

At the same time, States have found that a certain level of criticism is expected, just as also is received in public forums or other media. Agencies say they work internally to stay focused on their goals of using social media and remember that they launched their social media campaigns to engage with the public and encourage feedback, both positive and negative. As long as a plan is in place to respond in a thoughtful way, even negative comments can help achieve the ultimate goal of building understanding and support for reform and elevating stakeholder opinions and feedback, States have found.

Organizations that may also face a broader-scale crisis that would require traditional media response, such as a security breach in schools, a public health incident or inclement weather that forces an unexpected closing of schools, often include separate planning

How States Are Using Social Media to Engage Their Audiences

Facebook

- **Ohio** maintains multiple Facebook pages targeting different audiences, such as **teachers** and **parents**. Users can thus receive more directed and relevant updates and information, rather than having to sift through unnecessary posts.
- **New York** directly engages with users on its **Facebook page**, answering questions and providing follow-up resources. Such responsiveness transforms the feed into an active dialogue between the New York State Education Department and stakeholders.

YouTube

- **Florida** maintains a variety of content, including student-created public service announcements and policy updates. The **feed** targets content to teachers, parents, students and other stakeholders to more directly engage with audiences.
- **Maryland** posts regular updates in a series titled “**News from the Board**,” which includes new information for educators and updates on reform initiatives. Such a series provides users with a regular source of information and an area in which they can comment and interact.
- **Indiana** produces **videos** that showcase upcoming events and new initiatives, using personal interviews and innovative formats. These videos allow for more engagement among users.

- **Wisconsin** has developed a **page** that organizes videos into playlists that highlight different issues and audiences, making its videos, including one summarizing its five-year plans for education reform, accessible to users.

Twitter

- **Kentucky posts** multiple times per day on events, issues and local highlights; retweets relevant information from various sources; and replies to individuals who respond to the feeds. A friendly tone and regular output ensures that the State’s feed remains interesting and relevant to users.
- **Georgia** engages followers in back-and-forth discussion amidst its regular output of updates and information. This approach helps keep the **feed** dynamic and creates a more personal and interactive environment.

Blogs

- **Utah** provides daily education **news updates** alongside opportunities for teachers and students to comment on policy issues. The State also promotes this material across its social media platforms. Users can thus rely on a steady stream of relevant information as well as information on how they can engage with the department and key decisions it is making.

around social media. In these instances, people may begin to post questions, comments or concerns on the SEA’s Facebook page or post questions via Twitter almost immediately. With preparation and a clear plan to guide activities, these can be addressed and responded to in real time by agency communications staff, long before the next day’s newspaper is printed or the evening news is aired. This prompt response can result in a better informed and, in the case of an emergency, safer public.

The response time on social media is minutes, not hours — while clarity and completeness are still paramount in crisis response, the ability to move swiftly can make a difference, government agencies have found. Pennsylvania’s Montgomery County Department of Public Safety has made Twitter one of its primary means of communicating with the public in both planning for and managing public safety events. On Twitter, hashtags (a word or phrase

immediately following the # sign) allow users to quickly find and categorize updates posted by anyone about that topic. Officials there have been noted for providing up-to-date information on Twitter and using a hashtag (#ReadyMontco) to allow Twitter users to quickly find and categorize updates posted to Twitter in times of crisis. Thus, State crisis communications plans can include forming a special team authorized to respond and post around the clock and creating basic how-to documents for posting status updates before traditional communications tactics can be deployed.

The experience of many social media campaign managers is that most social media challenges and real-world crises that flow into social media can be planned for because institutions know their potential vulnerabilities. Government agencies that have faced social media challenges have found that nearly all of them can be met or limited with even basic planning.

Conclusion: With Planning, Success Is Possible

As States consider whether to proceed with social media efforts and the steps presented here and elsewhere, States experienced in using social media suggest that the key is to simplify goals and follow several simple guidelines:

- Social media can be a useful tool, but their use has worked better for States when it is well thought out and properly planned as part of an overall communications and engagement strategy. Don't just tweet or post on Facebook; rather, strategize, plan and prepare.
- Social media are designed to be a *social* media. Engaging with key audiences is important, and States have found that being responsive, compelling and transparent makes their efforts more successful.
- Challenges in social media will emerge, but State agencies can prepare for the most predictable ones and manage them successfully.
- Although capacity and staff issues are often a challenge among States using social media, proper staffing and a focus on achievable, measurable goals help ensure success.

Additional Resources

For more reading on the topic of social media in government:

- Governing magazine: [Developing Policies for Responsible Social Media Use](#)
- C-SPAN Video: Activism + Media + Policy Summit, [Government Use of Social Media](#)

See the States and institutions we called out in this report via their direct links:

- [EngageNY.org](#)
- [Ohio Teachers' Homeroom and Ohio Families & Education](#)
- [Tennessee Department of Education](#)
- [Tennessee SCORE](#)
- [Florida Department of Health](#)

Appendix: Review of Social Media Use by SEAs

(NOTE: Data for this chart were collected from information available on SEA websites and social media pages as of September 2012. Additional information was gathered from Internet searches.)

State	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Blog	Other
Alabama	•	•	•		
Alaska					
Arizona	•	•			•
Arkansas	•	•		•	
California	•	•			
Colorado		•			
Connecticut					
Delaware	•	•			
District of Columbia	•	•	•	•	
Florida	•	•	•	•	
Georgia	•	•	•		•
Hawaii					•
Idaho	•	•	•	•	
Illinois	•	•			
Indiana	•	•	•		
Iowa	•	•	•	•	
Kansas	•	•			
Kentucky	•	•			
Louisiana	•	•	•		
Maine	•	•	•		
Maryland	•	•	•		
Massachusetts					
Michigan	•	•			
Minnesota	•	•	•		
Mississippi					
Missouri	•	•	•		
Montana	•				
Nebraska					
Nevada					
New Hampshire					
New Jersey	•				
New Mexico	•	•			
New York	•	•		•	•
North Carolina					•
North Dakota					
Ohio	•	•	•		

State	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Blog	Other
Oklahoma	•	•	•		
Oregon					
Pennsylvania	•				
Rhode Island		•			
South Carolina	•	•	•		
South Dakota		•			
Tennessee	•	•	•		
Texas	•	•			
Utah	•	•	•	•	
Vermont	•	•			
Virginia		•			
Washington	•	•	•		
West Virginia	•	•	•		•
Wisconsin	•	•	•		
Wyoming					

Endnotes

- 1 eMarketer, "Worldwide Social Network Usage: Market Size and Growth Forecast," March 2012, <http://www.emarketer.com/Article.aspx?R=1008903>.
- 2 Smith, Aaron, "Government Online: The Internet Gives Citizens New Paths to Government Services and Information," Pew Internet and American Life Project, April 2010, <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Government-Online/Part-Two/Engagement.aspx>.
- 3 Ferriter, William M., "Using Social Media to Reach Your Community," *The Effective Educator* 68, no. 4 (2011): 87-88.
- 4 Smith, Aaron, "Government Online: The Internet Gives Citizens New Paths to Government Services and Information," Pew Internet and American Life Project, April 2010 <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Government-Online/Part-Two/Engagement.aspx>.
- 5 Edison Research Group, "The Social Habit," June 2012, <http://www.edisonresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/The-Social-Habit-2012-by-Edison-Research.pdf>.
- 6 Edison Research Group, "The Social Habit," June 2012, <http://www.edisonresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/The-Social-Habit-2012-by-Edison-Research.pdf>.
- 7 Discussion with Emily Sandefer, project assistant, New York State Education Department, July 2012.
- 8 Discussion with David Mansouri, director of advocacy and communications, Tennessee SCORE, July 2012.
- 9 EngageNY website, www.engageny.org.
- 10 Discussion with Anu Malipatil, fellow, New York State Education Department Common Core and Educator Engagement Team, August 2012.
- 11 Ohio Teachers' Homeroom Facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Ohio-Teachers-Homeroom/303190473049852>; Ohio Families and Education Facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Ohio-Families-Education/117228291694042>.
- 12 Discussion with Michael Sponhour, communications executive director, Ohio Department of Education, July 2012.
- 13 The Chief Marketing Officer Council, "Variance in the Social Brand Experience," 2011, <http://www.cmocouncil.org/press-detail.php?id=2819>.
- 14 Florida Department of Health website, <http://www.doh.state.fl.us/>.
- 15 Discussion with Christie Goss, assistant deputy communications director, Florida Department of Health, July 2012.
- 16 Discussion with Kelli Gauthier, communications director, Tennessee Department of Education, July 2012.