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Social Media in Schools: A Treasure Trove or Hot Potato?

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Social Media in Schools: A Treasure Trove or Hot Potato?

Abstract

In the sphere of education, social media has posed enormous challenges and unleashed its potential as a venue to communicate with stakeholders. This case is a fictionalized version of several real cases related to the school leaders' struggle with utilizing social media to accomplish changes in schools. This case describes two high school administrators' exploration in school's use of social media. All people and schools' names are pseudonyms. The narratives in this case are presented to deepen the understanding of the role of schools' social media in creating social capital, and to raise the acute awareness of legal issues of schools' social media.

Case Narrative

Northwright High School (NHS) is located in a large metropolitan area with over two million people in the south of Ohio. The unemployment rate in the area surrounding the school is 8.9% with job growth of 0.01%, which is slightly better than national average unemployment rate of 9.10% with job growth of -0.12%. The future job growth in this metropolitan area over the next ten years is predicted to be 31.12%.

NHS, one of two high schools in the Estermount School District, is currently serving approximately 1,100 students in Grades 9 through 12. The student body is 70.1% African American, 14.7% White, 8.7% multiracial, 4.6% Hispanic, and 1.9% Asian or Pacific Islander. Economically disadvantaged students account for 48.1% of the students at NHS. NHS employs a total of 77 full time teachers with an average of 14 years of teaching experience. All core courses at NHS are taught by properly certified teachers.

Kevin has been the principal of NHS for six years. He walks into school building after the celebration of his 50th birthday with the family over the weekend. The hustle and bustle before classes begin in the building, however, belies the financial stress that faces the staff and community after years of massive budget cut in the school district. This year's budget cut has forced NHS to stop offering many Advanced Placement programs in the 2012-2013 school year. Kevin shares a large dose of discouragement and frustration brewing among students, teachers, parents, and community. Yet, he also knows the significance of standing firm as a school leader and weathering the frustration via unified efforts of all stakeholders.

Melissa, who is the assistant principal of NHS, shows up at Kevin's office for a scheduled meeting to discuss her proposal of creating a school Facebook page for NHS and using it for community outreach. Melissa, a former high school English teacher in a nearby community, utterly defies the stereotype that technology turns females off. She has been an avid advocate of incorporating technology into classroom instruction by serving as an instructional technology integration coach at NHS since 2009. While she has been challenged by ongoing resistance to integrate technology into classroom, there are some positive, incremental changes Kevin has observed in the school building. Teachers spend less time in the copy room, but more time behind computers to ensure teaching materials are Internet-driven, current, and contemporary. Students seem welcome the change as well, and respond favorably to engaging classrooms brought by the appropriate use of technology. NHS has made stride in school report card over the past three years. The NHS's Performance Index score, which was the statewide measure of all

students' test scores in Ohio, jumped 3.1 points to 101 in 2011-2012 school year, 6 points higher than the state average level at 95.

Melissa sits in front of Kevin's desk, broaching the conversation, "I've been taking time contemplating the feasibility of using school's social media as an open, transparent communication platform serving our school and community. And I firmly believe social media is not a fad, but has unbridled potential in communicating with parents and community. This is why I propose an official NHS Facebook page should be created in an effort to build connections with community members. We can post school announcements, student achievement, and share pictures and videos of school events on NHS Facebook page. We can also solicit ideas and feedback from community members on the Facebook page. It is a great way to stay connected with community members and keep them informed of the progress and needs in our school building." Melissa shared her thought with Kevin, with a hint of enthusiasm and resolution in her eyes.

Kevin is not opposed to this idea of creating a Facebook page for NHS, but the concerns lurking in the back of his mind tell him he needs to be extremely cautious about the Facebook epidemic, and its impacts in his school building. Working with Melissa over the past three years, Kevin has been captivated by her contagious efforts in improving student achievement by integrating technology into classroom instruction. He, however, needs more clarification before NHS dives into the exciting but tumultuous social media world. After all, instructional technology and social media are fundamentally different. Instructional technology, as its name implies, serve the purpose of instruction; whereas social media is open to the public, and can start a wildfire if used inappropriately.

Kevin has been aware of the controversy over social media in schools. Recently, a high school principal made national headlines by creating a fake Facebook account to spy on students at her school (Hoft, 2012). In addition to school administrators' controversial presence on social media, some teachers magnify the drama on social media in an afflicting manner. For instance, a high school English teacher in Georgia was asked to resign after a parent called to complain about the teacher's Facebook pictures of holding a glass of wine and a mug of beer (CBS, 2011). More disturbingly, a special education teacher put sexually provocative posts on his Facebook page (Horvath & Bushouse, 2008). Policymakers' response to the chaos of social media in school settings simply compounded the problem. The Missouri law which barred teachers from using social media websites that allow "exclusive access" with students, was shortly repealed given the potential infringement on educators' freedom of speech (eSchool News, 2011).

The controversy does not spare Kevin's school district from its spell. While the school district had been discussing the integration of social media into the district's communication plan since 2010, a recent incident added fuel to the fire of social media, stalling the progress in the exploration of social media in the school district. Last month, a 16-year-old student created a fake Facebook profile for a teacher and used this phony Facebook page to conduct inappropriate conversation with other students on Facebook. The student is now facing felony charges of online impersonation.

Amid the drama and chaos created by social media, Kevin also sees the possibility of using social media to build and strengthen the school's relationship with parents and community members. He himself is one of over 60,000 Twitter followers on Arne Duncan's official Twitter

page of the U.S. Secretary of Education (<https://twitter.com/arneduncan>). Kevin is particularly interested in Arne Duncan's tweets about Race to the Top (RTTT), because Kevin's school district is currently applying for RTTT grant and those tweets have been a valuable source of information. Last month Kevin, without a hesitation, forwarded an invitation email to all teachers in his school building, inviting teachers to "Like" Ohio Teachers' Homeroom Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Ohio-Teachers-Homeroom/303190473049852>) created by Ohio Department of Education.

Kevin takes another look at Melissa's proposal, exhaling deeply, and said: "Melissa, I'm not against your proposal, but we do need to be more cautious about creating our school's presence on social media. What is on my mind is not whether we do it or not, but rather how to do it. If NHS Facebook page is used for community outreach, then parents and community members are primary NHS Facebook audiences. Does our school encroach on parents' free speech if we delete an unhappy parent's comment on our school's Facebook page? Furthermore, I guess most of our high school students have already had their Facebook page. Given the controversy stirred by Facebook friendship between teachers and students, how are we going to set boundaries for the interaction between teachers and students on NHS Facebook page? I don't think our district have any policy addressing the professionally appropriate use of social media. And I don't want anybody in our school to make the front page on newspaper because of something negative on social media. With this in mind, prevention is better than cure in our social media initiatives. What about we invite our potential Facebook page audiences to formulate a set of policies as a guideline of professional use of social media? I want our school's social media policy to identify clear boundaries on the use of our school's Facebook so that the social media policy serves as a form of protection for NHS Facebook users."

Melissa nodded affirmatively, and responded, "It is a legitimate concern over using social media in a professional and ethical manner as an educator and a school. I agree with the necessity of having social media policy in place as boundaries to prevent potential drama or, even worse, litigation. What about we put together a taskforce by inviting representatives from parents, teachers, community members, and district staff? The purpose of this taskforce can extend from social media policy development to policy implementation and evaluation. In the process of policy development, the taskforce can help us build a collective understanding of the vision of our school's social media, as well as learn from our potential social media users." Melissa thinks to herself, "I do not have many answers to offer, but there are countless community members who are smarter than me, and I can look to them for answers. This collective thinking is instrumental to develop effective social media policy for NHS, preventing unprofessional behaviors which can potentially imperil the efforts in establishing our school's presence on social media."

Kevin listens attentively. He pauses before continuing the conversation, because he has no intention of dampening Melissa's enthusiasm with poorly-chosen words. "Taskforce is a great idea! I also appreciate that you look beyond the policy development stage by considering long-term goals for the taskforce. Melissa, I applaud your pioneering efforts in the social media initiatives. I want you to know that I am not putting a stumbling block in your efforts. I am cautious on social media, simply because the social media is an all-encompassing communication platform. To put the interest and needs of our students ahead of others, we need to keep a relentless focus of our use of social media on community outreach and relationship

building. This is why I think social media policy will prevent our efforts from drifting into unintended domains.”

At the end of the meeting, Melissa’s initial excitement about venturing into social media is readily overtaken by her racing mind filled with the details of taskforce. She is grateful for the opportunity to work with Kevin who is not simply a cheerleader, but a mentor challenging her to wade through constant changes in NHS. Instead of discounting Mellissa’s idea, Kevin provided support and suggestions in the meeting, helping her translate seemingly elusive vision into achievable goals. While the details of NHS social media initiatives still need to be ironed out, Melissa is now fully charged to tackle the task of putting together social media taskforce for NHS.

Teaching Notes

Along with educators’ using of social media in instructional environment (Aydin, 2012), all levels of educational institutions have embraced a new way of using social media to communicate with stakeholders. At the forefront of institutional use of social media in education, U.S. Department of Education has become an active user of social media on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Arne Duncan, the U.S. Secretary of Education, has over 60,000 Twitter followers as of December, 2012 (<http://twitter.com/arneduncan>). At the state level, 35 states’ Departments of Education are on Facebook, 36 on Twitter, and 20 on YouTube, with an attempt to “inform and connect with more educators, parents, business leaders and community leaders as well as engage with them by seeking feedback and ideas” (Race to the Top Reform Support Network, 2012, p. 3). At school district level, the Los Angeles Unified School District became might be the first district in U.S. that hired a full-time social media director aiming to broaden the district’s community outreach (Quillen, 2012).

Our current social media-laden life has presented unprecedented challenges to school administrators. As a double-edge sword, the implications of schools’ social media are subject to how it is utilized. On the one hand, schools’ social media can be leveraged as a viable means of schools’ communication with stakeholders. On the other hand, policies regarding schools’ use of social media have been left woefully behind the evolution of social media, leading to an array of legal vulnerabilities. This case presents the role of school’s social media in the process of creating social capital, and explores the possibility of collaboratively developing social media policy in school settings. This case was developed for students and instructors in school leadership preparation programs. It can be used to enrich the learning in two domains: social capital and legal issues of schools’ social media.

Social capital, defined through a lens of social network, is “resources embedded in social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions” (Lin, 1999, p. 35). According to Lin’s (1999) theory of social capital, three essential components—embedded resources in social networks, accessibility, and resources mobilization—must be utilized over the process of generating social capital. Flashback to the end of 20th century, Lin (1999) was optimistic about the potential of Internet in creating social capital. Over the following decade, Internet, particularly social media, has never slowed its advance (comScore, 2012). With the core functionality of information exchange and sharing (Isaias, Pifano, Miranda, 2012; Kim, Yue, Hall, & Gates, 2009), schools’ social media can give rise to a new way of social capital generation through social media’s capacity in formulating online networks, as well as providing

a platform where resources embedded in these online networks are readily accessible (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011).

In this case, two school administrators—Melissa and Kevin—approach the social capital in a noticeably different way. Melissa seeks to create social capital by formulating online networks and accessing community resources via NHS Facebook page. Therefore, Melissa purposefully proposes using NHS Facebook page to foster online relationships between NHS and its stakeholders, as well as promote the access to community resources which can be allocated to serve NHS and its students. In contrast, Kevin suggests developing NHS social media policy through mobilizing the resources in NHS community. He advises Melissa that NHS social media policy development should be a product of collaborative efforts from NHS stakeholders.

In addition to the role of social media in building social capital, a string of legal issues arise when social media has made its way into education. In light of the venue of free speech provided by social media, school social media policy makers need to be aware of inherent danger in the infringement on school social media users' freedom of speech which is protected under the First Amendment. The tonic effect of schools' use of social media is the facilitation of dynamic conversation among stakeholders in the interest of student learning. However, if schools' social media is misused, the unwanted consequences can ripple across all stakeholders both online and offline. Given the problems social media can cause, school administrators are left scratching their heads. Responding to the call for raising administrators' awareness of legal implications of personal expression on electronic media (Gomez, McNamara, & Brooks, 2006), Decker (2012) summarized school employees' legal responsibilities in three areas: employee sexual harassment and/or abuse, speech, and privacy. Decker's (2012) discussion squarely focuses on the educators' use of social media as *individuals*. However, with schools' increasing visibility on social media, attention needs to be extended to the schools' use of social media as *institutions*. With the increasing use of social media by educational institutions, the schools' use of social media commands attention from school leadership practitioners.

The following questions were developed to initiate classroom discussion, and help current and future school leadership practitioners raise the acute awareness of the challenges and opportunities posed by the constantly evolving social media.

1. Dexter (2011) states that current technology integration into school leadership largely focuses on instructional technology, but rather “using technology as a strategic resource in an organization” (p. 165) to achieve the goals of school improvement. How do you think schools' social media is the resource that can be utilized to improve schools?
2. According to the above Lin's (1999) theory of social capital, what is the mechanism of using social media to generate social capital in school buildings?
3. According to the U.S. Constitution, citizens' freedom of speech is protected by the First Amendment, and teachers' privacy rights are protected by the Ninth and Fourteenth Amendments (Decker, 2012). Is a school held liable to dismiss a teacher if he/she writes on personal Facebook page to advocate same-sex marriage, when this teacher happens to be his/her school's Facebook friend?
4. The Supreme Court has held that school-sponsored activities are not normally protected from administrative control by the First Amendment (*Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*, 1988). Is it legal for a school to censor comments made by students, teachers, parents, and community members on school's social media websites?

5. Rosekrans (2006) proposes the effectiveness of policy formulation and implementation can be considerably enhanced if research and stakeholders participate in the collaborative policy formulation process. What can school administrators do to improve the effectiveness of school social media policy?
6. Assuming a school's social media policy is implemented, is there any possibility that the policy turns a school's social media website into a one-way, school-controlled communication platform? If yes, does the social media policy defeat the purpose of creating social capital via building online communication networks for a school and its community?

As a follow-up to classroom discussion, students can be asked to collaboratively develop NHS social media policy by working as different interest groups (e.g., teachers, parents, community members, school administrators, and district staff) in NHS social media taskforce. To guide policy development, students are recommended to follow some generic steps: identifying the problem, clarifying goals, identifying effective practices and required resources, considering alternatives, setting implementation agenda, as well as developing an evaluation plan (Ben-Peretz, 2009; Edwards & Sharkansky, 1978; Rosekrans, 2006; Tataw & Rosa-Lugo, 2011). While there is no one-size-fits-all formula for policy development, these steps help students sharpen their skills for policy making.

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ERIC Descriptors

social media

social capital

policy development