

Westwood Regional School District builds bridge to community through website



Facing aging facilities and unsafe conditions, Westwood Regional School District in New Jersey presented a bold \$16.7 million referendum in 2007 to update and improve its buildings. Considering such referendums had failed four times in the past, the district recognized the need to connect with the community and provide vital information to increase its chances of passing the referendum.

The catalyst to build that critical connection was Westwood's website. Using the tools available in the Schoolwires® Centricity™ content management system, the district conducted surveys and forums to draw input from the communities and facilitate voter registration and absentee ballots.

The strategy worked. Westwood succeeded in making the essential connections and the referendum passed with a vote of 67 percent. Every precinct passed the measure, and five years later, Westwood continues to strengthen its connection to community through the district website.

One-stop shopping

Westwood effectively applies a "one-stop shopping" strategy via its Schoolwires website to facilitate communications. The website answers the public's questions through a vast amount of information in one resource, fulfills the public's need for transparency, fosters strategic partnerships, and is the backbone of the district's branding strategy.

"The community has learned that they can come to the website and its tools for just about anything, from Back-to-School nights to emergency alerts," said Westwood Superintendent, Dr. Geoffrey Zoeller, now in his seventh year at Westwood.

"When an electric panel burned out resulting in a loss of power in the high school, we used our website to keep families informed until the power was restored," Dr. Zoeller said. "Recently, we experienced two attempts to lure students, so we were able to quickly post the police alert on the website to warn the community."

Website visitors can also add money to student lunch accounts, follow courses of study, check building hours, and keep up with the Board of Education. Navigation is simple and intuitive, while graphic elements and engaging content compel the visitor throughout the website. Whether it's teacher pages or third-party providers — such as the online employment application — the information is readily accessible. According to Dr. Zoeller, "The effectiveness of the Schoolwires Centricity2 interface and its compatibility with third-party solutions is evident in the tactical links throughout the site."

Dr. Zoeller continued, "If you want to read about the curriculum for the engineering design program, it's on the website. If you want to see a video of the girls 4x4 track team winning at nationals, it's on the website. If you wonder if there's a snow day, it's on the website. If you need to find your child's homework assignment, it's on the website."

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A+ in transparency

Openness, communication and accountability, commonly referred to as transparency, are keys to building favorable opinion and confidence in any organization. Providing opportunities for the public to review, discuss and see what actions are performed often determines if taxpayer-funded organizations pass or fail. Westwood's 2007 referendum received an A+ in Transparency 101, and that focus remains clear. The Board of Education section is comprehensive, with minutes dating back to 2007. Policies ranging from teacher certification to crowd control are accessible from the home page. The website also links to education regulations, such as the Common Core State Standards Initiative.

Interestingly, Dr. Zoeller has noticed less people are coming to board meetings. "It doesn't mean the public is apathetic. It means that the community and the media feel confident they know what's going on. And they feel that way because the board is transparent, posting all agendas, minutes and archives online and through e-news," he said.

The public and media can get information from board meetings in three ways:

1. By attending the meeting
2. On the website the next morning
3. By Web links in the district's e-newsletter a few days later

"If people have questions or concerns based on what they've learned online, they can email or call us and we quickly push out the information on the website," said Dr. Zoeller. "If something peaks their interest or they want to provide input, they show up at the meeting."

"If we smell smoke on an issue from advance questions or input from people, we get out the information to douse potential fires," said Dr. Zoeller. "Since we have put this system in place we have not heard from anyone who thinks we're trying to hide something. The public is happy with our transparency."

Profitable partnerships

One outcome of Westwood Regional's website strategy is strengthened community partnerships. For example, the Westwood Washington Township Education Foundation is charged with enhancing the quality of education and increasing interaction between the schools and the community. The foundation uses the district's website not just to disseminate information and volunteer opportunities, but to facilitate fundraising efforts.

The foundation hosts an annual gala to connect with the public and a silent auction is conducted online via the Westwood website prior to the event. The foundation is a growing success and it has raised over \$250,000 to help meet district needs.

The foundation's Web section also promotes a local bank's affinity program and recognizes community leaders and alumni.

"Our online communications strategy has allowed us to establish a three-way partnership between the school, the foundation and the community," Dr. Zoeller said.

Strengthening municipal connections

The district has also broadened its engagement with local government. Janet Sobkowicz, the mayor of Washington Township since 2010 and a council woman for 28 years, has seen how the district's improved communication efforts have made a difference over the years.

"The school district emails weekly updates to the mayor and council to keep us informed of what's going on in the schools, and the progress that is being made in academics, athletics, events and activities, and buildings and grounds," Sobkowicz said.

The district also makes the information readily available through the website. "It's easy to access information about the curriculum, times of events, and emergencies," she said.

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Students have been encouraged to make connections, too. The township's first municipal website was built by students from the technology education program as part of a class project. National Honor Society students volunteer at township events, such as the Annual Family Festival and the Tree and Menorah Lighting Ceremony, to help the town and earn community service credit.

Whether it is the town's recreation programming, community use of the athletic fields or the public library's collaboration with the school's summer reading program, Westwood Regional continues to unify the district and community.

Seeing red

The vibrant red and graphic embellishment of the cardinal logo is everywhere in the school district and its communities, from the football field to lapel pins, Zoeller said. "People know what the cardinal is and what it represents. It's who we are. We've been purposeful in how we brand the school district, and the website has been key in building Westwood Regional's signature look."

The website is well-organized, interactive and graphically appealing to diverse audiences. The critical information is up front, along with thumbnail teasers for news and quick finds.

From the home page, parents are directed to portal logins and newsletter subscription sign-up. Student absence reports and substitute teacher placement also can be accessed online.

During election cycles, voters can download PDF applications for absentee ballots and voter registration from the Westwood Regional website. There's even a link to the State of New Jersey's electronic ballot.

A virtual eye on the future

Westwood Regional is evolving academically by piloting flipped classrooms in the high school. With that comes the need for training teachers to be tech savvy in their communication strategies — largely Web-based — for coursework and classroom use.

"That means we're focusing on the virtual environment, such as servers, the network and fiber optics, as well as the strength of the website," said Dr. Zoeller.

With the need for technology advances comes the need to fund them. Government cuts year after year have challenged budgets. But Dr. Zoeller is emphatic that technology is vital to the fiscal effectiveness of a school district. Not only does technology keep the community informed of critical funding needs, like Westwood's bond issue in 2007, it's cost effective and delivers a return on investment.

"When I came to Westwood all our communication pieces were paper," Dr. Zoeller said. "Now all our communications are electronic, except for one paper publication. We're saving money on paper, ink, copiers and printers. Our efforts demonstrate how we support green initiatives, which provides a good example to the community."

Many hands make light work

In 2012, Westwood upgraded its Schoolwires website with a new look to reinforce its branding. But with such a comprehensive website, how does Westwood keep the content fresh, attractive and current?

Dr. Zoeller explains that a unit in each department is responsible for its section on the website, whether it's a building principal, an administrative assistant or department staff. Standards, guidelines and expectations are spelled out.

Training is always accessible through Westwood's IT staff. Schoolwires also offers online support options, such as forums, tutorials, help cards, user guides, and the WebAcademy. In addition to training its own staff, Westwood serves as a hub for Schoolwires regional training.

Bottom line, it took time and strategizing with many internal and external stakeholders, but Westwood Regional has come along way in how they communicate with the public. "We're proud of how we put things together on the site and the impact it's made on our school district," said Dr. Zoeller. "The site is our bridge to the community."

Human resources information on the public site details the district's affirmative action program and mentoring strategies. Through the internal portal, staff has access to Webinars, evaluations and links to state mandated trainings.



Building blocks of an effective website

Dr. Zoeller and his staff offer the following advice to build a website that's relevant for a school district's many audiences.

1. Post critical information on the home page in a timely manner. Be succinct, yet thorough in messaging.
2. Take advantage of front page interfaces to drive users deeper into the website. Provide quick and easy access to parent and staff portals, contact directories, e-newsletter sign-up and social media.
3. Direct people to the website in phone conversations, over-the-fence chats, meetings, and in both hard copy and electronic communiqués.
4. Keep pages clean and streamlined.
5. Develop tools for flexibility and interactivity, such as teasers on the front page, photo galleries, videos, forums, blogs, spreadsheets and surveys.

About Westwood Regional School District

The Westwood Regional School District serves the Borough of Westwood (population 10,400) and the Township of Washington (population 9,400). These two communities are located approximately fifteen miles northwest of midtown Manhattan. The district enrolls 2,800 students and includes four K-5 neighborhood elementary schools, a 6-7 middle school, and an 8-12 junior/senior high school. The high school placed 58th out of 328 schools in the 2012 New Jersey Monthly's Top Public High Schools rankings.

The Schoolwires story

Schoolwires is dedicated to K-12 education, and to the people who are part of every local school community — students, families, teachers, administrators, and supporters of education. From the beginning, we've believed that a successful school district is a product of total community involvement. That's why our Web-based solutions are expressly designed to connect K-12 communities with the information, services and people they need to achieve their district goals. For more than 10 years, our intuitive technologies have been helping administrators and educators, students and parents, communicate and collaborate like never before — to come together around success.

Today, more than 10 million users in the U.S. and China rely on our website, content management and safe social learning solutions to drive engagement in the classroom, locally and across the globe. We're proud to be a part of that. And we remain committed to helping K-12 communities extend their local reach and transcend the boundaries of their districts so that individuals everywhere can achieve their full potential.



877.427.9413 | schoolwires.com
sales@schoolwires.com

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