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Publications Contest

The annual PenSPRA publications contest has begun! Attached to this e-mail please find contest rules and an entry form. Demonstrate the excellence of your communications by winning a state-wide award. There are multiple categories so you are sure to find one to fit with the work you have done over the past year. Deadline is January 19th!

Social Media

Like many of you, Bristol Township School District has been struggling with a decision on social media for some time. In order to move the conversation forward, PenSPRA member Eileen Kelliher recently invited social media expert Michele Martin to lead a discussion on the pros and cons of social media for some of the district's administrators and board members. I attended the session and thought you might find some of the information useful in your districts as well.

It is important to define social media before an accurate decision about how it should be used in your district can be made. Social media does not just mean a facebook page. The term "social media" also encompasses twitter, blogs, wikis, multimedia sharing like you tube and social networks like facebook or linked in. With very little instruction, anyone can use these tools and publish their thoughts, photos and videos to the internet quickly and easily.

Social media can be a powerful tool for educators, both in the classroom and for professional development. Mrs. Martin shared examples of teachers who tweet or blog, and who have thousands of followers from around the world. These educators share ideas, lessons plans and curriculum. Their students work through social media platforms and learn from each other and from other students and teachers around the world. In these cases social media is an extremely positive tool, and is very cost-effective.

Recent polls have found that 65% of adults use social media, and as a communicator you surely want to take advantage of this huge audience. We all know that we need to get our message to our stakeholders, and these numbers demonstrate that social networks are an effective means of reaching

our audiences these days. As a communication tool, social media is cost-effective, fast and provides you the opportunity to have a dialogue with your audience. Instead of pushing your message out, stakeholders are seeking out or pulling your information in.

The ease and power of social media provide these obvious positive attributes, but they also present some difficulties for school districts. Student use of social networks has moved the school social scene online, 24 hours a day, and playground bullies have become cyber bullies. Tonight's online conversations or threats become a distraction in tomorrow's classroom. Online relationships between teachers and students or between teachers and their outside circle of friends have also created distractions and in some very public cases, complex and expensive legal problems.

As a result of these issues, many districts have simply locked social media sites out of their networks. With this approach, however, teachers lose the ability to utilize the power of social media to teach and to collaborate with other teachers. Students lose the opportunity to learn in different ways and to explore all the internet has to offer. We have to ask ourselves too, in attempting to protect students from these possible negative online interactions, are we helping students learn how to behave online? Are we helping our students learn how to develop the positive online image they need for college and the workplace?

Educators in Bristol were clearly frustrated by the complications presented by social media. It is easy to see why a school district might shy away from social media use. Some school districts, however, are using social media very successfully. Mrs. Martin advised that a dialogue on social media begin with a clarification on what a district wanted to achieve. Is your district looking to improve communication, facilitate professional development or enhance classroom learning? Whatever you hope to accomplish with social media, approach it from a positive angle and start small. Don't get bogged down with defining every possible negative outcome. If your district doesn't already have one, review social media policies from other districts and draft your own.

There is no doubt schools are struggling to adjust to a world that is now both physical and virtual. Our society has been online for well over a decade, but we can't just hang out on our own websites anymore. Initiating a dialogue about social media like Eileen did is a great place to start. Focus on the positive, and your district too can take small and careful steps into this new virtual world.

Bye Bye for Now Vouchers!

Legislation on vouchers and the expansion of charter schools failed to move forward in Harrisburg this week. Reports are saying this development means it is likely now stalled until after next year's elections.

Symposium Registration

Registration for the 2012 PenSPRA symposium is now open. Make time for some powerful networking, and important information on fund development, crisis communication and budget communication. For more information, click here:

Job Opportunity

Communications Specialist - January 3, 2012 (deadline). Montgomery County Intermediate Unit.

Full-time, year-round position beginning as soon as possible after expiration of deadline. Bachelor's degree and 2-5 years experience in marketing/communications field required. Must have excellent writing and communication skills. Proficiency in Microsoft Office and desktop publishing required with experience in Adobe Design preferred. Assist with the writing and design of MCIU publications and contracted work with school districts, create marketing plans for MCIU divisions and provide appropriate communications support.

Salary range \$40-47,000 depending on experience and qualifications. Applications may be downloaded at www.mciu.org. Contact Mrs. Flowers at (610) 755-9307 for more information.

Lawn Signs Support Public Education

Show your support for public education with a lawn sign. Here's where to get one:

<http://www.educationvoterspa.org/index.php/site/news/request-a-lawn-sign-here/>

News From Around the State and Nation

Vouchers and school choice could not make it across the legislative finish line.

http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2011/12/state_house_rejects_school-vou.html

An investigation into PSSA test results is moving very slowly:

<http://www.thenotebook.org/blog/114180/state-refuses-release-pssa-probe-reports>