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An Evaluation of Mississippi Public School Websites

Lindon J. Ratliff 8911034
1976, lindonratliff@gmail.com

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[Author's Name Omitted for Blind Review]

Abstract

Websites are well-established forms of digital communication in use by both the public and private sector. An effective website is an educational tool public school districts can utilize in their efforts to communicate with stakeholders.   The purpose of this study was to determine the prevalence of website utilization and the components of websites used by public school districts in Mississippi. To determine the components in use by public schools in the State, a search of 143 school district websites occurred September 2017. To assess the quality of the websites, we used a checklist to evaluate content and design features that, if in place, would maximize communication and dissemination of information. Only 62 (43%) of the 143 school district websites listed email contact information for central office personnel with 52 (36%) choosing to publish an email address for the superintendent. We observed limited access to homework portals (58%) and links offering opportunities for parental involvement (45%). An appraisal of navigation and video displays occurred as well. The low percentages of effective website use found indicate school districts are not taking advantage of the internet as a form of communication with its stakeholders.

Keywords: website, Mississippi, public schools, communication, parental involvement

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Students and parents visit high quality websites. Websites are, for the most part, low-cost, easily available dissemination channels that allow their staff to share information and promote their school (Chavkin & Chavkin, 2008). The purpose of a school website is to "provide a pedagogical response to the school's requirements and to serve as an effective, organized online learning environment" (Rotem & Oster-Levinz, 2007, p. 2). The school administration's websites goal is not to sell products (i.e. Amazon, Wal-Mart) but instead to share information and ideally create a strong interactive digital environment. With the sharing of information, parents can create a home environment that will support the learning that occurs in the classroom (Piper, 2012).

The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) stresses the importance and benefits of website design through Standard 8 titled Science, Technology and Society. The standard asks how can we as a educators cope with the ever increasing pace of technology changes? In addition, how are these changes benefiting the greatest number of people? With schools scattered over different regions within the state of Mississippi, a website should stress the fundamental values and beliefs of the school as stressed by the standard. The College, Career and Civil Life (C3) Framework stresses the need to have strong communication skills utilizing various forms of technology. If students are encouraged to present summary of arguments via digital technologies, it is safe to assume the schools they attend should also be able to use their school websites to do the same.

School information should be accessible to all parents. Taddeo and Barnes (2016) attempted to discern the key factors separating basic (labeled as emergent) and advanced (labeled as progressive) school websites of 30 South Australian school websites over a six-year period.

The authors concluded emergent websites had a static and basic website design that lacked recent updates. Furthermore, there appeared to be limited administrative feedback and involvement with a focus of just providing basic information. Conversely, the progressive websites created a culture of sharing of knowledge by presenting lesson plans and providing parental resources. The emerging website also created an atmosphere that many contributors were involved in adding content and could be easily contacted. The underlying goal of the progressive website is to build a strong and active learning environment that connects school's teachers and administrators with parents and students.

Communication between parents and school personnel enhances the education process. According to The National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, when strong communication exists, student, parent and teacher morale increases (George Lucas Educational, 2011). Maio-Taddeo (2007) examined information communication technologies (ICTs) integration into school websites to identify the components of a highly successful ICTs integration. Through an examination of various ICTs websites, the researcher concluded the highest functioning websites (labeled as Category 4), were able to inform, communicate, entertain and display innovation within the educational setting. On the opposite end of the scale, category 1 websites, only provided a general overview of the school's curriculum and contained no interactive elements or opportunities to engage the intended website audience through the use of interactive elements.

The use of social media by a school assists in expanding the district's image beyond the website (Williamson, 2012). The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2012), found that over 71% of teens have a Facebook profile and 75% of adults have one. The need for effective communication by the school arose from the increased use of email and social media. Farrell

and Collier (2010), warned against poor communication skills that characterizes poorly trained educators. "New teachers require academic preparation and supported practice in communication" (p.16). Even though mentoring can facilitate improvements in communication, Farrell and Collier stress that parents do not perceive attempts to communicate with them as welcoming. This demonstrates more reason for school websites to stress lines of communication to make parents feel free to open dialogue with the school personnel.

Effective schools have effective manners in which to recruit and organize parental support. The participation of parents in school activities via the school website constitutes a factor motivating participation and makes a positive contribution to the school (Rotem & Oster-Levinz, 2007). Epstein (1995) identified six types of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and community collaboration. Increased parental support can also help the teaching staff's morale. Stipek (2012), surveyed 473 elementary teachers and concluded self-efficacy increased when the teachers perceived parental support as high. Diamond, Randolph and Spillane (2004), compared two schools with high population of children below the poverty line. They found that teachers in the school which had limited family involvement had low expectations for students' academic success. In contrast, teachers had high expectations for students when parental support was present.

Enhanced education can occur when students can learn at home. Students who have parents actively involved in their education have higher grades and scores on standardized exams, enroll in advanced placement courses, graduate from high school and go on to post-secondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Constantino (2003) found that parents desired to work with their children on their studies but due to time restraints felt overwhelmed. Olmstead (2013) concluded because of the time crunch parents need to start utilizing electronic

means to communicate with teachers.   Furthermore, the use of, "Parent portals allow parents to access students' courses, homework assignments, grades and attendance" (p.31).

Method

Population

An analysis of all Mississippi public school district's websites took place in January 2018. A list of school districts and their linked websites were obtained from the Mississippi Department of Education's website.   The Mississippi Department of Education's website provides a list of all Mississippi school districts and their linked websites used in this study.

Analysis

The author developed a fourteen-item checklist based on the following three categories: a) Communication; b) Dissemination of Academic Information and c) Promotion of Active Stakeholder Involvement (Appendix A). The instrument was designed by merging Taddeo and Barnes' (2016) progressive school website checklist as a guide (p. 431) with Chavkin and Chavkin's (2008) Promising Partnership Websites Checklist (p. 87). The author analyzed website content using an exploratory point and click method and data was entered onto a spreadsheet as yes or no. For example, if a website contained a search engine, the entry of key words helped to determine the functionality of the tool.   A total score out of the 14 items was calculated (1 point for yes and 0 points for no). The author used the school rankings provided by the Mississippi Department of Education. The ranking system ranged from A to F. The ranking systems were coded and a correlational analysis was conducted to determine the strength of relationships.

Findings

The examination of contents produced the following outcomes:

Communication

In general, school districts did not publicize email addresses of central office personnel. While every school district posted a main telephone number for the central office, the analysis of the websites revealed less than half (43%) published email addresses of individuals who worked in the district office (see Table 1). Sixty-four percent of the school districts failed to disclose the Superintendent's email address.

As it relates to social media, 37% of the districts posted links to either Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. Only 5 (3%) of school websites had a link for anonymous reporting of crimes or bullying.

Table 1

Percentages of Websites Which Contained the Listed Items

Characteristic	n	Percentage
List of District Schools	129	90%
School Academic Calendar	114	79%
Functioning School Websites	112	78%
Link to job application	97	67%
Search Box for the District's Website	91	63%
Homework Portal	83	58%
Parental Involvement Information	65	45%
Central Office Personnel Email Info	62	43%
Superintendent's Email Address	52	36%
Link to Social Media	53	37%
Search Boxes that failed to work	21	23%
School District's State Report Card	30	21%
Playable Video	11	7%
Anonymous Tip Line	5	3%

Dissemination of Academic Information

　　　　Most districts (79%) posted an academic calendar. Over half (58%) presented a link to a

homework portal for parents to view assignments. Ninety percent of districts had active links to

their elementary, middle or high schools, unfortunately, of the listed schools 14% had inactive links. Twenty nine (20%) of the districts chose to post their state report card.

Promotion of Active Stakeholder Involvement

Less than half (45%) of websites contained information on how a parent could become more involved in the district. To help with more effective searches of the complex websites, 63% had a search box, however, when examined 23% of the search engines did not work. To encourage people to seek employment 67% of the school districts posted applications online. In viewing the websites for media, only 7% of the districts posted videos related to school functions or activities.

An analysis examined the school report card ranking and the overall strength of the district's website. A correlational analysis revealed no significant relationship (see Table 2).

Table 2

Relationship Between Website Components and overall School Ranking (A to F)

Website Components	School Ranking		
	N	R	P
List of District Schools	143	-.102	.225
School Academic Calendar	143	-.014	.865
Functioning School Websites	143	-.037	.662
Link to job application	143	-.036	.666
Search Box for the District's Website	143	-.013	.878
Homework Portal	143	.032	.706
Parental Involvement Information	143	.062	.464
Central Office Personnel Email Info	143	.050	.555
Superintendent's Email Address	143	.013	.878
Link to Social Media	143	.084	.316
School District's State Report Card	143	.093	.268
Playable Video	143	-.013	.878
Anonymous Tip Line	143	-.122	.148
Total Points	143	.018	.834

Table 3

Relationship Between Website Components and overall Website Score

Website Components	Website Score		
	N	R	P
List of District Schools	143	.581*	.000
School Academic Calendar	143	.348*	.000
Functioning School Websites	143	.629*	.000
Link to job application	143	.501*	.000
Search Box for the District's Website	143	.528*	.000
Homework Portal	143	.429*	.000
Parental Involvement Information	143	.495*	.000
Central Office Personnel Email Info	143	.422*	.000
Superintendent's Email Address	143	.420*	.000
Link to Social Media	143	.499*	.000
School District's State Report Card	143	.426*	.000
Playable Video	143	-.260*	.002
Anonymous Tip Line	143	-.264*	.001

* Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Discussion

In this study we explored the technical components of Mississippi School District websites which could promote communication, active learning and stake holder involvement and came up to several important conclusions. First, we found the promotion of email as a form of

communication between school officials and stakeholders was neither universal or conducted in an effective manner. With less than half of school districts posting email addresses of the central office employees combined with only a third posting the superintendent's email creates a broken line of possible communication between the superintendent and the parents. Future research could focus on why school administrators are reluctant to publicize email addresses.

Second, we found when it came to website design many school districts failed to embrace social media (63%) and even failed to post videos (93%) which would encourage visitors of the website to watch. The lack of these tools conveys to the visitor that the school does not maintain its basic website in an effective manner. Given the ubiquitous use and rapidly updated websites commonly found on the web, the school appears out of touch, unable to provide the resources required to maintain a functional, up to date website.

Third, in only slightly more than half the school districts surveyed, were active learning environments promoted through access to homework portals.   When it came to bringing volunteers in the form of PTA recruitment many schools failed to address that need. Little more than 2/3 of websites attempted to advertise open and available positions or provide an online application for use by prospective teachers or employees. This suggests a need for the MDE to standardize hiring practices to ameliorate the critical teacher shortage currently facing the schools. Are schools losing out on potential employees due to the absence of an online announcement and application forms that prospective employees could readily access? Is the absence of an online application process a deterrent to potential employees who are used to online job application systems?

Fourth, we found, the quite noticeable, and almost universal, absence of an anonymous reporting system for bullying, sexual assaults and/or school violence troubling. With the growth

of the digital age, victims clearly need an outlet to anonymously report crimes, but with the exception of 5 school districts, the websites did not provide that service to the community.

Finally, we found there was no significant relationship between the academic ranking of a school district and the quality of their district website. This finding concerns the researcher because it clearly points to a flaw in the educational ranking system. Perhaps in the future, the state report card will take into consideration the quality of a school district's internet presence. After all, through a strong website, a school can establish the connections and open strong lines of communication and at-home learning that is present in successful schools.

Limitations

The study is limited to the scope of websites listed and publicized on the Mississippi Department of Education website and found through keyword searches in popular search engines. Some school districts and school personnel may have separate websites or blogs which could assist with communication and online learning. These websites, while effective, are not publicized and therefore cannot be evaluated.

Conclusion

School websites are extremely important extensions of the classroom. The website allows for communication for parents as well as opening portals for educational purposes. This study, while examining all public-school websites in Mississippi, concludes the most school districts are not utilizing the internet to maximize communication, parental involvement and academic achievement. The unwillingness to publicize central office digital contact information helps create an atmosphere that the central office does not desire to be directly. Whether this desire is intentional or an after effect of poor web design could be examined in the future.

In addition, avenues for parental involvement are not stressed and the connection between the schools and social media is, for the most part, absent. The digital footprints of public schools in Mississippi needs a strengthening. Future research could also examine the qualifications and training of school website designers.

Using strong websites that encourage communication, homework portals, parental involvement and the sharing of information, schools in Mississippi can excel in gaining a stronger educational environment for all the members of the community in which they serve.

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EVALUATION OF MISSISSIPPI PUBLIC SCHOOL WEBSITES   17

Appendix A

School Website Evaluation Instrument

Item	Is it Present?	Does the Link work?
List of District Schools	Yes / No	Yes / No
School Academic Calendar	Yes / No	Yes / No
Functioning School Websites	Yes / No	Yes / No
Link to job application	Yes / No	Yes / No
Search Box for the District's Website	Yes / No	Yes / No
Homework Portal	Yes / No	Yes / No
Parental Involvement Information	Yes / No	Yes / No
Central Office Personnel Email Info	Yes / No	Yes / No
Superintendent's Email Address	Yes / No	Yes / No
Link to Social Media	Yes / No	Yes / No
Search Boxes that failed to work	Yes / No	Yes / No
School District's State Report Card	Yes / No	Yes / No
Playable Video	Yes / No	Yes / No
Anonymous Tip Line	Yes / No	Yes / No

Column one total (1 point for yes): _____