Reform Support Network

Social Media Tip Sheet #3
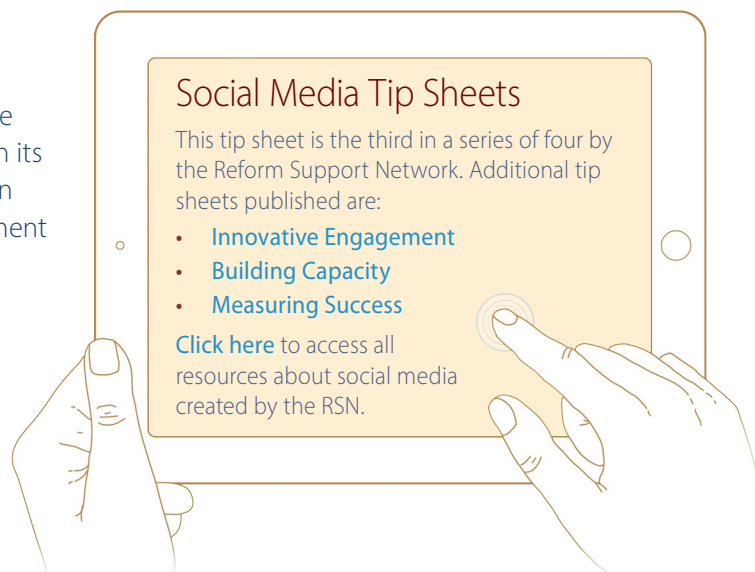## Driving Success Through Smart Policies

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Social media's established power to communicate and engage with mass audiences, combined with its largely free and easy-to-use platforms, makes it an irresistible lure for private, nonprofit and government institutions. What's murkier, but more important than ever, is solving the problem of properly planning and creating a structure so that social media efforts—like those in traditional or mainstream media—are strategic, purposeful, measurable and in keeping with the organization's guiding principles.

Increasingly, proper planning guides the social media work of State education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs), most of whom now use social media and say that they are doing it successfully. A slight majority of agencies reported having social media policies and guidelines (51 percent have them). Many agencies appear to be acting on those policies, with two-thirds of the agencies creating a formal process for approving social media content and one-third reporting that they have communications plans that guide their strategy. [1] The Reform Support Network (RSN) worked closely with several SEAs creating policies for the use of social media.

While many agencies do not have specific social media policies—typically either because all social media work is done by one person or a small team within the communications division—many departments find policies necessary as their efforts

Social Media Tip Sheets

This tip sheet is the third in a series of four by the Reform Support Network. Additional tip sheets published are:

- Innovative Engagement
- Building Capacity
- Measuring Success

Click here to access all resources about social media created by the RSN.

expand and include other parts of the agency. Some States have lengthy written policies, some adopt State policies and some have less formalized policies or guidelines to inform staff work.

The RSN found three key learnings related to policies.

Learning One:
User Guides Are Essential

Often, and by necessity, social media policies focus more on what can not and should not be done on interactive social media than what it takes to drive success. While some State and local agencies are split on whether to implement a full-scale social media policy for its staff to follow, many are ensuring smart and strategic engagement by informing those who use and might use social media. States that have had some of the most success on social media take the greatest care in explaining the medium, its unique phraseology and the rules of the road to internal audiences.

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[1] The Reform Support Network (RSN) conducted research to develop the series of social media tip sheets. First, the RSN conducted a social media questionnaire in January and February 2013, completed by 23 SEAs and 11 LEAs. The RSN then conducted follow-up interviews in September and October 2013 with representatives from eight SEAs and two LEAs.

In its 14-page *Social Media Plan*, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) devotes two pages to explaining the *who*, *what*, *why* and *how* of social media for the uninitiated and experienced alike. The plan includes working definitions of *social media*; brief explanations of some of the most popular social media platforms—Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn; and definitions for some of the key facets of those mediums, such as tweets, hashtags, likes and company pages.

The CDE plan details its current social media use and, by listing key audiences, seamlessly showcases its outreach and engagement strategy to those reading and following the plan. "CDE has a diverse following and audience base on Twitter. Current followers include: principals, political organizations, middle school teachers, superintendents, city council members, State education agencies, high school teachers, assistant principals, elementary teachers, PTAs, members of the media and Colorado school districts." The plan also details strategies for each social media platform in a proactive manner rather than simply listing the "dos and don'ts" of social media within the agency.

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) created a two-page "Social Media in Education" document that it shares with key internal personnel and districts throughout the State. This simple and user-friendly document displays the ODE social media pages and offers general background information on the social media platforms that the agency uses (for example, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, LinkedIn and YouTube). The document also lists the Website addresses of eight Ohio educators who blog, six additional Ohio education-focused blogs and eight districts who use social media for their local communities. It also provides ODE's template disclaimer

for those posting on ODE pages (complete with instructions on how districts can create their own disclaimers).

Learning Two: Start With the Basics

States that are just starting out on social media are often overwhelmed by the flood of information, as well as the time it takes to properly maintain the sites and succeed in growing active social media audiences, not to mention the vast potential for crisis-inducing mistakes. States ought to consider detailed planning efforts before they take that first step and as they expand, including listening, planning and preparing to measure the impact of its efforts.

In addition, departments could offer a series of simple "Rules of the Road," including being polite, transparent, accurate, creative and courteous, to help staff avoid common social media pitfalls. The State of Georgia, through its Georgia Technology Authority, created a section in its *Social Media Guidelines* on "Tone." Among other suggestions, the guidelines list the following:

• Be as authentic and transparent as possible.

• Understand interacting with people in physical, digital and virtual spaces.

• Embrace both positive and negative feedback from the community.

• Understand public sentiment and acknowledge valid criticism.

The Kentucky Department of Education lists 12 "Employee Responsibilities," including being open, transparent, smart, conversational and remembering that "perception is reality."

The New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE), in its *Social Media Guidelines*, suggests treating social media the same as any other official action of

the department. Employees should "treat professional social media space and communication like a classroom and/or a professional workplace. The same standards expected in NYC DOE professional settings are expected on professional social media sites," it states. "If a particular type of behavior is inappropriate in the classroom or a professional workplace, then that behavior is also inappropriate on the professional social media site."

Learning Three:
Be Clear on Firm Policies

Bedrock policies (the actual "dos and don'ts") may differ from agency to agency, depending on its approach to social media. Government entities often agree on several basic rules and prohibitions, including the following:

- The appropriate department managers are aware or approve of the creation of new social media sites.

- The posting or disclosure of personally identifiable student information is prohibited.

Likewise, these entities often agree that it is important to create a process for responding to comments, particularly negative comments, attacks or disparaging/abusive language.
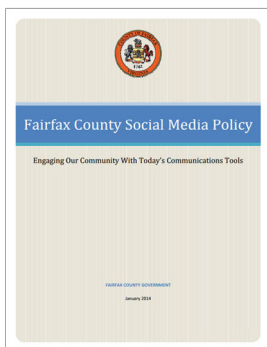
Wherever a State ultimately decides to draw the line, it should be clear, concise and in writing. For instance, the *Fairfax County [Virginia] Social Media Policy* lists 10 specific actions that can lead to the deletion of posts on its social media pages.

Actions that can lead to a post deletion include vulgar language, personal attacks, spam and comments that promote discrimination, are clearly off topic or which may compromise public safety.

Many government social media policies align with State or local public records laws by having specific sections concerning the saving or archiving of posts.

Some policies, like the City of Philadelphia's *Social Media Use Policy*, list procedures for employees if another rule or code of conduct is broken. For example, city employees must report unauthorized uses of city social media or city social media accounts immediately to their agency head, the city's chief innovation officer or designee, and the mayor's director of communications and strategic partnerships or designee.

Key Takeaways

Social media policies are the bedrock of any social media effort, guiding smart strategy, engagement and use. State and local agencies should consider offering essential guidance, rules of the road and, as needed, clear and firm policies

In addition to the policies, guidelines and information linked above, here are a few social media policy templates that could be helpful:

Edudemic *Crowdsourced School Social Media & Acceptable Use Policy*

Edutopia's *How to Create Social Media Guidelines for Your School*