

COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE MINUTES

June 5, 2015

Attendance: Laura Schulkind, Deirdre Burns, Deirdre d'Albertis, Joe Phelan, Stephen Jensen.

Website Update:

RCSD's contract with SchoolWorld is due to be renewed this summer; this would be the logical time to "cut over" to the redesigned, customized district website. Steve shared various features being built into the district website to improve communication both in terms of administrative function (front page, etc) and teacher web pages. A soft launch over the summer would give everyone time to review various parts of the site before it receives much traffic.

Steve is drafting a letter to teachers outlining the upgrades to the website and inviting input/questions prior to the switch. He is also producing a video to aid users in making the transition.

In looking carefully at patterns of current usage, Steve determined that only about half of all teachers have used their individual pages at some point this year. Some of these users are quite active, while others simply update information once or twice a year. He would like to focus on training and support moving forward to encourage more active engagement with the new site. Some faculty members may well be fashioning their own digital tools and platforms to support instruction; it is important to bring those users back to the district site as it is updated and improved. New faculty should also receive orientation addressing use of websites as a major means of communication with students and parents.

Joe asked Steve to work with Ed Schindler to move all existing pages to the new site and to establish templates for all teachers who have not yet had the opportunity to customize their own pages. Steve will remind all users—active and inactive—about the transition taking place over the summer.

District E-Mail

Student e-mail accounts are coming online now. Steve is testing with a small group to catch potential glitches early on. He shared with us best practices for middle and high school students and would like to explore the pros and cons of limiting Grade 6-8 users to internal e-mail only. A few parents have been in touch about access issues (asking for e-mail to be forwarded to them as well as the student). Sharing technology guidelines and resources with families in general makes more and more sense. The district must show due diligence in terms of safety and security when drawing up its Acceptable Use Policy (AUP). Joe reiterated a crucial point: these accounts "belong" to the district, not to individual students. Akin to a book locker, there should be no expectation of privacy for such an account. So too, it should be very clear that all

communications from school personnel will proceed only through district accounts; we ask that the Policy Committee take this matter under consideration soon.

Design of Website

Members of the committee affirmed their interest in using a “carousel” feature with a visual and text rotating on the front page of the site. These “headliners” would be changed on a quarterly basis to reflect major communications themes for the district. The Twitter feed is more prominent on the page since we last reviewed the beta site. “Ask a Question” is also on the front page to facilitate communication. Laura asked about the scrolling function and “usability.” So too, she wondered, how can the site best support the use of videos for “flipped classrooms” (a few teachers are forging ahead with such learning strategies already). Each building will be able to lead with its own news, contact information, calendar.

Synching HR changes with the site is a challenge and top priority for the summer transition period, as is working with the Guidance Office to update its section of the new site.

Establishing a front page for each department offers a great opportunity to introduce the public to the great work going on in our schools. Crafting a welcoming “introduction” message, Deirdre Burns pointed out, will be crucial for the superintendent, principals, and others who interface frequently with the public on behalf of RCSD. People often look at the website before ever stepping on campus and parents use it to research our schools prior to registering their children either as Kindergarten or transfer students.

The layout of the pages needs to be optimized for screen size (including smart phones).

Laura reminded us of the findings of the Website Usage Survey conducted a few years ago. People want most to see: teacher WebPages, calendars, Board of Education information, and Guidance resources. These uses should be at the forefront of our thinking.

What gets in the way of teachers using these pages? We discussed the perception that digital communications might detract from personal interactions—something no one would want to see. The site should allow for creativity, unique approaches, and the personality of each teacher. If we could look at web pages as virtual bulletin boards or white boards for showcasing what is best in each classroom (as opposed to a system of accounting), that would be an important first step.

Timeline:

Steve would like to sit with Ed and the building principals along with Joe to edit and update content prior to June 30. The switchover will save the district seven thousand dollars if we do not renew with SchoolWorld.

Michelle has set up an e-mail for “Help Desk” queries: webmaster@rcsd.org Messages sent to this address will go to Steve and Ed for response.

An instructional video (along the lines of “How to Set Up Your Web page”) will be circulated to all teachers before the end of term to assist them with customizing their “pre-set” pages. This video will be archived for ready access and repeated use.

To recap: the new system will be up and running by the beginning of July (soft launch) with official opening of the website (being edited during July/August) at the beginning of the 2015-16 school year.

Agenda for our next meeting:

The committee would like to meet in July to follow through on progress with the switch-over. All members of the group expressed a desire to stay with Communications next year.

Respectfully submitted,

Deirdre d’Albertis