Reform Support Network

Measurable Success, Growing Adoption, Vast Potential
### Social Media Use Among State and Local Education Agencies
May 2013

State and local education agencies are leveraging and quickly expanding upon the communications opportunities presented by social media, informing and engaging key audiences in broad discussions about ongoing reform efforts, results of a new Reform Support Network (RSN) questionnaire show.

Eighty percent of participating State education agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) responding to the RSN-conducted survey reported using or planning to use the three dominant social media platforms — Twitter, Facebook and YouTube — and less than 5 percent reported that the agency has no plans to use Facebook and Twitter. And a significant majority of the agencies responding, 79 percent, say they believe their efforts on social media are succeeding. As evidence, they cite growth in followers, engagement, metrics and surveys.

Social Media Platforms used by SEAs and LEAs
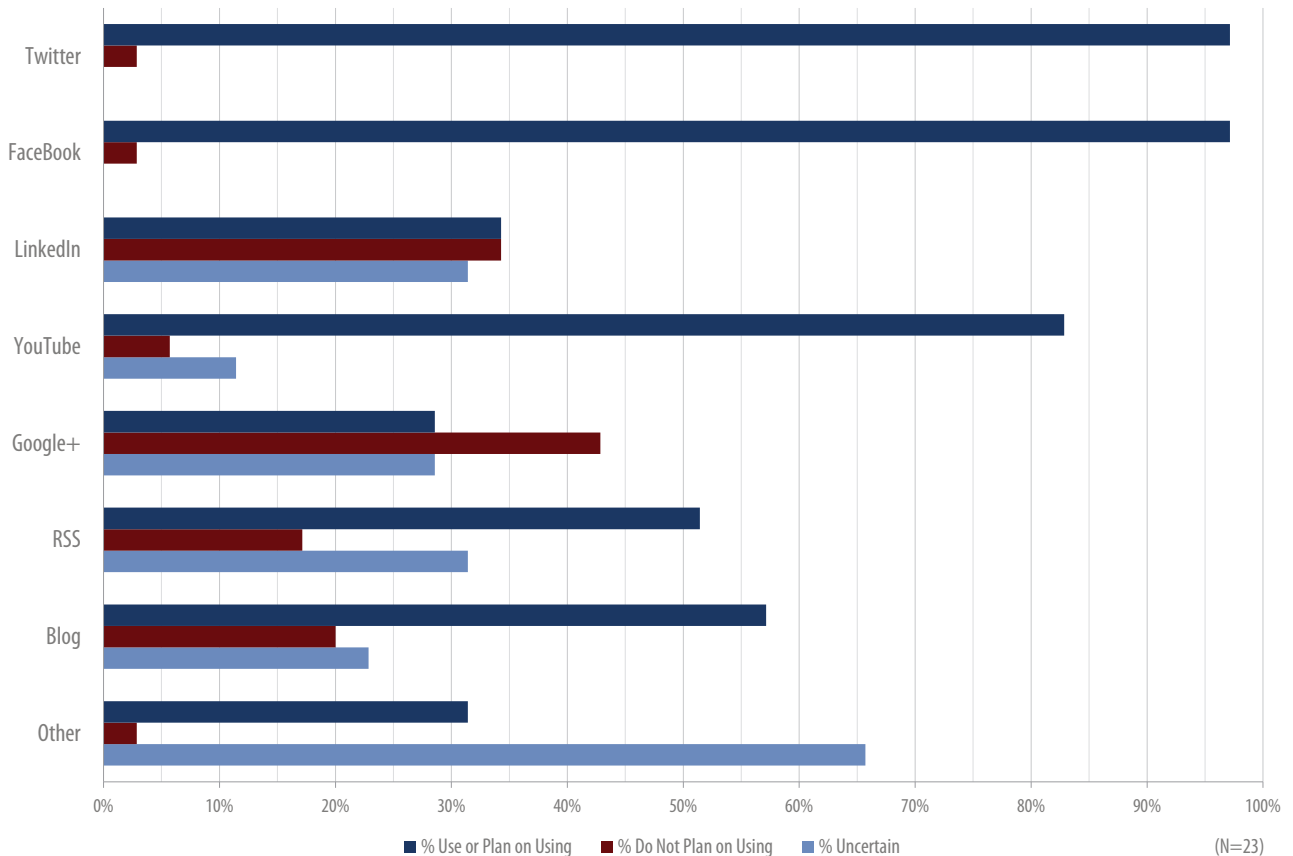
Legend: ■ % Use or Plan on Using ■ % Do Not Plan on Using ■ % Uncertain (N=23)

The RSN developed the questionnaire to inform SEA use of social media to communicate reform efforts. Among the key findings:

- Twitter is the most used social media platform among the SEAs and LEAs while, of the three dominant social media platforms, YouTube is the least frequently used.

- While adoption of those leading tools is strong, skepticism remains about additional or unproven social media platforms.

- Local education agencies are leading their SEA counterparts in more expansive use of social media tools.

- About half of agencies have formal policies in place for social media usage, and an equal number use metrics to track success.

The results from the questionnaire of SEAs and LEAs inform the RSN's broader work with States to develop effective communications strategies and tactics, including the use of social media.

In September 2012, the RSN hosted States and their partners on a webinar on using social media to engage with and communicate to key stakeholders. The network followed that event with a report that included case studies about State use of social media and the creation of a 50-State chart tracking current social media use among SEAs (Appendix A).

Since then, the RSN has been working with individual States on refining social media strategies and eliminating barriers to their successful implementation — including planning, creating policy and engaging key audiences. As part of this review, the RSN conducted the questionnaire completed by 23 SEAs and 11 LEAs. The questionnaire was conducted via a dedicated Web link for each respondent using the Web-enabled survey tool, Survey Monkey. The questionnaire response rate was 79 percent for SEAs and 73 percent for LEAs.

The questions and results fall into four broad areas: Social media usage, tools and key audiences, planning and measuring and, finally, challenges on the horizon.

Social Media Usage

Every agency responding to the questionnaire agreed or strongly agreed that social media has great potential to assist communications efforts and a vast majority, 88 percent, agreed that having an internal champion for social media use is essential for successful implementation.

Twitter, a microblogging service which limits posts to 140 characters and allows users to share information and engage on topics of mutual interest, is the most used social media platform among SEAs and LEAs. In fact, 62 percent of agencies report that they post multiple times each day. In contrast, YouTube is the least regularly used of the three main social media platforms, with 41 percent saying they post videos to the sharing service on a monthly basis.

While adoption of the larger social media tools (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) is strong, skepticism remains about other, lesser-known platforms. Thirty-five percent reported they do not plan to use the LinkedIn networking and recruiting tool, and almost 45 percent said they do not plan to use Google+. Meanwhile, despite the popularity of social media among individuals, businesses and other sectors, few of the SEAs and LEAs responding reported any interest in other platforms such as Pinterest, Yammer and Flickr.

According to the results of the questionnaire, it is clear that, among agencies responding, LEAs are leading some of their SEA counterparts in more proactive use of social media tools. LEAs are using the top social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) slightly more than SEAs and the LEAs also are far outpacing the SEAs on other platforms (LinkedIn, Google+ and the use of blogs).

For instance, 45 percent of LEAs are using Google+, compared with only 13 percent of SEAs, and 73 percent of LEAs are utilizing long-form blogs, which are used by just 25 percent of responding SEAs.

Tools and Key Audiences

Agencies reported that they are primarily using social media to connect directly with a variety of audiences. When asked to choose among key stakeholder audiences, the LEAs and SEAs showed they prioritize audiences differently in many of the sites. For instance:

- Parents were a key audience for 96 percent of respondents using Facebook, 88 percent using YouTube and 73 percent using Twitter

- Local educators were a key audience for 100 percent of respondents using YouTube, 96 percent using Twitter and 82 percent using Facebook

- And the media were a key audience for 86 percent using Twitter, 71 percent using YouTube and just 46 percent using Facebook

Among those surveyed, respondents said they used social media to a great extent to share information and resources with educators, connect directly with parents and engage the local community.

Less targeted audiences were elected and appointed officials and SEA employees.

When asked how they are using social media to communicate to those key audiences, most of the respondents (70 percent) reported that they primarily use social media to improve communications to better inform key audiences. Fifty-two percent said social media is used to share information and resources with educators and to communicate directly with parents.

At the same time, the opportunity of social media to allow for inquiry from key audiences and involvement on key issues is also being seized by some SEAs and LEAs. Sixty-nine percent of respondents said they are using social media to a moderate or great extent to engage the local community. Meanwhile, 50 percent said they are using it to a moderate or great extent to enhance collaboration on initiatives and projects.

When asked for specific examples of how and why they use social media, some agencies reported using social media as a tool to communicate with audiences

they sometimes have trouble reaching. Another agency noted that social media are easier to update than its traditional Website.

One LEA created a "Social Media Toolkit" for principals who want to engage with the school community which includes videos, how-to documents and more. The agency reported that, in the last 15 months alone, Facebook use among principals is up 3,550 percent and Twitter use is up 1,390 percent.

Planning and Measuring

SEAs and LEAs are taking seriously the "best practice" recommendation to plan and set policies before using social media tools, according to the findings in the questionnaire. A slight majority of agencies reported having social media policies and guidelines (51 percent compared with 43 percent without).
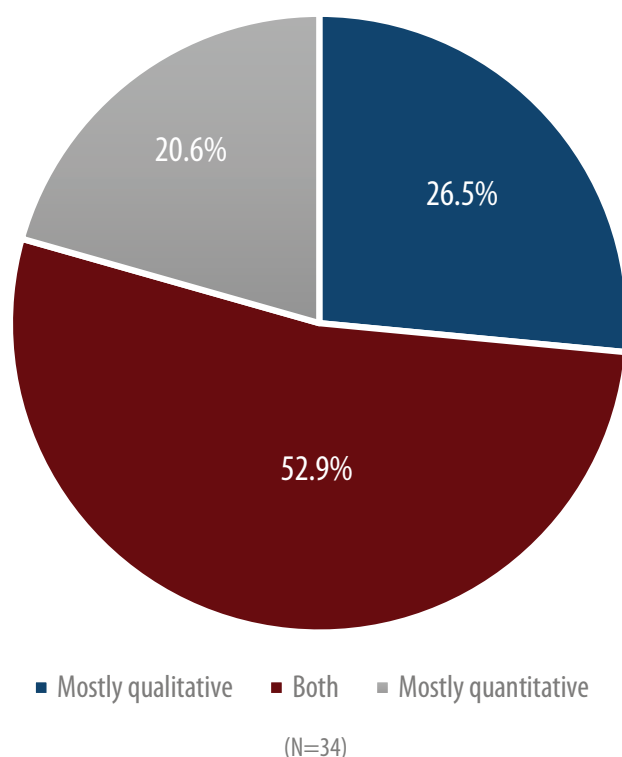
Education Agencies with Formal Social Media Policies

- Yes   - No   - Don't know

(N=35)
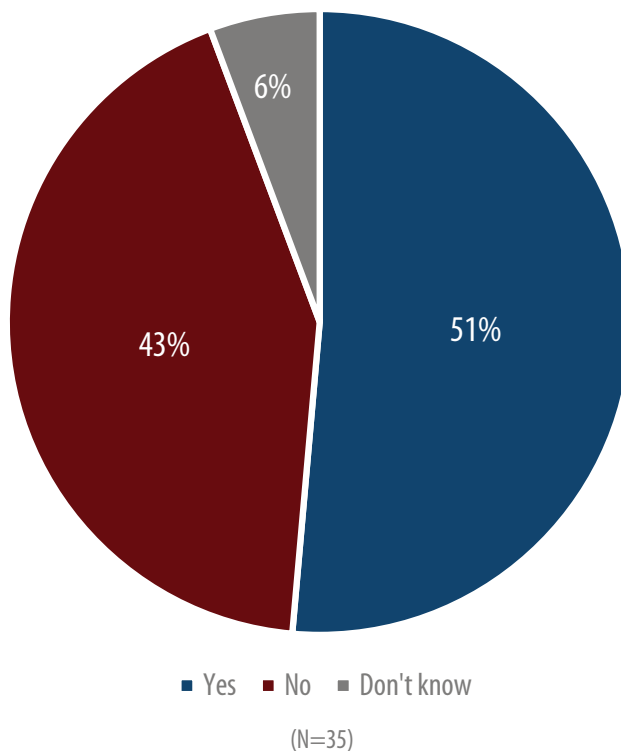
Likewise, agencies appear to be acting on those policies: Two-thirds of respondents noted that their agencies have a formal process for approving social media content. However, less than one-third of the agencies responding have communications plans guiding their strategy.

Half of agencies questioned noted that they measure the success and impact of their efforts by receiving reports with metrics and other measurements. These efforts include measurement of audience reach, level of engagement and mentions by other users.

Overall, half of agencies responding said that they use an equal mix of qualitative and quantitative measures for success on social media. Among those measuring the success of their efforts, nearly a quarter reported their agencies use mostly qualitative measures but noted that they also include analytics offered by the specific social media platform, quality of interactions, stakeholder feedback, surveys and growth of followers.

Asked in an open-ended question about which quantitative and qualitative metrics they use, one agency wrote: "Quantitative: Likes, retweets, @ mentions, etc. Qualitative: Positive stories and interactions shared, general conversation about the department."

Another wrote: "Growth in absolute followers as well as interactions. We doubled the number of Twitter followers for our account in 2012."

As a measure of its success with social media, one agency wrote about the number of stakeholder messages received via social media, compared with the more traditional forms of inquiry to SEAs and LEAs: "Increasingly, we receive inquiries through (social media) and respond after getting guidance from subject matter experts."

Evaluation of Social Media Use

26.5%

20.6%

52.9%

■ Mostly qualitative   ■ Both   ■ Mostly quantitative

(N=34)

Challenges on the Horizon

While pleased with their efforts with social media thus far, respondents identified several common challenges.

Only 6 percent of agencies responding did not have a designated person managing social media, but nearly all agencies, 91 percent, have a senior manager — a deputy director or director of communications — leading the effort. Those senior managers, the questionnaire showed, spent a quarter of their time working on social media and just three agencies have someone with "social media" or "digital content" in the formal job title. While senior managers running social media may, because of their seniority, provide opportunities for more strategic coordination with the agency's broader communications goals, those managers also have only finite time and limited additional capacity.

Agencies noted the following top challenges for social media implementation: staffing (44 percent), concerns about negative postings by the public or critics (35 percent), and lack of training and resources (35 percent).

Additionally, agencies cited firewalls and access by agency staff to social media sites as implementation challenges. Sixty percent reported having firewalls or other technology that limits or denies access to social media sites.

Asked to elaborate on implementation challenges, officials from SEAs and LEAs mirrored the issues noted above:

- "[Our] main challenge is to continue encouraging local school districts and local educators to engage," wrote one agency official.

- "Developing guidelines is underway but has been a long and detailed process involving many internal stakeholders," added another.

- "Getting most people in the department to support social media or provide information for our social media accounts has been a giant challenge. People usually roll their eyes at the mention of Facebook or Twitter," a third added.

Social Media Implementation Challenges

(N=34)
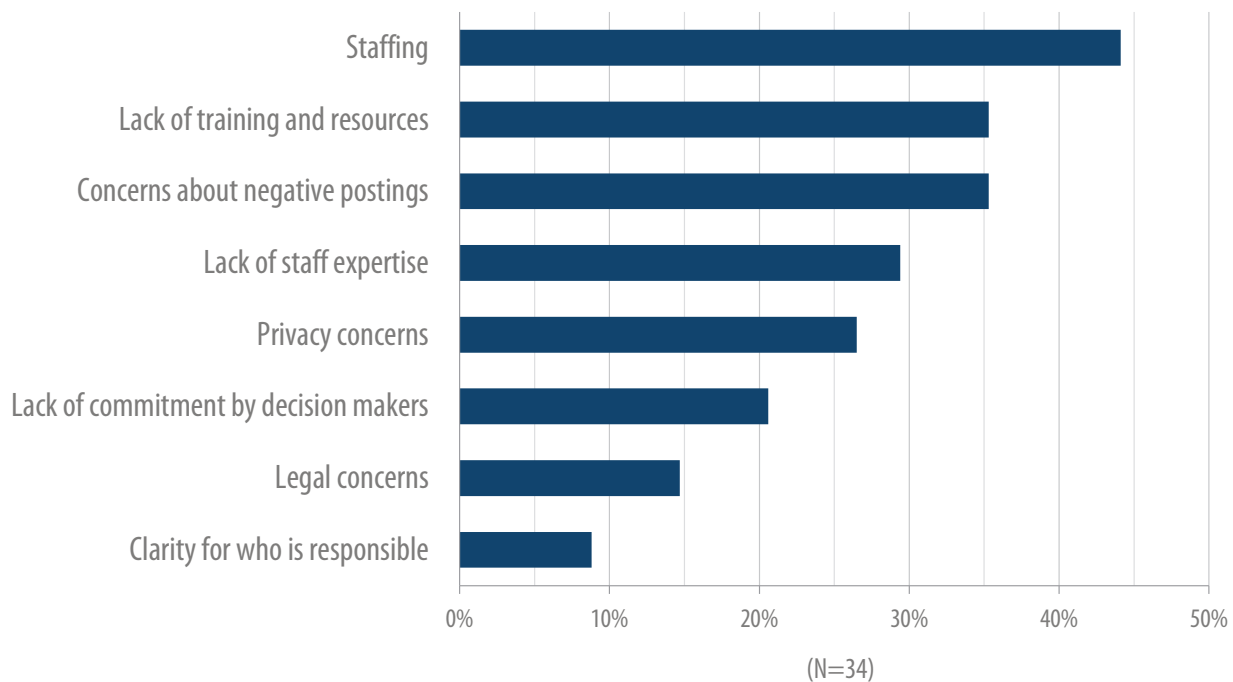
Conclusions

Overall, the questionnaire showed significant use already among SEAs and LEAs — with reports of more and more agencies engaging on various media platforms every week.

Respondents agreed there is significant potential in the use of social media tools, while also recognizing that progress on social media could be hindered by lingering challenges around access, support and capacity. Agencies are doing more planning, measuring and testing of the latest tools in an effort to make their communications more vibrant and engaging.

The questionnaire results help illustrate how social media opens up new opportunities for agencies to inform audiences, some of them once hard to reach. The new tools can involve and prompt inquiries from these audiences through public and targeted engagement. What's more, they can help break down traditional communications walls, spread information more quickly and directly to those impacted, and inspire a much broader conversation among stakeholders about policy changes and implementation.

Appendix A
Current Adoption and Use of Social Media Among State Education Agencies*

Check out **Alabama's** use of the **Facebook's** Cover Picture Feature.

The **District of Columbia** uses social media feeds on their **Blog**.

Missouri uses **YouTube** as a platform for video messages from the Commissioner.

New York's "**EngageNY**" website houses information and resources related to their Education Reform Efforts.

Ohio uses **Twitter** Chat as a tool for Ohio educators to discuss new teacher evaluations.

State	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Blog	Other
Alabama	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		
Alaska					
Arizona	Facebook	Twitter			Pinterest, Race to the Top Website
Arkansas	Facebook	Twitter			
California	Facebook	Twitter			
Colorado	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		
Connecticut					
Delaware	Facebook	Twitter			
District of Columbia	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Blog	
Florida	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Blog	Flickr, Pinterest
Georgia	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		Pinterest, Race to the Top Website
Hawaii		Twitter			Race to the Top Website
Idaho	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Blog	
Illinois	Facebook	Twitter			Race to the Top Website
Indiana			YouTube		
Iowa	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		Flickr, RSS Feed
Kansas	Facebook				
Kentucky	Facebook	Twitter			RSS Feed
Louisiana	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		
Maine	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		Flickr, Race to the Top Website
Maryland	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		Race to the Top Website
Massachusetts		Twitter			Race to the Top Website
Michigan	Facebook	Twitter			
Minnesota	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		
Mississippi		Twitter			
Missouri	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		RSS Feed
Montana	Facebook				
Nebraska					
Nevada					
New Hampshire					
New Jersey	Facebook				Pinterest
New Mexico	Facebook	Twitter			
New York	Facebook	Twitter			engageNY, RSS Feed
North Carolina	Facebook				Race to the Top Website
North Dakota					
Ohio	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		LinkedIn, Race to the Top Website
Oklahoma	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		Flickr, Vimeo
Oregon					
Pennsylvania					
Rhode Island	Facebook	Twitter			
South Carolina	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		
South Dakota		Twitter	YouTube		Pinterest, RSS Feed
Tennessee	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		Race to the Top Website
Texas	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		Flickr, RSS Feed
Utah	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Blog	
Vermont	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		
Virginia		Twitter			Flickr
Washington	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		Flickr, RSS Feed
West Virginia	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		Google+, Pinterest, RSS Feed
Wisconsin	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube		RSS Feed
Wyoming	Facebook				

KEY

Blog	
Facebook	
Flickr	
Google+	
LinkedIn	
Pinterest	
Race to the Top Website	
RSS Feed	
Twitter	
Vimeo	
YouTube	

*Information current as of April 11, 2013

Appendix B

Participating State Education Agencies

Arizona Department of Education

California Department of Education

Colorado Department of Education

Delaware Department of Education

Florida Department of Education

Georgia Department of Education

Hawaii Department of Education

Illinois State Board of Education

Kentucky Department of Education

Maryland State Department of Education

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Michigan Department of Education

Minnesota Department of Education

New Jersey Department of Education

New York State Education Department

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

Ohio Department of Education

Rhode Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

South Carolina Department of Education

Tennessee Department of Education

Texas Education Agency

Utah State Office of Education

Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (WA)

Participating Local Educational Agencies

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (NC)

Chicago Public Schools (IL)

Clark County School District (NV)

Duval County Public Schools (FL)

Fairfax County Public Schools (VA)

Hillsborough County Public

Los Angeles Unified School District (LA)

Montgomery County Public Schools (MD)

New York City Department of Education (NY)

Prince Georges County Public Schools (MD)

Wake County Public School System (NC)