

To Blog or Not to Blog



As the Web 2.0 method of communicating is catching on, board members from around the nation are debating whether to start up blogs of their own.

Waconia School Board member Jim Sanborn always thought that local board action should be conducted as more of a dialogue with the community, not just a board deciding what to do and pitching it to the public.

“Politics should be a conversation,” said Sanborn. “And my blog was one way I could start that conversation and give people a chance to say, ‘Hey, wait a minute. Let’s think about this.’”

Greg Abbott Back in 2006 he started his blog, becoming perhaps the first school board member in the state to do it.

“When I started, I thought it would be a place to share news,” Sanborn said. “One challenge we have is that there is no TV or radio station that covers us. It was just the weekly newspaper, so getting information out was a challenge.”

At the time, he didn’t like the blog tools. It was difficult to do so he didn’t post many opinions until this past summer. He put a strong disclaimer at the top of his page that stated the opinions in his blog were his own and didn’t represent the board.

He is also careful not to use the blog to blast board decisions he may not agree with. “Our board works well,” he said. “If I don’t agree, I state so, so I don’t need to do it in the blog.”

That’s a huge point pushed by Albemarle County School Board member Brian Wheeler of Charlottesville, Va. Wheeler started his blog in 2005 and has become the unofficial National School Boards Association presenter and expert on running a school board blog.

“You have to make sure you treat your colleagues with respect to gain their trust and support,” Wheeler said. “Any communications tool—from a letter to the editor to a blog—can be used to harm the work of a school board. For almost a decade I have always tried to champion the positive use of communication tools and technology to support the goals of the school.”

Wheeler believes more board members should be blogging. “It would be great if each member of our board shared information about the issues they thought were important. I think it would be good for democracy and good for our public schools.”

Sanborn agrees. He said that elected officials today can become very insulated, especially when not many people show up at meetings. “So we need to do anything we can to increase the dialogue. Any time we have a chance to talk with our constituents, it helps.”

Starting the blog was fairly easy. But setting it up required some decisions to be made: The biggest was whether to allow anonymous posts or make people state their real names when posting comments. Wheeler doesn’t allow anonymous comments. Sanborn does.

“I do allow anonymous posts, but I need to approve them. I would hate to have someone get on and use foul language.

I don’t keep their opinion out if they use clean language and don’t slander people,” Sanborn said.

Wheeler takes it a step further: No name, no posted opinion. “I visit other blogs that allow anonymous posts and

the conversations can be a real turnoff because people will say outrageous things. I want people to stand behind their remarks, just as I do with my posts. It also keeps the number of comments down, which means less time monitoring them.”

St. Cloud School Board member Jerry Von Korff said he uses his blog mainly to inform. “Sometimes I write about issues facing the school board, but I don’t use my blog as a method of advancing my particular personal agenda. On occasion, if an issue is coming before the board, I may try to provide information about the background of the choices we face.”

Former St. Cloud Superintendent Bruce Watkins said Von Korff is one of the few people he knows who has made his blog work.

“Jerry takes a direct approach,” Watkins said. “His attorney background makes him stick to facts. He does a great job with making corrections and dispelling rumors about school issues. He doesn’t spout opinions. He gives facts and information. That’s it. I

think if someone were to use this just to spout opinions, it wouldn’t have been as successful.”

Watkins said he wouldn’t recommend blogging for just any board member. But in Von Korff’s case, it worked because it was factual and accurate. “He doesn’t write anything that isn’t cited or can’t be backed up. He’s a unique individual. I’ve never worked with someone so civic-minded from start to finish on what’s good for kids, the country and education.”

With anything, there are positives and negatives. And Watkins said if there was a negative, it is wondering whether responding makes a difference to the segment of society that reads blogs and posts anonymous comments.

“Is this stimulating conversation with people who aren’t the least bit interested in fact? Does it feed them information they will intentionally distort?” Watkins wonders.

Sanborn said that as more people want to interact in political decisions, having a good source for information will be important—if the information is recent and the blog is kept up to date.

Read more from School Board Bloggers

Waconia School Board member Jim Sanborn’s blog, “The Story I Stick To” is at:
<http://jimsanborn.blogspot.com>

St. Cloud School Board member Gerald Von Korff’s blog is at:
www.sctimes.com

Jennifer Abell’s blog, “Ready, Willing and Abell” is at:
<http://abell4edu.blogspot.com>

And Brian Wheeler’s blog, “School Matters” is at:
<http://www.wheeleronboard.com/blog.htm>

“There is nothing more lame than a blog with no new posts for more than two months. You have to keep it up,” Sanborn said. The key is to set a timeline that works for you—once a month, once every two weeks, once a week. But whatever schedule you pick, you have to live by it.

The other important thing is to have a thick skin. “Everyone is not going to agree with you,” Sanborn said. “You’ve got to be open to opposing opinions going in. It’s not unhealthy, but some don’t like that kind of conflict. And if you don’t have a thick skin, don’t start a blog.”

Though Sanborn’s and Wheeler’s blogs were well-received or tolerated by other board members, it may not always be the case. Jennifer Abell, a Charles County, Md., board member, said that after she started up a blog, members of her own board threatened action against her. The reason: She was dissatisfied with how long it took for the board to get minutes of the meeting to the public. So, once she received them as a board member, she posted them on her blog.

Her board members tried to censure her and punish her for blogging. “But my First Amendment rights trumped any Board of Education Code of Conduct, and the blog stayed,” she said. “I believe my fellow board members have become accustomed to my site

now and don’t feel as threatened by it.”

One of Sanborn’s touchiest issues was a column he wrote about a local charter school that was starting up in the district. He took offense at their approach that said their school provides a better education than the public school.

“We do a great job, and I’m a big defender of public education. That didn’t sit well with me and I said so,” Sanborn said. “I got feedback from both sides and I think both sides are learning from this experience.”

Sanborn spends a couple hours a week on his blog. He says it is a good tool to let the public know the thought and reasoning behind his decisions.

“I think the public process should be run more like the courts with confirming decisions and dissenting decisions. If something passes 5-2, that’s the end,” he said. “The blog is my place to explain the vote—not to call someone an idiot if they disagree—but to thoughtfully sit down and say this is why I made the decision I made.”

Greg Abbott is the Director of Communications for the Minnesota School Boards Association.

Making public dialogue constructive

Gerald Von Korff

In 2003, the year I first ran for school board, our newspaper, *The St. Cloud Daily Times*, started using unmoderated Web-based comment lines. Any person could write anonymous comments of unlimited length on any article. The comment line soon became a community forum. Our newspaper writes several significant articles per week on our school district, and soon the comment line became an unmoderated gossip column and complaint center for issues about the public schools. There were many sensible comments, but the general tone of the comments was often angry, uninformed and confrontational. Our local newspaper soon became a public forum where anonymous people from anywhere in the country could say just about anything that they wanted to about our community and community leaders.

This arose in the context of a new environment for public education. First, as never before, public education

has been subjected to organized criticism, some of which is warranted, but much of which is unfair. No Child Left Behind, anti-public school pundits and angry citizens all can create an environment where public education is perceived as failing and unwilling to change.

Second, school districts find themselves increasingly dependent upon voter-approved referenda to survive.

Third, as the percentage of school-age population declines and the percentage of older Americans increases, fewer and fewer citizens have personal experience with public schools. When citizens lack a direct meaningful connection to their public schools, then citizens can easily believe just about any rumor about what is happening in the schools. At the same time, the Internet is radically transforming the way that information is exchanged and made available. On the Internet, you can find excellent resources on the superintendency, board governance, alternative teacher compensation, school funding and finance, special

education, assessment strategies, personnel practices, leadership, emerging trends in the principalship and much more. Universities, foundations, advocacy groups, unions, and state and federal agencies all have left us a tremendous reservoir of information.

I believe that as leaders in public education, we cannot abandon important community forums to anonymous or uninformed people. As an experiment, I decided to register as a commenter, but to identify myself under my own name. I remain one of the few online participants who is not anonymous. I found out several things. Very soon thereafter, the quality of the comments on education improved. When leaders participate constructively in dialogue, it can contribute to a positive tone. Numerous citizens took time to thank me for taking the time to set the record straight, or at least to respond with information.

Earlier this year, the *Daily Times* made two major changes in its Internet coverage. News article commenters are now limited to 2,000 characters, a limitation I find pretty challenging. But the *Times* invited me to register as a “blogger.” As a blogger, I can write articles at will and without space limitation. My articles appear next to my picture on the electronic version of the editorial page. There is a blog archive, so that anyone can review prior articles at any time. I believe that on balance, the experience has been strongly positive. People appreciate engaging in dialogue with their elected representatives, and they generally respond in a positive way. There are still comments with which I completely disagree, of course. But even the people who disagree with me completely do so with courtesy. I am almost never attacked personally; and the vast majority of people who disagree with my views have nonetheless been appreciative that a board member takes the time to listen and respond.

Sometimes, people who regularly disagree with me will even jump to my defense if someone gets a bit too personal. This infant public forum is developing ground rules and a sense of community. In my blog, I try to provide challenging ideas, factual information and hyperlinks to resources on public education. I’ve written

a series on the 25-year anniversary of “A Nation at Risk.” I provide summary information about our own school district budget and I’ve provided hyperlinks to information about school finance. I’ve written a series on NCLB, on special education finance, on governance by policy and on the role of administrators in public education.

How does this blogging experiment fit within the governance paradigm that we are used to in Minnesota? How do my fellow board members feel about this? What about my superintendent? To tell you the truth, I haven’t given these issues a whole lot of worry time. I start from the perspective that as an elected official, I do not check my constitutional rights and liberties at the district administration office. Communicating with the public, listening to citizens and responding and informing, is, in my view, a sacred obligation of elected officials. Our district follows the National School Boards Association Key Work model, which tells us that communicating with the public and linking to elected officials is a critical role of board members. The advantage of the forum I use is that what I say is public and accountable.

As a school board member, however, I try to follow some self-imposed ground rules. Because I believe in governance by policy, I try to write about issues at a policy level. I never engage in debate about the performance of individual employees of the district—that is outside my domain. I don’t attack people or their positions. I try to correct factual inaccuracies that are circulating in the community. I never purport to be speaking for the board or for the district. When discussing my position on an issue before the board, I identify my views as that of an individual board member. During labor negotiations, I use extra caution, but here again, I subscribe to the view that the First Amendment protects my right to explain and engage in dialogue provided only that I adhere to appropriate guidelines.

Gerald Von Korff is a St. Cloud school board member and blogger.

