What's Missing From YOUR School Website?

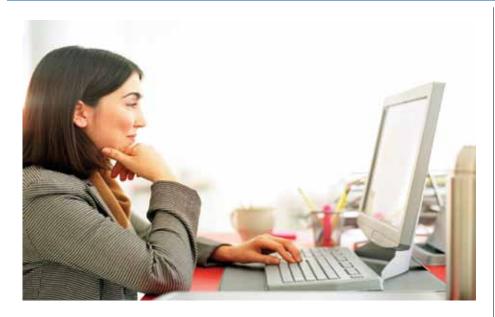## 18 Features School Websites Must Have, Plus 5 Mistakes to Avoid

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With the Internet rapidly becoming the top source of information about schools for parents and community leaders, how does your website stack up?

Broadband Internet use has risen by more than a factor of seven in the last decade. In 2009 almost two-thirds of US households used some kind of high speed Internet service at home, at work, on mobile phones, at friend's homes, coffee shops or the local library.

It's neither hard nor expensive to make your site one of the most helpful sources of information about your school. With very little time and expense, you'll see increased school support from parents and the community—and spend less time answering the same questions over and over again, time that can be better focused on improving student achievement.

Use the following checklist to see at a glance what, if anything, your school website is missing.

The Checklist

Check off the boxes beside each statement where you can definitely answer "Yes":

☐ **1. The primary audience** to which our website is directed is the parents and families of our current and prospective students.

Your school's website is the first contact many parents will have with the school, so it's important to make sure that their first impression is a good one. Start by making a list of the most common reasons parents call the school. Then look at your school's home page. Is it obvious how to address each of the parent questions or concerns on your list?

☐ **2. Our school address and phone number** are prominently displayed on our home page.

A surprising number of school websites omit this vital information. Make sure your website displays the city and state, too. Since many website visitors will find your school's site using a search engine, this additional information will help visitors find your school instead of a similarly-named school in a far-off place.

☐ **3. An easy-to-find email link** is provided right on our home page so our website readers can easily contact someone at our school with questions, comments or concerns.

Consider directing this email to the school secretary or the person who normally answers the telephone at the school. This person already knows the answers to many commonly-asked questions—and can direct other queries to the most appropriate person.

☐ **4. We make sure that email sent to school officials** through our website is always answered within 24 hours.

It's frustrating for parents to write an email only to have it go unanswered. Even if the question or problem will take time to address, a parent sending email to your school should quickly get some sort of acknowledgement.

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☐ **5.** **Our current lunch menu is available** no more than two clicks away from our home page.

Parents care about what their child is eating. Providing an up-to-date lunch menu seems like a small thing but one that many parents greatly appreciate.

☐ **6.** **Our website home page provides a link** to parents' Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) such as:

- *When should I contact the teacher if I have a concern?*
- *Do I need to make an appointment to meet with a teacher or another school staff member?*
- *How can I reach a teacher or other staff member by email or telephone?*
- *If I submit a question to a staff member by email, when should I expect to receive a reply?*
- *What should I do if I think my child has a learning disability?*
- *What should I do if I want my child to participate in the athletic program?*
- *What should I do if I think my child has an attention problem?*
- *How can I view my child's grades or homework assignments?*
- *What should I do if my child doesn't like the teacher?*
- *How can a divorced parent get information on a child's school progress?*
- *When should I contact the school counselor and what services can he/she provide?*
- *What services does the school nurse provide?*
- *How do I find school closing information?*

☐ **7.** **Our website contains prominently visible daily-updated information** to make sure readers find something new and useful to them every time they visit our site.*

*Daily updated information will get users to check your website often. PTA or board meeting minutes from the past may be important but they shouldn't be front and center on your site. When they become out-of-date, they need to be removed altogether or put into an archived link. (*See the sidebar on the right to read about the School Success Web Content Service—daily-updated parenting tips delivered automatically to your website from The Parent Institute.) An image of how the service buttons can look on your site is below.*

☐ **8.** **Our School Calendar is both up to date and available** no more than two clicks away from our home page.

☐ **9.** **Our school policies can be found in our School Handbook** no more than two clicks away from our home page

Policies should include those on inclement weather closings, drug use, school bus safety, bullying, attendance/tardiness, discipline, security procedures for school visitors, dress code, etc.

☐ **10.** **A link to a list of our key school administrators** and teachers along with their school contact

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information is no more than two clicks away from our home page.

It's easy to compile and can provide a wonderful service to parents that need to contact the teacher. The two-way communication will establish the parent-teacher teamwork needed to boost achievement.

☐ **11. Our website has information available in all of the major languages** spoken by parents of students in our school.

Research shows that parents with limited English proficiency feel especially isolated and don't know where to turn. Engaging them to help their children with information in their native language will help your school make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in all sub-groups.

☐ **12. Required forms are both up to date and available** no more than two clicks away from our home page.

Forms get misplaced before they make it back to school. Providing PDFs of forms will help your teachers and staff members as well as parents.

☐ **13. Practical tips* parents can use at home** to help their child learn are available no more than two clicks away from our home page.

Research proves that parents want to help their children but many don't know what to do. Your website is the perfect vehicle to provide the information parents need to help their children.

☐ **14. Up-to-date classroom supply lists** can be found no more than two clicks away from our home page at least one month before classes begin.

Supply lists sent home with students don't always make it home. Providing this essential information will help your teachers, parents and students make sure the work is done using the tools that are needed.

☐ **15. Our website provides links to information found on our school district's website** that our school's parents need to know—no more than two clicks away from our home page.

Check these links, and any others, to make sure they are always current. Be judicious with links. They take parents away from your website and too many can be confusing.

☐ **16. Our website's homepage encourages users** to sign up for email and Twitter announcements.

Taking advantage of new technology helps build the home-school team. Having up-to-date information, inclement weather closings and other important announcements delivered right to phones or computers via email or Twitter allows busy parents and community leaders to plan effectively with your school in mind.

☐ **17. Our website is visually pleasing** and easy for readers to scan.

Parents, like all of us, are more likely to read information in a typeface that is easy to read and on a web page that is free of animated images, busy backgrounds or distracting music. Typically home pages are full of information so it is important to make yours easy to scan. Don't have the text in lots of colors and only underline words if they are links. If possible, have a navigation bar on the left or top of your pages so parents can quickly find the main information they are looking for. Be sure there is an area there specifically for parents!

☐ **18. Our website is a team effort.**

Carrying out the plan to have a great school website that engages parents to boost student achievement should be a school-wide effort. Create a web team made up of staff and parents. Have regular meetings either in person or by phone. Assign members to monitor your site regularly to make sure it is accomplishing your goals. Have them record every error they find on a team punch list. The team won't be able to fix everything at once, so prioritize. This on-going punch list of items to be corrected will be a key to success.

*See sidebar on previous page.

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Five Mistakes to Avoid:

1. Don't design your site for a specific browser.

If your school website requires the use of a specific browser (like Internet Explorer), you're making it difficult—or impossible—for some parents to access. Test your website using as many different browsers as you can (Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari, and Chrome are all widely-used). And don't forget mobile phones! More than ever before, parents will access your school website from their mobile phones. Test your site using common phones (like the iPhone, a BlackBerry, and an Android phone) to make sure that it looks good and works well from a mobile device.

2. Don't let out-of-date information linger on your site.

A parent who visits a school website only to find outdated information and broken links is unlikely to return. Enlist help from parents, teachers and staff to locate out-of-date information, then correct or remove it. Avoid features like "Last Updated on …" or "Visitor Number ___." When the month and year are out-of date, it reflects badly on you and your staff. These trendy features from a few years ago will immediately make your site look dated to sophisticated users.

3. Don't be afraid to experiment.

It's easy and inexpensive to make changes to a website. And it's very simple to correct mistakes. So don't hesitate to make changes to the content and presentation of material on your website in order to make it more useful to your audience.

4. Don't be intimidated by the size of the task.

Even though your school's website may have many areas of concern to be addressed, it's not necessary to correct every weakness at once. Small improvements in content and presentation add up quickly.

5. Don't be complacent once your original punch list is completed.

A successful, up-to-date school website that engages parents and helps to boost student achievement should always be evolving. Even the best websites look dated after a few years. Strive for a fresh look all the time and listen to your team members when changes are suggested.

Your school website can be the most effective communication tool with your most important and largest audience – busy parents. It can be dynamic in terms of content, offerings and news but can quickly go stale or fail to be user-friendly if not maintained. Scrutinize your site often to make sure that it is up-to-date and presenting the image, content and accuracy your community expects. Providing parenting tips for school success on an engaging, user-friendly site will help you boost student achievement.

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