To the more than 600 million members of Facebook and the expanding legions of Twitter users, you can add a growing number of schools and districts. Whether communicating with parents and the public, enhancing classroom instruction and staff development, or rallying school spirit, administrators and teachers are beginning to leverage the interactive and multimedia features of social networks that have the added advantage of being widely and easily accessible—and free.

And while some district leaders have banned the use of social networking sites altogether because of fears over inappropriate use and/or goofing off among students, others are puzzling over what to do about the brave new world of social media, and weighing its potential use by students and teachers inside and outside of the classroom.

The Weymouth (Mass.) Public
The Social Media Dilemma

Schools, which make extensive use of interactive whiteboards and multiple educational Web sites, have yet to catch the social media wave for classroom use, says David Cawthorne, the district’s technology director. “Is Facebook a good tool? Absolutely. Is it a good way to engage kids? Absolutely,” Cawthorne says. “But from a district perspective, there are just too many gray areas to deploy it, and too many uncertainties. My main objective is kids being safe. If you can just throw something out there, how do you dependably monitor what others are putting up?”

During the past school year, the Weymouth district—citing concerns about inappropriate contact—also imposed the increasingly common prohibition of teachers “friending” students, that is, establishing an online relationship with them that would have allowed teachers and students to view and post messages on each other’s personal Facebook pages.

“We define social media as an Internet-based tool for sharing and discussing information among users,” says Trevor Timmons, director of technology and information services for the Weld Re-4 School District in Windsor, Colo., which until last spring prohibited social networking for educational or administrative purposes.

“The district had started using Facebook as a communication tool this past fall, and it felt a bit hypocritical that we were using it for that while prohibiting it elsewhere.”

—Trevor Timmons, director of technology and information services, Weld Re-4 School District, Windsor, Colo.

The district had started using Facebook as a communication tool this past fall, and it felt a bit hypocritical that we were using it for that while prohibiting it elsewhere.

Cashton Middle School students in the Cashton (Wis.) Public Schools take part in a reading lesson where they listen to questions (via headphones) that their teacher had previously recorded on iTunes, and read those questions on their laptops at the same time. Cashton Public Schools doesn’t use social media like Facebook or Twitter, per se, but uses tools like iTunes that might be considered social media, as the term has been morphing to include Web 2.0 tools.

Timmons and others leading their districts into the Web 2.0 era are not thinking about traditional emailing and blogging when they discuss social networking. They’re focused on the connections made possible through tools such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, as well as collaborative writing and editing tools like Google Docs and Edmodo.

**A 21st-Century School**

“Facebook is huge for us,” exclaims Michael Roe, the first-year principal of four-year-old Tahquitz High School, part of the Hemet Unified School District in California’s San Jacinto Valley. The 38-year-old Roe notes that before he arrived last fall, “we had a very strong policy of no cell phones, no iPhones, no anything.” Unlike his older predecessor at Tahquitz, he has spent his teaching and administrative career amid the digital revolution and is enthusiastic about the latest technological advances.

At Tahquitz, Roe communicates daily with more than 5,000 parents, students, teachers and staff members via his own Facebook page, on which he posts everything from announcements, pictures and links to interesting videos. Those connected to the page as Facebook “friends” can post their own queries or comments.

Roe posts pictures, including of a student production based on Greek mythology and the night of the prom last May. At the same time, he ran commentary in real time, prompting one Tahquitz student to respond, “I bet you are the first principal to Facebook a prom. Too cool. Talk about connected.”

“Parents could look at the pictures and also know that their kids were safe,” Roe points out. He adds that a separate Facebook page launched last fall for the school’s Parent Teacher Student Association has become an interactive hub for PTSA business. “Within the first month, we had over 200 [parent] members,” he says, which was more than triple the rate of past parental participation.

Tahquitz High’s school leaders’ foray into social networking has other outlets. Last fall, a Twitter campaign promising students a free shirt if they attended a school football game and displayed the tweeted game announcement on their cell phones or iPods helped fill the Tahquitz side.
Even texting, a form of social media, has made it into Tahquitz High class-rooms. Connecting through polleveryone.com, the school’s U.S. history class uses overhead projectors to present multiple-choice questions, while students use their own cell phones to text the numerical code of the answer. Students without phones collaborate with others who do.

“It’s an anonymous way for students to engage and contribute,” Roe explains, adding that the teacher can immediately assess how well students are picking up on class content and identify which information needs to be retaught. “And it’s all at no charge. That’s the key thing.”

Communicate With Community
Twitter is taking on an increasingly large role in large districts, including the Houston Independent School District in Texas, especially when it comes to communicating about school business. “We have a tendency in urban settings to believe that shows up in the newspapers, but only about 8 percent of our population will see it there,” says Superintendent Terry Grier, who started tweeting to teachers, parents and the press when he arrived two years ago.

“I use Twitter primarily to share good news,” Grier continues, who often tweets from district and school functions to his almost 1,000 Twitter followers. Grier has also tweeted about district initiatives such as a new instrument for evaluating teachers, accompanied by a link to a district blog that covers the changed evaluation process in detail. “The more ways you can find to communicate, the more transparent you and your district can be,” he insists.

In contrast, Cawthorne says his 6,900-student, 11-school district in Weymouth, Mass., still makes effective use of a more traditional approach for reaching parents and the public. “We subscribe to a communications system that will call the house and send out emails,” he says. “In our environment, we feel these communication tools are the best way to reach 99 percent of the people we’re trying to reach. Parents are coming to evening activities, so why muddy the waters if the system works?”

Weymouth teachers, meanwhile can communicate with parents either by e-mail or telephone. Cawthorne admits that these approaches may seem old-fashioned, but he’s not opposed to social media for administrative communications. The district’s high school and one of its middle schools have recently started using Facebook for that very purpose. “Why not, if you want to try and communicate?” he says. “But it can’t be the only way.”

First-Graders on Facebook
In the Council Bluffs (Iowa) Community School District, teachers at the former Gunn Elementary School, which is now College View Elementary, are leading the district into the social-networking age. Two years ago, first-grade teacher Erin Schoening and her husband Devin, the district’s K12 technology coach, devised the idea of having her students use a class Facebook page to report their classroom activities several times daily and post pictures and videos.

Their audience consists of peers in other Gunn classrooms, as well as parents and grandparents—and aunts and uncles, for that matter—who have been identified as “friends” and who therefore can view and respond to those postings. Three or four times a day, they find announcements on the page such as “We are editing our non-fiction books. Tomorrow we are going to start typing them!” or a set of photographs accompanied by the message “We hope you enjoy the pictures of the first-graders working in math workshop.”

“In the past, I had kept a blog to communicate with families, and I noticed that no one was reading it,” Erin Schoening recalls. “But there are so many people on Facebook, and it’s so accessible that the information is right in your face.”

Schoening is quick to point out that she alone has sign-in privileges for the class Facebook page and that she supervises all student postings. The parents of her students have signed permission slips allowing their children varying levels of involvement, such as using their names and appearing in pictures. (A few have exercised an option to keep their children
Most of the other Gunn classrooms have followed suit and share videos—many shot from handheld devices on such activities as science experiments. Students have also posted animated videos for which they write the scripts. “It lets the students know that our learning is important and that someone out there cares about it,” Schoening says. “Parents love it.”

Social Networking Success
Michael Smith, superintendent of Mt. Vernon Township High School District in Oakland, Ill., uses Google Docs for collaborative work with other administrators. While Google Docs allow users to share ideas, comments and multimedia with each other—much like Facebook—Smith finds the easy security controls better suited to educational settings.

The students in Mt. Vernon Township are also leveraging the reach of social media. They create videos of classroom exercises such as mock trials in social studies and, under their teachers’ supervision, upload them to YouTube. Twitter is also making an impact.

“We can’t afford to fly in an author to talk to students,” Smith continues, but we can tweet him and ask questions. Or if you’re talking about the pyramids, the teacher can look up and choose from 18,000 personal videos from people’s vacations. It’s like a virtual field trip.”

Bradford Saron, district administrator of the Cashton (Wis.) Public Schools, uses Twitter to announce everything from early releases because of bad weather to reminders that summer school applications are due. “It’s sharing information for a young generation of parents whose primary means of receiving information is mobile,” he says.

Saron and other social media proponents agree that whether fellow superintendents embrace the new social media often depends on what side of the digital and generational divide they stand on.

“It’s directly related to how much superintendents are plugged in, logged on, and knee-deep in the digital stream,” insists Saron, who runs various workshops on using social media for Wisconsin administrators. “There are superintendents in my region saying, ‘We’re not going...
THE SOCIAL MEDIA Dilemma

to invest in that because we don’t feel it will have a high impact on learning. My suspicion is that they don’t understand the technology yet.”

David Jakes, coordinator of instructional technology and information services at Glenbrook South High School just outside of Chicago, has spoken at conferences around the country about the ways that social media can transform student learning. “I think the future is fairly bright and that we’ll harness and make sense out of social media,” Jakes argues, adding that students could “extend their passions” by tapping into social media sites on subjects ranging from particular issues in American history to photography.

Just Saying No

Michael Smith adds that despite the growing enthusiasm in educational settings for social networks—and his own belief that all districts should use social media—many of his counterparts in other districts prohibit such sites. “It’s more common to have them blocked than not,” he observes. “When it comes to sites like Facebook and YouTube, adults don’t know what to do with them. It’s easier to say no.”

After Smith attended a social media panel at the Superintendents’ Summit sponsored by District Administration’s Leadership Institute in Phoenix last spring, he wrote on his blog, “I was surprised when several superintendents talked about why they don’t personally use social media. Their reason? They don’t want to give parents and community members any more access to school business than they already have.”

There’s also concern in the administrative ranks about the misuse of social media by sexual predators and student bullies, online relationships between teachers and students, and inappropriate postings.

Some of those fears seem warranted, given recent incidents that have embroiled school districts in public controversies. In Chicago last March, one elementary school teacher made headlines, and faced disciplinary action by the district, for using her personal Facebook page to ridicule the hairstyle—and post a picture—of one of her 7-year-old students. Shortly before that, a male gym teacher resigned from an Atlanta school after a criminal probe was launched into his sending inappropriate personal messages via his own Facebook account to a 15-year-old female student.

The Futures of School Reform

ELIZABETH CITY, A FORMER MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER AND PRINCIPAL who now teaches at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), has developed her own vision of the future, the result of her work in The Futures of School Reform, which is a group organized at HGSE and consists of leading academics, policymakers, practitioners and business leaders. The group is devising ways to restructure education. City says, for example, middle school students would have to meet a learning goal by a specified date, but they could learn algebra through social media groups with people worldwide. And high school students could have more opportunity to learn off campus, freed-up from “seat-based credit” to achieve proficiency. “They might focus on the Civil War together with groups of other people based in the South,” City continues, adding that they could also pursue specific interests with online peers, from medical practices to photography during that war.

So how can districts and district leaders use these tools to really change the learning interaction, not just the communication part? “I think that’s the challenge right now,” Richardson admits. “Few still really get the idea that social media is more than just posting updates of the prom. It’s about kids developing lifelong learning portfolios, of problem solving with others outside of their physical spaces, of creating things that are new, unique, and valuable and sharing them with the world.”

THE NEXT STEP

SOME TECHNOLOGY EXPERTS, INCLUDING WILL RICHARDSON, A WELL-KNOWN SOCIAL media blogger, say that social media has some value right now, but it’s just a first step. He believes that schools in America are still way behind the business world, including journalism, in terms of how social media is used for learning. “We’re not yet at the point where it’s really altering the landscape, and much of that is because the assessments just want to keep measuring information and knowledge, not learning and skills,” says Richardson, who is also a columnist for District Administration.

Social media in schools demands a different way of thinking about what we prepare students for and how, Richardson says. “This is about a real change in what we value as important to learn,” he adds. “Schools weren’t built for this moment. The whole notion of ‘schooling’ has to be reinvented to reflect a time in which we no longer need schools for information or knowledge. Until assessments change, or until enough people scream ‘irrelevant,’ schools can pretty much stand pat, or not change what they’re doing, layer in some social technologies along the way, but fundamentally not change a thing.”

Richardson says that most of the social media being used in schools today is about communicating and sharing information, and very little is about creating information or using the tools so students can drive their own learning and share their knowledge with others. “Social media creates huge opportunities for self-directed learning outside of schools,” he adds.

Will Richardson

Elizabeth City

The Connecticut Association of
Boards of Education’s Vincent Mustaro, senior staff associate for policy services, also points to the recent online foibles of the former superintendent at the Wind-sor Locks (Conn.) Public Schools. Shortly after being appointed in the summer of 2010, he noted on Facebook that he had “slept in” until 10 a.m. on his first day on the job. He also used his Facebook page to publicly dress down a principal he intended to evaluate.

“It left a sour taste in the mouths of his community,” Mustaro observes, adding that the superintendent was forced out this past May. “We try to impress on folks not to post anything you wouldn’t want on the front page of The New York Times.”

New Policies
Aside from imparting good advice, Mustaro and other educational leaders stress the importance of clearly stated acceptable use policies, updated to include the advantages and problems inherent to social media sites. Along those lines, Mustaro has crafted four sample policies for school boards around the state of Connecticut, ranging from completely banning social media sites to progressively allowing them.

“Clearly the policy has to include what the board considers unacceptable,” he says, which may include prohibiting the use of social media for buying and selling online, releasing identifiable information about students, harassing other students or teachers, and—for many districts—teachers and students “friending” each other on Facebook, which can allow them to have a private, online correspondence.

Mustaro recommends against friend-ing students. “That’s what hits the front pages again and again,” he warns. “School boards are extremely sensitive about not wanting to get into that situation.” Besides Weymouth, Mass., policies banning student-teacher friending are already in place in districts in Salt Lake City and Chicago, and the Virginia Board of Education is considering a statewide ban.

This past spring the Weld RE-4 District adopted a new acceptable use policy, largely crafted by technology director Timmons and focused on “the use of social media for school-related purposes.” The policy begins, “The Board acknowledges that social media have become important means of communication with potential pedagogical value if used appropriately.”

What follows are clear guidelines for teachers seeking to use social media in the classroom. They include getting a principal or supervisor’s approval, how to manage security, and identifying what standards social networking will address and how it enhances what’s being taught. Google Docs is already approved for use in middle and high school.

“The teacher now does the diligent research to make sure it’s a safe place to go and students aren’t identifying themselves with information that could be used by a predator,” Timmons says. He stresses that teachers are also responsible for monitoring all student postings and removing inappropriate content.

Timmons adds that the right kind of social networking belongs in the required curriculum. “If we let students get all the way through high school without responsibly being able to use these tools,” he says, “we’re doing them a disservice.”

Ron Schachter is a contributing writer to District Administration.