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**Following and Being Followed:  
Social Networks, Tweets, and  
Other Updates**

For years, schools have been more reactive than proactive when it comes to fully utilizing emerging technologies. This is less true when the topic involves instructional technologies, with many schools having served as pioneers in computer-assisted instruction and even Internet usage for learning. However, the criticism of schools lagging behind emerging technologies is accurate and fair when it comes to the relatively contemporary concepts of using technology to connect, inform, and persuade socially.

A mere couple of years ago, these technological uses were not parts of the school-community relations landscape. Communication skills in person, through writing, on the telephone, and in front of large groups constituted the bulk of knowledge, skills, and dispositions this field demanded. The use of e-mail, particularly the overuse by some parents is a somewhat contemporary topic in school-community relations, and thus, it gets ample treatment in this book. However, the new uses of social networking and status updates, which began as personal tools but quickly, became integral parts of the business landscape, represent a highly important set of skills and understandings that must be mastered by educators in this new decade. At press, new forums for social networking are emerging and existing ones are undergoing evolution and, in some cases, litigation, as the access to each other's personal information, even if by choice, continues to raise questions. As it would be impossible to focus on all emerging social networking forums, this chapter is centered on the two most widely used—the two with the most immediate utility for savvy school administrators who must respond to the public's growing demand for instant information and constant updates—Facebook and Twitter.

## Facebook

Growing exponentially in popularity, Facebook is a social utility that many schools have begun using, although few schools maximize its effectiveness or fully grasp its potential. As a company **Facebook** was founded in February 2004, and it essentially is a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family, and coworkers. The Facebook

Company develops technologies that facilitate the sharing of information through the concept of social networking, which essentially is the “digital mapping” of people’s real-world social connections. In simpler terms, Facebook digitizes what used to require face-to-face social connections. There are other social network utilities on the market and in use, but Facebook has the largest following by far, and the company name itself is used synonymously with the term “social network.” As of this book’s publication date, the following statistics regarding Facebook’s usage were accurate:

- ❶ Facebook claimed to have in excess of 135 million active users.
- ❷ The fastest-growing demographic of Facebook users is people 25 years old and older.
- ❸ The average Facebook user is reported to have more than 100 “friends” on the site.
- ❹ 2.6 billion minutes are spent on Facebook each day (worldwide).
- ❺ More than 13 million Facebook users update their statuses at least once each day.
- ❻ More than 2.5 million users join various Facebook pages each day

### **Utilizing Facebook Effectively**

To make the best use of Facebook, schools or school districts need to engage in substantial planning before simply and quickly launching their Facebook page. Although creating a presence on Facebook is free and simple to accomplish, an uninformed user runs the risk of launching a presence on the site that doesn’t send the message and have the appeal necessary to engender stronger school-community relations. A poorly planned and organized Facebook page can be disastrous, and so the following suggestions are offered for consideration:

1. Decide who will be responsible for designing the content and maintaining the Facebook page. At the school district level, this responsibility often will be assigned to a public relations specialist or a member of the executive administrative team. At the school level, the responsibility quite often falls on the shoulders of an administrator or a technology or media specialist. Having an employee with training and skills in technology and/or public relations is a good idea, but there also is a risk that such an individual will not be close enough to the actual information that should be presented. As such, a well-trained teacher could be chosen for the task, as such an employee may be more familiar with school vernacular, events, and information that needs to be communicated. Regardless of the individual

holding primary responsibility for the task, oversight is of paramount importance. Facebook pages can be viewed by many people and erroneously placed information can reach a wide audience in a short amount of time.

2. Figure out the main purpose of having a Facebook page on the Web. Is it to keep parents informed of events, grading periods, and policy changes? Is it so that the community can see pictures of students and teachers in action? Is it to attract parents and would-be-parents to the school as a future choice for their child's education? Is it to celebrate accomplishments of students and/or staff? Perhaps it's all of these reasons, or reasons not yet mentioned. The important consideration is that a Facebook presence should not be initiated by a school or school district just because it feels like a good idea. Like all elements of a strong school-community relations plan, there ought to be a compelling reason for a school or school district to utilize Facebook.
3. Visit other school or school district Facebook pages and look for ideas. Although there are limitations to what material can be viewed on Facebook before a user actually creates an account, there are certainly employees within the school who already have such accounts. Ask them to assist you in conducting Facebook research through their own accounts. Figure 10-1 illustrates a simple snapshot of what a Facebook page could look like.
4. Once you have determined your purpose and begun designing your Facebook page, launch it with limited access. Before making your Facebook profile public, you can test its content and gather reactions by a controlled group of people. Facebook provides instructions on how to do so in the Frequently Asked Questions section of their website (<http://www.facebook.com/help/>). As previously mentioned, it is critical to determine who will have primary responsibility for designing and updating the page.
5. Pay close attention to the privacy features of Facebook. Social networking has received a good deal of negative publicity lately because users have failed to secure their sites, which has resulted in unwanted and potentially dangerous visitors, predators, or hackers. On the Facebook website, there is a good deal of information to read about privacy before actually activating your Facebook page. Topics on the Facebook website related to privacy include the following:
  - a. Controlling Your Privacy Settings
  - b. Update to Privacy Settings
  - c. Privacy Settings and Fundamentals
  - d. Friend Lists and Limited Profile
  - e. Controlling Who Can Find You

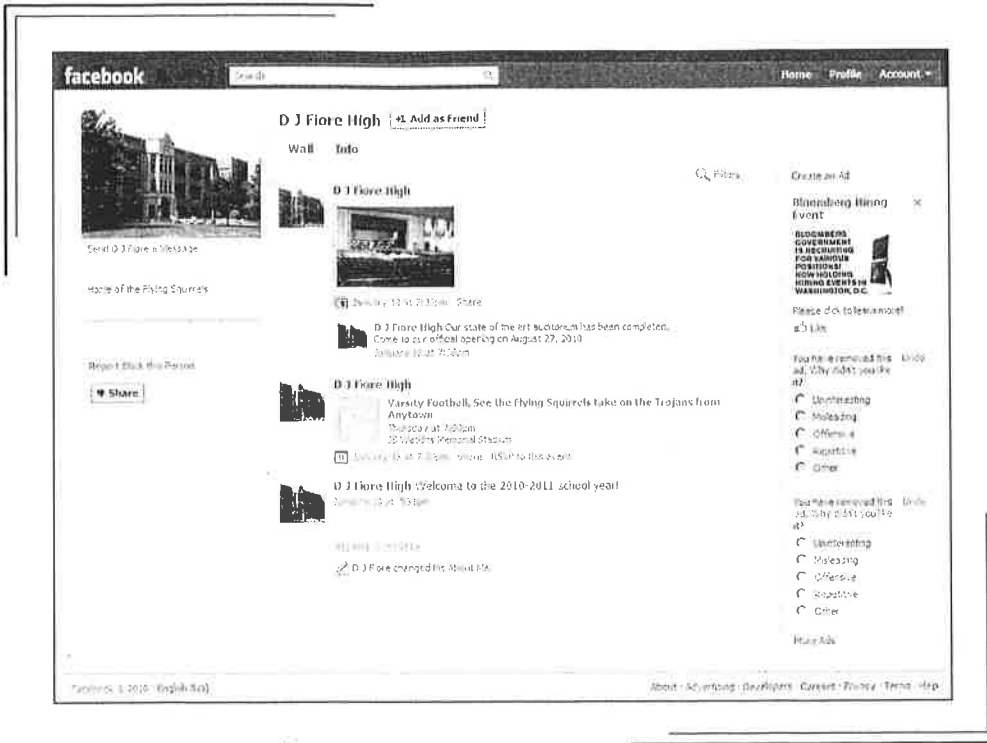
- f. Search Privacy and the Suggestions Feature
- g. Blocking People
- h. Public Search Listings on Internet Search
- i. Privacy Policies and Internet Safety
- j. Protecting Account Security
- k. Phishing, Spam and Hacked Accounts
- l. Information for Parents
- m. Deactivating, Deleting and Memorializing Accounts
- n. Report Abuse
- o. E-mails from Facebook
- p. Privacy Settings by Feature
- q. Profile and Contact Information
- r. Messages and Inbox
- s. Wall
- t. Photos
- u. Video
- v. Notes
- w. Events
- x. Groups
- y. Chat
- z. Applications not built by Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/help/>)

Figure 10-1 shows a screenshot from a simple, fictitious Facebook high school site. As you examine this page, begin thinking about the endless possibilities for providing and controlling information.

### **Keep it Current**

As is true with all website maintenance, it is imperative that Facebook pages be updated regularly and purposefully. Just as driving past a school facility and seeing an outdated message on the marquee can have a negative impact on the perceptions the public can have of a school, a Facebook page that is not regularly updated can cause similar reactions. Deciding to be involved in social networking requires a commitment on the part of school administrators to actively keep the information that is presented fresh, current, timely, and useful.

## Exhibit 10-1 D J Fiore High Facebook Page



### SHOWCASE

#### Using Facebook Effectively

The Chesterfield County Public Schools near Richmond, Virginia utilize Facebook effectively to communicate important information to stakeholders. At press, the school system has over 3,200 fans of their page, and they utilize the social networking site to highlight events at schools, discuss school board meeting events, announce closures due to weather, and announce awards won by the school system and positive accomplishments by some of its employees. Privacy functions are set in a manner that virtually eliminates negative comments, and the school district enjoys this significant opportunity to highlight its achievements. Moreover, the school district illustrates, by virtue of its Facebook presence, that it is up to date with current technologies. Most importantly, it accomplishes this in a manner that makes it easy for the public to learn what important pieces of information the district wants to communicate, and they can do so on their own time from their own computers or smartphone devices.

## Potential Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

With the advent and subsequent spread of the Internet, schools of the previous decade rapidly found themselves in great need of Acceptable use policies (AUP) to protect themselves against misuse by school stakeholders. As is the case with all new technologies, there were pioneers in the creation of these policies, and initial policies looked very different from school to school and from community to community. As the need for AUPs became commonplace, however, we have witnessed a convergence of ideas and best practices, and we are now at a point where acceptable use policies in one school district tend to look strikingly similar to those in other school districts.

Facebook and other social networking sites have, similarly, caused school districts to develop policies for their use by students, staff, and administrators. As was true with early acceptable use policies for Internet usage, there is great variance in what these policies look like. However, what follows are some general guidelines, which are common to social networking policies seen in various school districts:

- Do not use social networking sites for instructional purposes. They are best used as a means of communicating non-instructional material that is of interest to the majority of the school community.
- Keep administrators informed of any social networking sites to which you belong that your students might reasonably be able to access.
- Do not use commentary deemed to be defamatory, obscene, proprietary, or libelous. Exercise caution with regards to exaggeration, colorful language, guesswork, obscenity, copyrighted materials, legal conclusions, and derogatory remarks or characterizations.
- Consider how easily reputations can be damaged by online behavior. For example, consider if a particular posting puts your effectiveness as an educator at risk.
- Post only what you want the world to see. Imagine all of your students and their parents visiting your site and viewing your profile. It is not like posting something to your website or blog and then realizing that a story or photo should be taken down. On a social networking site, once you post something, it can immediately be copied, and therefore, remain for eternity.
- Do not discuss individual students, parents, colleagues, or administrators.
- Do not post images that include students unless proper permission has previously been obtained.
- Pay close attention to how you have your privacy settings configured.

- Limit what types of information your friends can see about you through external applications that work with the social networking site that they are using.
- Having students as friends on social networking sites is strongly discouraged.
- If contacted by a student in the form a friend request, inform the student's parents before responding.
- Monitor your wall regularly to ensure that no offensive language is used.
- Create friends lists and set different permissions for different lists.
- Due to security risks, be cautious when installing the external applications that work with the social networking site (i.e., games and applications).

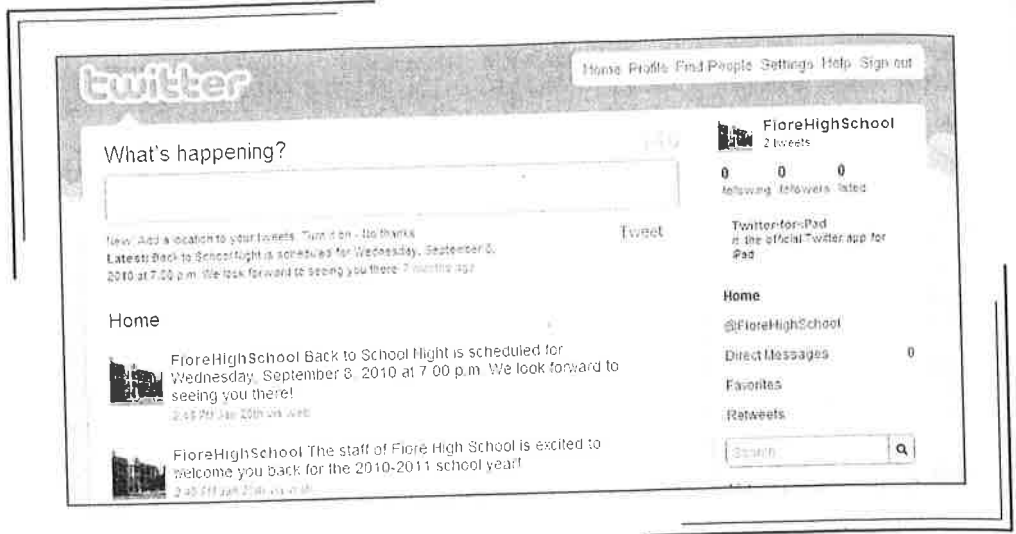
## Twitter

Twitter Incorporated was founded in 2007 on the simple concept that people wanted to know what their friends were up to at any given time. There was no deeper, hidden meaning than the obvious. Whereas Facebook sought to mirror or digitize all aspects of social relationships, Twitter's goal was, and remains, more basic. Jack Dorsey, the founder, claims on the Twitter website (<http://www.twitter.com>) that he simply liked the idea of being able to know what his friends were doing. Simplicity has served as the integral reason for Twitter's success. It is an easy application to use, it requires minimal computer competence, and its time commitment is virtually nothing. Simply put, people are eager to connect with other people and Twitter makes it simple for them to do so.

Essentially, Twitter asks one simple question, "What's happening?" Users of Twitter inform followers of their response through answers known as "tweets." Answers, or tweets, must be under 140 characters in length, and they can be sent via mobile texting, instant message, or through the Web (<http://www.twitter.com>). Twitter's power as a communication utility lies in the fact that a user can "step in and out of the flow of information" as it suits them. There are no expectations to respond to tweets, and Twitter users are very much in control of whose updates they receive, when they receive them, and on what technological device they receive them. For contemporary educational leaders, Twitter offers the possibility of periodically posting important happenings at school. Furthermore, it offers this possibility in a forum that is limited to 140 characters, does not use pictures, and requires almost no effort to create. Figure 10-2 shows an example of what a Twitter page could look like for a fictitious school.



## Exhibit 10-2 Fiore High School Twitter Presence



However easy Twitter might be to use, there are still potential pitfalls, and there are important considerations school administrators must make before venturing into Twitter's regular use. On a parenting blog hosted on the blogging site WordPress (<http://www.wordpress.com>), some cogent suggestions for effectively using Twitter in schools appeared on January 8, 2009. The following adaptations were among the advice given:

### Some Suggestions for Utilizing Twitter in Schools

1. **Keep it simple**—No more than two tweets a day—unless there's an emergency. Twitter should be used sparingly. Parents and community members who sign up to follow the school system's tweets typically don't want to be bothered with unnecessary, overabundant information.
2. **Keep it smart**—The tone of all tweets should be professional. Attempts at humor and casual conversation should be avoided. Messages should be kept short, simple, and direct.
3. **Guide the parents**—Plan on providing parents with an explanation of twitter and instructions on how to set it up and use it. Let them know what it is, how it works, why you are doing it, and how they can get started. Focus on the fact that it is a free utility that is simple to use.
4. **Prioritize your tweets**—Weather information, important news, and emergencies should take precedence over reminders about sports,

clubs, and activities. Don't saturate the flow of information with irrelevant data, or people will stop following you.

5. **Be fair and spread the good news**—Administrators should be careful not to favor one sport or activity over another. Choose events of significance to tweet about, such as a reminder about the homecoming game or the soccer team's regional championship.
6. **Be timely**—Try not to tweet during school hours unless it's an emergency. It would be inappropriate to utilize Twitter during the school day since extraneous technology use can interfere with the instructional process. Save tweets for before or after school whenever possible.
7. **Combine technologies**—Use Twitter as a way to link to the school web site. This allows parents, students, and community members to read more information on the web site if they are particularly interested in a specific tweet.
8. **Sell the concept to the community**—Push the idea of using Twitter aggressively in the local media. Parents need to feel confident in the technology, and they need to adjust to the idea of its usage. Twitter is not new to tech-savvy net surfers, but parents probably will be unfamiliar with the format and skeptical of its benefits.

## SHOWCASE

### Tweet Tweet

Broward County Public Schools in Florida recently began using Twitter to quickly disseminate information to parents, students, and staff. Although automated calling systems and school/district websites are fine ways to get information out, district officials felt that Twitter represented a particularly useful application for their communication needs. The district's Twitter feed can be found at <http://twitter.com/browardschools>, and it contains links to a new attendance policy, links to school board meeting broadcasts, etc. Because Twitter is so easy to update, it makes for a much more convenient platform than traditional websites, although it's also easy to embed a Twitter feed in a website, further increasing its utility and reach. Similarly, multiple people could be given access to the account, making it simple for principals, secretaries, or other administrators to add to the information stream. Furthermore, parents who wish to stay informed about events can follow the schools via Twitter updates to their cell phone or simply watch the feed through any number of technology tools.

## **Advantages and Disadvantages of Facebook and Twitter**

Twitter and Facebook, although both social utilities, are quite different from one another. Depending on your community and its relationship with and expectation of its schools, one of these options may be the preferable way to get started. Although Facebook claims more daily users than does Twitter, the ease with which Twitter can be used has caused some schools to start their foray into social networking with its application. Summarized here are some advantages and disadvantages of using Twitter as your main or sole source of social networking:

### **Advantages:**

1. Twitter is easier to learn, and is much quicker to utilize than Facebook or other social networking sites.
2. Twitter has fewer auxiliary applications than Facebook or other social networking sites and is, therefore, less prone to spyware or malware.
3. Followers on Twitter can receive updates with greater ease than they can with Facebook or other social networking sites because the content is more streamlined.

### **Disadvantages:**

1. Tweets, or Twitter messages, are limited to 140 characters, which imposes limitations on message length,
2. Twitter, as a more basic social networking site than Facebook, does not provide the same opportunities for picture uploads, photo album storage, or lengthy posts.

## **Legal Considerations**

As if the infusion of new technologies and new methods of communication into our school-community relations plans were not enough, there are serious legal considerations that must be taken into account before embarking on the creation and subsequent publishing of a school Facebook page or Twitter account. Although a previous section of this chapter takes into account issues of privacy and administration of such sites, a school that uses Facebook and/or Twitter has a natural likelihood of having a student body that also uses such sites. Cases literally are flooding courts in certain districts that deal with issues of student postings on social networking sites, even when such postings occur outside of school. It is only a matter of time before litigation is seen against schools for the content of their postings on social networking sites. This is no cause for alarm, but it ought to serve as a

reminder of the laws surrounding information put out in the public domain, such as information posted on the World Wide Web.

Among the most noteworthy cases involving a school and a social networking site is *Layshock v. Hermitage School District* (*Layshock v. Hermitage School District*, 412 F.Supp.2d 502, 2006 WL 240655). In this Pennsylvania case, a student contested the disciplinary action taken against him by the school because of an online parody he created of the principal using an off-campus computer. The parody, created on MySpace.com, was viewed on many school computers once word of its existence began to spread. In it, the principal was not portrayed favorably, and the parody even included a picture of him that had been copied from the school's official website. The student who created the parody was punished and subsequently appealed the punishment because the parody had been created on his grandmother's computer and was not brought into the school by him.

In its ruling, the United States District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania found that the school was well within its legal rights for punishing the student who created the parody. Using the famous case, *Bethel School District No. 403 v. Fraser*, as a foundation, the court ruled that the presence of this web parody caused a "substantial disruption to school operations for several reasons. First, many students were viewing the parody on the computers in the school during the instructional day, which caused the school to shut down the entire computer system for a period of five days. Second, during the time period in which this occurred, the school district's technology coordinator had to devote approximately 25% of his work time to issues related to this matter.

There are laws in place at the federal and state levels that provide certain protections for sites like Facebook and Twitter, ensuring that the site creators themselves are not held liable for defamatory comments made by users on the sites. Social networking users, conversely, don't enjoy any of the immunities granted to social networking sites under the law, so they should be careful to always act appropriately when posting messages or files to the sites. The main areas where users can get themselves into trouble are through the posting of defamatory content or content that infringes on intellectual property rights.

Because no legal immunities exist to protect users of these sites, the standard laws pertaining to defamation and infringement will almost always apply. If a user is found to have posted defamatory content, the user will be liable, even if the site can escape liability under its own federal protection. Likewise, if a user posts material that infringes on another's copyright, the user will be held liable for the infringement, not the owners of the application itself.

The First Amendment and state constitutional free-speech provisions are the areas that most often come into play in these types of defamation lawsuits. Several of the most prominent cases regarding user liability for

material posted on social networking sites have dealt with students suffering criminal charges or adverse consequences at their schools as a result of allegedly defamatory, threatening or indecent messages posted on social networking sites. The aforementioned *Layshock v. Hermitage School District* is but one example.

## What's this Thing Called RSS?

RSS actually is an acronym in several formats that all mean the same thing: rich site summary; really simple syndication; RDF site summary; and/or real-time simple syndication. Regardless of the acronym's intention, RSS allows followers of various websites to have the latest news or updates delivered directly to their computers. Essentially, RSS solves a problem for people who regularly use the Internet. It allows busy individuals, like parents and other school stakeholders, to easily stay informed by retrieving the latest content from the sites they are interested in. This allows stakeholders to save time by not needing to visit each site individually.

Both Facebook and Twitter allow users to receive updates via RSS feeds. Over the past year, each utility has modified the manner in which this is done, and throughout this textbook's life, there surely will be further changes. However, the power of the RSS as a utility for schools utilizing Facebook, Twitter, or both cannot be overstated. Schools now have the power to allow followers, friends, or fans, depending on the application's vernacular, to subscribe to RSS feeds. By doing so, the followers, friends, or fans can receive whatever updates the school posts on Facebook or Twitter without actually having to go visit the website itself. There are requirements on the receiver's end, such as the receiver needing to have an RSS reader installed on their computer, but more and more stakeholders already have these readers than they or we actually realize. In fact, it is difficult to purchase a new computer nowadays that does not have installed RSS readers. This is simply a matter of the user catching up with the technology already in their possession.

RSS feeds make it even easier for schools to keep their stakeholders informed. Despite all the bells and whistles of utility applications like Facebook and Twitter, that is the essential message of this chapter in a nutshell. Schools and school leaders need to embrace the technology that allows them to keep stakeholders informed of the various events, curricular or not, occurring in the school on a regular basis. The applications described in this chapter allow school administrators to do this in ways that school leaders of just a few years ago never dreamed were possible.

## Chapter Summary

- Facebook is a social utility that many schools have begun using, although few schools maximize its effectiveness or fully grasp its potential.
- To make the best use of Facebook, schools or school districts need to engage in substantial planning before simply and quickly launching their Facebook page.
- As is true with all website maintenance, it is imperative that Facebook pages be updated regularly and purposefully. Just as driving past a school facility and seeing an outdated message on the marquee can have a negative impact on the perceptions the public can have of a school, a Facebook page that is not regularly updated can cause similar reactions.
- Twitter asks one simple question, “What’s happening?” Users of Twitter inform followers of their response through answers known as “tweets.” Answers, or tweets, must be under 140 characters in length, which makes Twitter an easy application to use.
- Twitter, as a more basic social networking site than Facebook, does not provide the same opportunities for picture uploads, photo album storage, or lengthy posts.
- There are serious legal considerations that must be taken into account before embarking on the creation and subsequent publishing of a school Facebook page or Twitter account.
- RSS, which is an acronym for several synonymous terms, allows followers of various websites to have the latest news or updates delivered directly to their computers.

### CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

#### Follow You, Follow Me

When Tyrod Smith first took on the responsibility for his school’s Facebook page, he felt that the extracurricular assignment was both fun and rewarding. It also gave him lots of recognition, as his school was the first one in the school district to have its own Facebook page. Tyrod designed the page, oversaw its launch, and even began accepting all of the friend requests that were pouring in from parents and community members.

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For the first few weeks, everything on Facebook seemed to be going well. Shortly afterward, however, some anonymous negative comments began showing up on the school district's Facebook page directly below some of the positive postings that Tyrod had left. It quickly became apparent to Tyrod that there were some security features of the social networking site of which he was unaware.

To attempt to get things fixed expediently, Tyrod contacted the school district's Director of Technology to ask for her assistance in preventing further negative comments from being posted. Unfortunately, the Director of Technology admitted that she really didn't know anything about Facebook, but she promised to learn as much as she could and get back to Tyrod shortly.

Within the next 24 hours, the Superintendent began receiving telephone calls and e-mails from parents expressing concern over the negative comments on the school district's Facebook page. They all wanted to know what would possess the school district from creating a web presence that allowed users to post negative comments. How, they wondered, was such a move expected to engender stronger relationships between the school district and the community? Not knowing how to respond, the Superintendent immediately called Tyrod, demanding to know how all of this could have happened so quickly.

### Questions for Analysis

1. Is Tyrod Smith to blame for launching a Facebook page without being keenly aware of security features and how to implement them? Is anybody else in this school district culpable?
2. Who should be ultimately responsible for maintaining a school or school district's Facebook page? Does this responsibility belong to an educator with a particular role in all school districts?
3. Specifically, what are the next steps that Tyrod should take? Can the school district recover from these blunders?