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**CONNECTING YOUR K-12 COMMUNITIES:**  
**An Imperative for District, School  
and Student Success**

By Dr. Steve M. Farrar  
*Superintendent*  
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By Dr. Steve M. Farrar

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## ● THE NEED TO CONNECT

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*Time has taken a serious toll on Westwood Regional School District in Bergen County, New Jersey.*

*When superintendent Geoffrey Zoeller assumed the lead at Westwood nearly 18 months ago, he found aged facilities and unsafe conditions across the district. The need for an overhaul was urgent.*

*“Our facilities are in need of critical improvement,” Zoeller states back in December 2007. “Our district is more than 35 years old. We have buildings that are more than 50 years old. One of them is approaching 80,” he adds.*

*To secure funding for construction and repairs, Zoeller needs the support of local constituents – parents of students, other Westwood residents, the media – in order to secure passage of a bond issue.*

*However, history stands squarely against him. This suburban community of nearly 20,000 has proven difficult to convince in the past. Four times over the course of seven years, Zoeller’s predecessor brought a referendum for facilities repair to the community. Four times, the referendum failed to pass.*

*Zoeller clearly understands his responsibility to ensure the facilities upgrades. He also is convinced that anyone who sees the buildings...who knows the demands of Westwood’s growing student population...who is aware of state mandates regarding facilities...who simply grasps the whole story...would be forced to agree.*

*The previous failures to pass the referendum provided Zoeller with a clear indication that the Westwood community had been severely disconnected from this critical information.*

*That’s why, nearly a year before this critical year-end vote, Superintendent Zoeller began a strategic campaign to connect his community online. Tonight, he will find out just how strong a community he has brought together...*

## ● THE CONNECTED COMMUNITY: NEW DEFINITIONS

In an era of transformative change for K-12 education – when technology has extended learning far beyond classroom walls and long past the three o’clock bell – the center of the educational universe has shifted from inside the school to the extended community.

A district’s success now pivots upon a superintendent’s ability to connect the district with each and all of its constituents, all the time. In fact, the very notion of community has been re-defined to encompass not just principals, teachers and students,

but also parents and families. The media. Taxpayer coalitions. Senior citizen groups. Prospective residents. Anyone and everyone who comes into contact with the district – and who the district has a need and obligation to communicate to and collaborate with.

This paper explores what many district leaders and education thought leaders consider among today's most critical imperatives – the need for superintendents to develop a strategic approach for connecting all their communities. For a growing number of districts, the ability to implement such a solution is reaping significant benefits that ultimately impact student success.

### **More than a growing need, an essential strategic undertaking**

Superintendent Zoeller's story is indicative of the imperative for superintendents nationwide to connect their K-12 communities. The reasons why are clear. In today's age of information and access, the free flow of relevant information is critical to district success.

From No Child Left Behind requiring districts to publicly report performance to parents expecting ready access to their children's test scores and progress indicators...from teachers wanting to post homework assignments on websites to students expecting online learning opportunities...from taxpayers demanding justification for increased spending to the media wanting unimpeded access to newsworthy data and information...superintendents are being held accountable on all levels and as never before.

Murrieta Valley Unified School District superintendent Dr. Stan Scheer comments, "I'm accountable to the state board, the governor's agenda and programs, the state legislature, and all of the Federal Government mandates. But having the resources to do everything we have to do is a huge and costly challenge."

"In today's political climate, in today's competitive collegiate climate, parents and community members have never been more concerned about how their schools are run," Westwood's Zoeller adds. "And you absolutely can't ignore the non-parents either. It's a tremendously complex undertaking," he continues.

Superintendents Scheer and Zoeller are far from alone in feeling these pressures. According to The State of the American School Superintendency, a recent survey conducted by the American Association of School Administrators, nearly 60% of superintendents consider their position "very stressful," citing meeting increasing community expectations with dwindling resources as a root cause.

And, considering the fact that state standards vary and that the Federal Government contributes only 9¢ of every \$1 spent in U.S. schools, many superintendents suggest ultimate accountability falls within the community.

"For me, accountability is whether or not my community likes our schools and thinks we're getting the job done," Dr. Scheer contends. "I don't think you have any choice but to connect your entire community. If you're going to ask for support, they need information on what you're doing. You can't do it alone."

■ ■ Schools will need to be more connected to the community and the community to our students. ■ ■

Alan November  
Education Technology Leader

## Community development moves to the head of the class

"I think the new primary business of education may be community development," says Alan November, an internationally recognized leader in education technology and author of *Web Literacy for Educators*.

"The natural consequence of involving the community will be that schools will need to be more connected to the community and the community to our students. In turn, our schools will become central enterprises within the community, contributing to its vitality and longevity," November states.

Peggi Munkittrick, Director of Product Strategy for Schoolwires, a leading provider of strategic solutions for connecting K-12 communities, hears similar opinions daily from districts across the country.

"Districts have had to increasingly focus on sharing information with the public. So much so, that I've begun to see a tremendous increase in the creation and responsibility of PR positions in K-12 districts," she shares. "Superintendents need to find strategic solutions for their districts to quiet anxiety. They need a new way to respond."

"All public education institutions are faced with the critical need to educate their communities about what's positive and what's going right in their districts," Superintendent Zoeller asserts. "I am the chief custodian of the public's trust. My critical need is to counteract hype."

Dr. Scheer echoes Superintendent Zoeller. "There are so many messages. Our duty is to make sure the community understands what we're doing. How we measure up is incredibly important," he asserts.

## ● THE WAYS TO CONNECT: "MOVING BEYOND PAPER TRAINING"

Communities have always existed and exerted influence on their school districts. Districts have long communicated with communities via newsletters, community meetings, parent conferences and the press. In recent years, most districts have also developed websites. So, what's different now?

### Connecting parents and community members

A new era of K-12 community connectivity starts with websites and email – all enabled by more tech-savvy educators, students, parents and the public at large, as well as by the widespread adoption of broadband Internet.

New Web 2.0 technologies such as online forums, blogs and wikis, as well as social networks like Facebook and MySpace, are taking connection and community much farther.

“We need to operate and teach in real time,” says Alan November. “Many of today’s teachers were paper trained. Unfortunately, paper – the primary technology that drives most of our curriculum – is not a real-time technology. We have to rewire our brains.”

Peggi Munkittrick concurs. “Community connections can’t be and aren’t limited to students’ backpacks anymore. It’s not enough to send home a newsletter with the students – that only reaches parents. You need ways to reach all your constituent groups. Your web presence should be the hub for how people engage with your district and get information.”

November and Munkittrick’s assertions are supported by hard facts. Research from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, released in October 2007, reveals that parents are more connected than ever:

- 83% of parents surveyed have a desktop computer
- 37% have a laptop
- 13% have a PDA (such as a Blackberry or Palm)
- 42% of adults say the Internet played a major role in deciding about a school or college for themselves or their children

Importantly, technology has become “a given” in the eyes of parents when it comes to education.

“Speak Up 2007,” an annual national research project facilitated by Project Tomorrow that polls students, parents and school leaders, reported that 91% of parents surveyed now regularly use technology to email their child’s teacher. What’s more, 58% of parents say they believe technology accelerates learning opportunities for children.

“I can’t emphasize enough how important it is to have relevant information available online,” says Dr. Scheer. “The behavior today is that people go to your website first, and they expect access to information, resources, and people. Reporting on performance the year after [high stakes] tests – even having a calendar that’s out of date – that’s unacceptable.”

Munkittrick adds, “Technology has made society much more transparent. People can access up-to-the-minute bank statements and travel services online. They expect to be able to find information on their children and their schools in the same way.”

### **Operational and instructional impacts**

Engaging and connecting the community online also yields more pragmatic, operational benefits. Enabling real-time communication with constituents can profoundly increase day-to-day efficiency and productivity for teachers and staff.

One relatively simple example is communicating school delays and closings. For Dr. Scheer and Murrieta Valley, connecting with the community online proved invaluable during the 2007 California wildfires.

Scheer recalls, "With our phone system and website, we were able to send messages to 21,200 people in less than ten minutes. It made it easy during the fires to not only announce school closings, but to very clearly explain to our constituents when and why school was closed."

"E-alerts and fast website updates can save districts a lot of effort and ensure they get the right information to the right people, at the right time," Munkittrick concurs.

Superintendent Zoeller cites the instructional advantages of connecting communities at a strategic level. "When teachers are on-site, I want them teaching and working with the kids, not on the telephone with parents. I don't want to bog down a teacher when they can email or post information online. Digital communication is a great way to communicate without taking away from instruction time."

## Connecting Students

Ultimately, enhancing education and driving 21st century learning is at the crux of a strategic solution for connecting communities.

Clearly today's (and tomorrow's) students demand ways to engage and get involved through technology. According to "Speak Up 2007," students are very interested in increasing their productivity through mobile devices, organization tools, sharing calendars and downloading information from their school portals. Specifically:

- 50% would like to be able to access their schoolwork-related software applications and projects from any computer in the school network
- 45% would like tools to help them communicate with their classmates
- 43% would like tools to help them communicate with their teachers
- 42% would like tools to help them organize their schoolwork
- 50% want to use mobile devices to work on school projects and communicate with classmates

▄▄ **Our kids are coming to us as digital natives. As we look into the future, we need to be relevant.** ▄▄

Dr. Stan Scheer  
Superintendent  
Murrieta Valley USD

"It's a different world," says Dr. Scheer. "Our kids are coming to us as digital natives. They have cell phones as complex as my Treo. As we look into the future, we need to be relevant."

At the same time, there is a tremendous imperative to prepare students to compete and succeed in the 21st century global economy. Part and parcel of enabling 21st century learning is providing students with 24/7, real-time access to the tools and resources they need to learn anywhere, any time.

"The real revolution is not about computers and labs, but about the quality and access of information," says November. "Networked information systems have brought about a new way of thinking about learning and problem solving. Now, workers are encouraged and expected to learn anywhere, anytime, with anybody, and in any way without seeking permission."

Superintendent Zoeller realizes this imperative when he states, "I have to try and prepare kids entering kindergarten in September for jobs that don't even exist yet."

To meet the needs of today's students and prepare them for tomorrow's economy, November assigns responsibility clearly to education leaders. "Our students have already chosen such tools as MySpace and Facebook for their own communications," he states. "Now is the time to take elements of these tools and provide students with the appropriate role models of how to use them to make important and rigorous contributions to their schools and beyond."

### Connecting teachers

Although teachers are traditionally adverse to change, research shows that they are actually more than up to the technology task. In terms of leveraging technology to develop 21st century skills, "Speak Up 2007" reports that 68% of teachers identify Web 2.0 tools and 48% identify multimedia projects in terms of what they are currently using in this regard. The research also reveals that teachers regularly use technology to:

■ ■ 93% of teachers use email to communicate with colleagues and parents. ■ ■

"Speak Up 2007"  
Project Tomorrow

- Communicate with colleagues and parents (93%)
- Facilitate student learning (51%)
- Create PowerPoint presentations (59%)
- Create or listen to podcasts/videos (35%)

Superintendents Scheer and Zoeller both observe the need and the willingness for teachers to step up to the challenge of making technology connections.

"Our mission at Murrieta Valley is to inspire students," says Dr. Scheer. "The key to fulfilling that is whether students see that the teacher understands the world they live in and can utilize the tools they use to engage them."

Zoeller cites the growing adoption and power of smart rooms – also known as intelligent classrooms. "Where it took some educators 25 years to figure out how to effectively use a simple overhead projector in the classroom, now we're using smart boards, streaming video and more as direct teaching tools. We're finally bringing instant, multimedia interactivity into the classroom."

Alan November summarizes the opportunity, the imperative and the challenge of connecting K-12 communities as a question of, "How many magic links can we build between our students and the global community; between our school community and parents and the local community; and between our education professionals and the world of adult development and knowledge?"

## ● THE STRATEGY TO CONNECT: NEW DEFINITIONS

Recognizing the imperative to connect K-12 communities and provide 21st century technology tools are only steps toward creating a base for success. What provides the foundation for this heightened level of community connection is a comprehensive and strategic solution for communication and collaboration.

“Most commonly, districts have assembled a collection of communications tools over time to meet their needs,” observes Schoolwires’ Munkittrick. She continues, “But without a strategic, unified solution, few districts offer or have the capability to offer the engaging experiences required to leverage the value of a connected community.”

Superintendent Zoeller underscores the need for strategic thinking by citing Norbert Wiener, the father of cybernetics: “The machine is only as good as what goes in.”

Alan November asserts that “these magic links are already very real links. They include access to all of Shakespeare through the Internet, access to the senior citizens’ center fax machine to inquire about local history, and access to NASA scientists to ask questions about images from the Hubbell Telescope that were taken above the planet only minutes ago.”

According to November, “If we are to make these real links for our students, then the planning process must focus on the educational vision that a communications network can bring to prepare our students to live and work and contribute in an interconnected global economy.”

## ● CONNECTED COMMUNITIES: REALIZED

By adopting a strategic approach for connecting communities, Murrieta Valley USD has realized the potential of connecting its communities – in expected and unexpected ways.

A rapidly-growing district with more than 21,200 students and 2,000 staff, Murrieta is located between San Diego and Los Angeles and operates 16 schools across 165 square miles.

To connect its communities, Dr. Scheer describes how his approach was strategic from the start: “I went to my elected officials and asked them to define our mission and vision. I polled the community. I also put our Media Communications Specialist at the head. For me, PR was the lynchpin.”

With input from all constituents, Murrieta Valley selected a solution that integrated its websites and web-enabled communication/collaboration tools via one unified platform. The solution includes a wide feature set – including calendars, surveys, forms and blogs – and a dynamic content management system to make it easy to create and update content at the district and school levels.

This new solution has made engaging constituents easier than ever. “Website and community management have become central to us,” Dr. Scheer asserts. “Now my website is the place where parents and community members go to find the information, resources and services they need.”

One vital Murrieta Valley community that has benefited from this new-found connectivity is the military families from U.S. Marine Corps base, Camp Pendleton. Many students who live at Camp Pendleton have parents serving abroad.

“Our students with parents serving in Iraq can get on the Web and see what’s going on,” Dr. Scheer says. “It’s very powerful. Our service people really appreciate being able to know what’s happening back home.”

Murrieta Valley also helped ensure widespread usage with a solution easy enough for teachers to quickly adopt – and with enough functionality to build upon. In the classroom, teachers have begun teaching online. They’re posting math, social studies and reading assignments. They’re encouraging students to create blogs and participate in surveys – expressing opinions and demonstrating comprehension.

■ ■ **Our teachers have been able to power up what they had been doing online because our new solution is so much more usable. What was cumbersome and labor intensive is now easy.** ■ ■

Dr. Stan Scheer  
Superintendent  
Murrieta Valley USD

“Our teachers have been able to power up what they had been doing online because our new solution is so much more usable,” says Dr. Scheer. “What was cumbersome and labor intensive is now easy.”

Dr. Scheer also touts the PR and marketing potential his district has been able to successfully tap into with its strategic solution. In one case, he was able to engage his community and turn what could have been a disaster into something special that has energized his community.

Scheer tells the story: “The district agreed to build a new elementary school in a remote area because real estate developers had promised the construction of 1,000 new homes; they ended up building 46. We were left with a new school and only 80 students.”

As a result, Marietta decided to create its first school of choice, offering students from its district and neighboring districts a K-5 elementary school with a focus on the visual and performing arts.

“For maximum effect,” Scheer says, “we quickly created and continually updated a website, integrated within our larger solution, to communicate the mission of the new school. We provided as much information and resources as possible about the school to excite our community constituents, as well as to neighboring districts. We also provided times parents could come visit.”

The happily ever after: Lisa J. Mails Elementary School, Murrieta Valley USD’s first school of choice, opened its doors in August, 2007 – all thanks to the district’s ability to engage and connect its communities and neighboring communities online. According to Dr. Scheer and the school’s website, the school has an enrollment of 750 students, including 200 students from neighboring districts.

## ● 5 KEYS TO A STRATEGIC APPROACH FOR CONNECTING K-12 COMMUNITIES

Based on the insights of all the contributors to this white paper, as well as the successes of Dr. Scheer and Superintendent Zoeller in their districts, the following is a summary of the key factors for creating a successful strategic approach for connecting K-12 communities.

### **1. Define your roadmap to success**

Ensure that your district administration recognizes and supports the mission-critical need to communicate more closely with the public regarding the district's initiatives and accomplishments. Identify your communities, and then determine what information and resources they will be most interested in. Consider ways to increase community interaction that will positively impact student achievement, teacher productivity, parental involvement, school board alignment and media relations. With your communities, define the roadmap for achieving your vision and then pursue it rigorously. The more diligent you are in your efforts, the more certain the positive outcome.

### **2. Put the right technology infrastructure in place**

Make sure you have secure, reliable web hosting and a scalable web infrastructure in place to meet users' increasing demands. The more comfortable your community members are with accessing and using information and resources via the web, the greater their demands will be for continuous uptime, fast access, dynamic content, reliable service and safe communications. Insist on hosting services similar to those used by universities, financial institutions and Fortune 500 companies. Your community members expect top-notch performance, and you can't risk delivering anything less.

### **3. Custom tailor your solution**

Be certain that your website reflects who you are as a district and make it the hub for all things district-related. Maintain control of your brand and your image. Choose a solution that offers robust content management capabilities that make it easy for your users to create, post and update content. Incorporate two-way, interactive communication and collaboration technologies, such as surveys, blogs, wikis, forums, and discussion groups.

### **4. Enable implementation and usage**

No solution can be truly effective if no one uses it. A strategic solution must include comprehensive user guides and tutorials, best practice implementation plans, robust training options and multiple ways to engage client support representatives. These are essential elements for ensuring successful adoption and utilization. At the same time, your solution is only as good as the information you put in it. Gather comprehensive contact information from all your constituents. Make sure your database is easy to update. Ensure your message reaches your constituents.

### **5. Evolve**

The one thing you can count on is change. Your needs will change. Your communities' needs will change. Technology will change. Make sure that you have the foresight – and that your solution has the flexibility – to adapt to those evolving needs, allowing

you to implement the services you need, when you need them. Your success and the success of your connected communities depend upon it.

## ● THE NEED FOR A STRATEGIC APPROACH: CONTINUED

■ ■ [Our solution] enabled us to keep our parents involved, our students engaged, and our community closely informed. ■ ■

Goeffrey Zoeller  
Superintendent  
Westwood Regional  
School District

“As part of a concerted effort to build community consensus around the referendum, we implemented a strategic solution for connecting our communities,” Westwood’s Zoeller reports. “It enabled us to keep our parents involved, our students engaged, and our community closely informed,” says Zoeller.

Starting the referendum process in February, 2007, Zoeller used the web-based solution to create community surveys and forums to foster input from all constituents. From the ground up, and with participation by all key communities, Zoeller and his team re-cast the project and re-articulated its value to the collective community via the web.

On the Westwood district website, Zoeller and his team posted:

- Information on the background and significance of the facilities project
- Photo galleries of the sites that required repair
- Timelines and schedules
- The budget and line items
- Regular updates

Zoeller and his team even used the solution to facilitate voting. “We put information and links for voter registration online,” Zoeller recalls. “We reached out to recent Westwood graduates and helped them to vote by distributing absentee ballots. We did it all utilizing the technology.”

“The community told us they had never felt more informed. As a result, a new level of energy, comfort and trust was achieved,” Zoeller states.



December 11, 2007  
9:37 PM

*Ten months after his campaign began, Superintendent Zoeller anxiously awaited results from the vote.*

*The referendum passed in every voting district with 67% of the ballots voting in favor – a landslide and a testament to the power of connecting Westwood’s K-12 communities.*

*The facilities project is currently underway with expected completion in the summer of 2009. Just like Westwood’s connected community members, you can track its progress online at [www.wwsd.org](http://www.wwsd.org).*

## ● About The Author



Dr. Steve Farrar is the Superintendent of Natomas Unified School District. He received his bachelor's degree in English, his master's degree in Administration and Curriculum Development and his doctorate in Administration and Organizational Development. He has worked as an elementary school teacher, a research assistant, a dean, a principal, and associate superintendent before becoming the superintendent of our district.

His professional affiliations include the American Association of School Administrators, the Association of California School Administrators, the California School Boards Association, the Education Research and Development Institute, the Greater Sacramento Chamber of Commerce, the Natomas Chamber of Commerce, the North Natomas Transportation Management Board, Northern California Superintendents, Phi Delta Kappa International, Sigma Xi Scientific Research Society and the Natomas Schools Foundation.

Dr. Farrar is committed to student achievement and envisions academic success for *all* students and is dedicated to the elimination of the existing achievement gap.

## ● About Schoolwires

Schoolwires, Inc. ([www.schoolwires.com](http://www.schoolwires.com)) is a leading national provider of strategic online communication, community-management and productivity solutions that result in stronger school communities, more effective schools and more successful students. With the launch of Centricity™, Schoolwires is delivering the first strategic solution for connecting K-12 communities. More than a portal or content management system, Centricity brings together robust and flexible website management, community management, and web 2.0/social network in a single, on-demand solution. Schoolwires also delivers the industry's most powerful digital file sharing solution, Synergy™, and a premier service request solution, Assist™. Schoolwires solutions are deployed at more than 3,500 schools serving an estimated three million students, parents, teachers and administrators throughout North America. Schoolwires is ranked as the #174th fastest-growing private company in the nation and the 3rd fastest-growing within the education industry in the coveted Inc. 500 list.



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