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No more sending notes home in backpacks

County schools flock to Facebook, Twitter, blogs to keep parents, students, alumni informed

BY BRADFORD PEARSON

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When Landon School officials noticed that young alumni weren't visiting the school's Web site, they decided to go where the students were: Facebook.

The Bethesda private school's page of news and notes now has nearly 500 followers.

"We're slowly trying to incorporate these social networking platforms," school spokeswoman Jean Erstling said. "It's very important for us to be able to reach out to young alumni, and since they weren't coming to our site, we needed to go to them."

In an age of instant information, many downcounty schools are turning to Twitter, Facebook and blogs to keep parents, community members and alumni in the loop.

"Everybody's using all of these different mediums for communicating now," said JoAnne Scribner, a Westbrook Elementary School parent who helps coordinate the school's Twitter and blog pages. "And instead of one-way communication like it used to be, now it's two-way."

Westbrook Elementary started using Twitter this year to inform parents about the school's expansion plans. The Twitter page is an offshoot of the school's blog, which provides parents and community members with monthly updates about the school's development.

Some of the Tweets are as simple as reminders about meetings; others carry more heft. After a recent community meeting hosted by Montgomery County Council member Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda), parents took to Twitter to recount his support for a Westbrook Elementary expansion.

"At Berliner event: Councilman's 'shout out' in favor of the addition AND gym," read one Tweet. "The time is now' and we couldn't agree more. Thank you!"

Twitter, a social networking Web site on which members can post 140-character messages, had more than 17 million visitors in April, according to comScore, which studies digital marketing. Anyone with Internet access can access the



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Adriana Murphy, a teacher at Green Acres in Rockville who is responsible for that school's blog, photographs a group of students at lunch for the site's gallery section.

school's Tweets, an advantage in reaching a broad audience, Scribner said.

Adriana Murphy, a teacher at Green Acres in Rockville, is responsible for that school's blog. It was launched this summer as a way to keep parents informed of goings-on at the Green Acres summer camp. Since the blog began focusing on the school itself last month, it has had more than 8,000 page views. The school enrolls 320 students.

The blog is popular because it opens a window to the school that most parents don't get to see regularly, Murphy said.

"If you can read a blog and can see pictures and watch video clips, all of a sudden you have some insight into what's going on," she said. "You've been invited to the conversation, and you can participate on your time."

Most of Murphy's posts are about the students; she walks to the school every Tuesday morning to find interesting items about which to write.

An advantage of blogs is that parents don't have to cut into family time to learn

about school life, Murphy said. Meetings take time, but a parent can read a blog in a minute or two.

Social networking platforms are particularly useful for reaching parents and students who are spending an increasing amount of time online, said Marlene Nesary, a spokeswoman for the Eugene, Ore.-based International Society for Technology in Education, a nonprofit group that supports the use of information technology in learning.

"It's what the kids and parents are at home with, and it's really important to be able to meet them where they are," she said.

Check out school blogs

Follow the construction at Westbrook Elementary School at www.westbrookexpansion.wordpress.com.

Get updates from Green Acres School at www.greenacresschool.wordpress.com.