Do These Web Sites Work?

Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't. Learn what our online experts, Odvard Egil Dyrli and Kirk Snedeker, say is right—and wrong—with these district Web sites

By Odvard Egil Dyrli and Kirk Snedeker

March, 2006

Seattle (Wash.) Public Schools
www.seattleschools.org

The home page opens with timely news stories that are useful in building interest—including reports on educational excellence, water quality and the math curriculum—and links that are highlighted in two vertical menus in the margins of the page. However, it isn't clear why particular topics appear in one menu rather than the other. —OED

Offering different language versions is great. —KS

The site offers specialized menus tailored for user groups of parents, students, staff and the community; and a main menu that is usually carried from page to page so it is easy to return to the home page. —OED

Appealing design–very calm. I like the right navigation graphics. —KS

The site offers a directory of e-mail addresses and telephone numbers for district program coordinators and school board members, but contact information for principals can only be accessed through the separate school pages, which adds extra steps. —OED

Some files are XML-based in the Nutrition Services section. This is a good sign that someone is paying attention. XML separates content from design, so that if everyone abides by the same rules, all the design will be consistent—and that's just the beginning. —KS

Design

• The site links to Web pages for each of its 100 schools, with a building photograph, contact information and selected class homework assignments, though much of the content is outdated or incomplete. Many of the pages offer access to separate school Web sites, though this is not clear to users. A How to Use This Site section would be helpful. —OED
• Faults in design are that secondary pages do not necessarily stick to the stylesheets established by the first page. Actually, the homepage doesn't really make much effort to play nicely with the other content in the style department. This can be easily fixed by defining a stylesheet for everyone to use. —KS
• Some links to PDF files are marked as such—which is a good idea—some aren't. Some pages are oddly arranged (Employment, Library), and do not follow suit with a link back to the secondary page on the top of the left navigation. How to solve this? Make use of "breadcrumbs" and provide the users with a visual link trail. It is easy to get lost here. —KS

Navigation

• Main menu choices access submenus unique to the selections, but some of the items and abbreviations such as SOIC and GED may not be clear to users. —OED

• Navigation is different, but not confusing. Home | Schools | Map | District Calendar | Contacts is present on all of the sub-pages but de-emphasized by its smaller text size. However, it works. This navigation is a good idea, even if it's not the best possible positioning. —KS

• Homepage information is grouped strangely: it's pertinent and timely, but the Chief Academic Officer search link is right above the link for inclement weather closinginformation. —KS

Quality of the interaction with the user

• Many of the menu choices, even short selections, are presented in PDF rather than HTML form, which adds unnecessary steps to accessing the content. —OED

• The site presents an amazing amount of information pertinent to the large district, but specific items are often difficult to find, so much of the content needs to be better organized. A site map, with a prominent link from the top menu, would help. —OED

School-to-home interaction

• The site offers a convenient link to the School Kids Come First service that allows parents and the community to make online donations for specific school and district projects, such as purchasing school uniforms. —OED

Creative use of online technologies

• A section with outstanding video clips on topics including school board meetings and curriculum presentations is included. Unfortunately the section is hardly noticeable as an SPS TV menu item, so it should be made much more prominent. —OED

Up-to-date information

• The site is generally kept up-to-date, with notable exceptions such as library resources that haven't been updated since 2001, and newsletter archives that end in January 2004. —OED

Wayne (N.J.) Public Schools www.wayneschools.com

Clean inviting graphic on homepage. Rotating images are nice. —KS

Link to superintendent's page doesn't include a link to Superintendent's Corner, though it is mentioned in detail. Superintendent reports are all in PDF form. Why? There is no reason for them not to be in HTML especially since there are few–if any–graphics. The Headline News section follows the HTML format, why not this? —KS

Headline news and announcement overviews are effectively placed in the central portion of the opening screen, with links to related stories, and the site offers a useful archive of district newsletters mailed to each household. —OED

Useful, if not pretty, calendar. District-wide testing schedule is also useful–presumably so parents and educators alike can prepare. —KS

The site includes a Frequently Asked Questions section—though it would be better to treat personnel questions in a separate section. —OED

Design

- The site offers links to separate Web pages for each high school, middle school and elementary school, as well as to community programs, but offers only limited content targeted specifically to user groups of parents, students and staff. —OED
- They've done a good job in posting who's who with pictures and bios of the administration. E-mail links are posted so contacting people is easy. —KS

Navigation

- The navigation system is effective, where each selected page displays a sub-menu listing the major site sections, which makes it easy to move to another content area. Other sections can also be accessed through the content menu that is carried over consistently at the bottom of each page. —OED
- The FAQ section is divided into four sections, but I think "Can I borrow money from my pension?" was intended for the Employee Resources section. —KS

Quality of the interaction with the user

- Some content areas such as the board of education section are tightly focused, whereas others address a wide range of topics such as general information, that includes forms, guidebooks, handbooks, a township overview and employment information that might better be organized into subtopics. —OED
- All links to PDF files should be labeled as such. Clicking on one without expecting a PDF to open is annoying. —KS
- The site is particularly weak on curriculum content, and offers no online educational applications for students, or links to related resources. —OED

School-to-home interaction

- The effective Contact Us link from the opening screen brings users to a directory of district administration and board of education members, featuring links to personal Web pages with photos, contact information and job descriptions for each individual. —OED

Creative use of online technologies

- With the exception of color photographs, used only sparingly, the district does not take advantage of online multimedia technologies such as audio, video, animations, live cameras and online simulations. —OED
- How about a blog since the From My Desk note is perfect blog content. Open Office Hour is a great outreach tool to the public and employees alike. Users can request a meeting and submit a topic for discussion with the superintendent. —KS

Up-to-date information

- The site provides no area for daily information such as announcements, bus schedules and lunch menus, and several of the staff pages have not yet been completed. —OED
- For what the site may lack, it seems to be making a sincere effort to communicate with the public. The board's meeting agendas and minutes are accessible and up-to-date. Meetings are posted in advance. Newsletters are also available for download. —KS

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