The Next Wave Now: Web 2.0

By Lane B. Mills

From The School Administrator

WHILE many of us are just getting comfortable with the Internet and e-mail, Web 2.0 technologies are already changing the playing field for education. Though definitions of Web 2.0 vary, the one constant is that Internet users are now content providers rather than content receivers. The top-down approach of the Web we grew up with now has been replaced with users who build information from the bottom up.

With Web 2.0, the focus is not on software, but on practices such as sharing thoughts and information through self-publishing and harnessing the collective intelligence of all users to generate information and solve problems. These technologies are creating huge changes in how educators and students receive and respond to information.

Web 2.0 is full of established tools such as blogs (personal publishing), wikis (collaborative publishing), real simple syndication (RSS), content aggregators, streaming video (YouTube), file sharing, podcasting, and social networking (MySpace). Of importance to educational leaders is that the pace of Web 2.0 technologies can almost ensure another process or tool will be gaining notoriety and presence among our students as quickly as we gain an awareness and understanding of these established tools.

Technology leadership for superintendents in the Web 2.0 world will be quite different. Information and content will flow from the bottom up, and many students already are proficient in this arena. As such, educational leaders can and should play a major role in understanding and supporting Web 2.0 technologies.

So where do you begin? Familiarity with known Web 2.0 technologies would be a good first step. Online resources and district technology staff as well as your students could provide excellent introductions to common Web 2.0

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tools. This introduction should include the pros and cons of the applications or processes. Spend some time using the tools. Make an edit to an entry in Wikipedia or post on a blog. Credibility is key and learning the nuances or common language of the most popular 2.0 tools will assist in this task.

With Web 2.0 driving change in the digital arena, superintendents need to take the reins of the implementation. A great introduction in your district is to use the tools in your daily work.

Only a limited number of superintendents now include a blog on their school district page. Take advantage of this communication tool. Web logs can keep constituents informed and allow for another pulpit for your agendas. Demonstrations of these tools also lend credence to their usefulness and power to change interactions among parties. Including an RSS feed on your site to keep the public up to date with information about the district and schools would be a great example of such a demonstration.

Use such tools to inform staff and the public about Web 2.0 applications at the school and district level in preparation for change. Conversations with key stakeholders to facilitate integration of these practices are also a good start.

Well-planned and thorough professional development for staff will be key. Incorporating the tools at the district and school levels will require a shift in instructional delivery and thoughtful planning. For instance, will your district approve using Wikipedia sources for historical events in U.S. history courses? Will blog posts count as a written response to a class assignment?

Behind the Scenes

Incorporation of Web 2.0 tools also will create a need for establishing policies and procedures addressing the use of these applications. While Web 2.0 applications offer opportunities for expanding student and teacher interactions, acceptable use and security policies will likely need updating.

For example, many school districts today block access to MySpace. With presidential candidates now providing platform information via their MySpace pages, should allowances be made for access to these pages to use for discussion in the classroom?

With a variety of free or low-cost versions of Web 2.0 applications available, standardization on tools would aid school districts in delivering technical support and professional development.

It's difficult to know how much change Web 2.0 technologies will bring to the school landscape. From the impact these applications have had in other arenas, superintendents and their deputies would do well to gain familiarity with the common tools that now are part of this likely revolution.   *e*𝕚