

SchoolNow

School Website Planning Guide



Complete step-by-step guide

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Say goodbye to scattered school communication.



Mobile app



Messages



Social media



Website



Auto-notices



Introduction

We've boiled it down to these prescribed steps to follow so you can build a website that will help your school or district achieve its communications goals. Using this guide, which centers largely on thorough **planning, analysis and effective design**, will assure you've covered all the bases for creating a strong web communications foundation

The *School Website Planning Guide* stresses the importance of goal-setting and a full understanding of what constitutes great design. And while some of the recommendations are based on the author's personal experience with developing and implementing proprietary content management system (CMS) software, regardless of who your website provider is, the information contained in this guide can and should be universally applied for any school planning a website.

We recommend using this guide in conjunction with the [*School Website Buyer's Guide*](#), which outlines specific steps to take and tools to use when evaluating potential website vendors, the *School Website Planning Guide* outlines much of the insight and best practices gathered from more than 15 years of planning and building websites for school districts and schools, large and small, private and public.

This guide is published by SchoolNow and is part of SchoolNow Academy's commitment to ongoing professional development for educators in the realm of web communications.



Step 1: Form your team

Your first order of business in planning for a great website is to assemble a great team or committee of school personnel who can help shape precisely what your school's website needs to be. Even though you may be the de facto champion or lead on the website project, you should not proceed independently or in a vacuum. Everyone on the planning team should have **clearly defined roles**, with each bringing valuable perspective.

Chances are the webmaster, school communications or IT director will be at the point on this project. It's a good idea, especially with the important role of the website in the communications mix these days, to have a **high-ranking administrator or two on the team**. So try to get a principal or even your superintendent involved along with key communications, technology, admissions or enrollment (if applicable), academic and even parents.

A rank-and-file teacher - one who's a champion of technology and maybe has a great teacher website - is also good to include on your team. He or she can speak for many of the classroom-driven concerns of building your new website. Some schools may even opt to have a student or parent representative on your planning team as well, for better communication between these two groups is a catalyst for improved academic achievement - the end game of all school communications.

Once you're satisfied you have **good representation from key departments** on your website planning team and roles are clearly defined, be sure to develop your plan consistent with your school's overall communications mission and goals. The website has quickly become the communications hub for

many schools, so it's critical that your planning is in concert with the bigger picture.

Step 2: Survey all your user groups

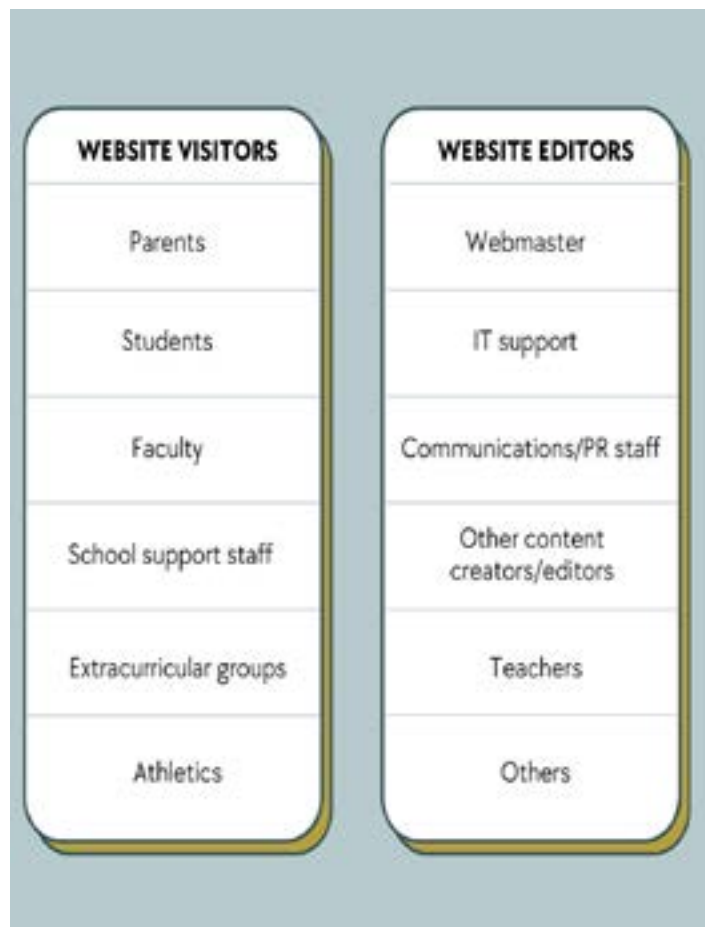
Your committee's first order of business in planning your school website is to gain a better understanding of the needs of all your users. Not just parents and students, of course, but your entire school community. For the content managers, creators and your website visitors, you want the website experience to be delightful and keep them coming back.

Understand your stakeholders

Through a thorough understanding of your stakeholders - your target audiences and the users themselves who will be managing the content - you may discover some constraints and possibilities in making the most of your website to reach your communications objectives.

Using both surveys and other forums, such as focus groups of staff, parents, and faculty, you can gain insight and confirm some assumptions your selection team has made about the direction of your new website. Informal meetings and focus groups are good opportunities to gain buy-in and discover champions in your website initiatives.

Consider the following user groups when surveying what's required for your website:



For your visitors, ask questions concerning what kinds of content they want to access, when and where they visit the web (time of day can determine, for example, how and when you stage your content), what devices are they using to view the website, what social media accounts they use.

For your content managers, ask them "what if" kinds of questions to stretch how they might better utilize the school website to improve how they do their jobs. It might be finding a way to more readily share content like a dedicated department web page, the ability to create online forms and surveys, creating their own blog, or establishing a school-based Twitter account.

Full Web Accessibility

One important user group not to overlook are individuals with disabilities in and around your school community. Close to 60 million people in the United States have a disability, and schools – like every public institution or organization – are required by law to make their websites fully accessible. Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the American Disabilities Act (ADA) require that schools have ADA-compliant, fully accessible websites, and there is a lot of pressure on schools from many sectors to comply with new accessibility standards.

Unfortunately, many schools currently don't have websites that accommodate the students, staff, parents and other school community members who have vision or hearing impairments, are physically disabled, or suffer from one of many cognitive or learning disabilities. It's important from a legal and ethical standpoint that you factor ADA compliance and web accessibility into your website planning. You need to first understand the scope and requirements of web accessibility, perform an ADA audit, appoint a web accessibility coordinator if one doesn't already exist, and make accessibility part of your school's website DNA.

Read a related article:

[How to Conduct a School Website Accessibility Audit](#)

Step 3: Access your existing website

Before you forge ahead and begin looking for new features and capabilities for your website, first thoroughly review your own website to determine what it's doing well and where there's room for improvement. And by thoroughly, we mean using objective analysis combined with subjective examination of your site. Part of your assessment should include an ADA-compliance audit.

Analyzing how people use your current website will not only flag some of the weaknesses of your site – perhaps confirming some assumptions – but



- 1. Build a comprehensive list of internal users.**
- 2. Build a list of all potential 'visitor' groups – including those with disabilities.**
- 3. Survey your groups.**
- 4. Conduct informal focus group meetings.**

can tell you what's successful with the current website. You may be doing some things very well. You also need to gain an understanding of the content and what is to be migrated into the new website. In addition to some critical analytics, here's where the insight from your webmaster, internal IT support team and your heavy users can be very valuable. What's working and not working will emerge in your data, but there's also great intuitive input to be gained.

How people use your website

While there are a number of web analytics tools available to collect, measure and provide reports on your school website, one of the best ways to get good data on how people use your website is to use **Google Analytics**. It's free to schools and is relatively easy to set up on your website.

Google Analytics enables you to collect some very valuable data. You can drill down as deep as you'd ever imagine examining your website, however the key areas where it can help is in determining:

- **Where** visitors are coming from
- **Which** pages are most popular
- **What** content they're searching for
- **How** they're accessing your site and viewing your pages

Track where visitors come from

Knowing the route visitors take to get to your website can unearth communications opportunities for your school. You may see, for example, a lot of visitors come from Facebook or Twitter, so you would

want to start sharing more content in those channels and encourage sharing on pages like blogs or news announcements.

Determine what's popular

Site content analytics help you identify the most popular pages, and helps you make that content easily accessible from the main pages of the website and within the navigation. This makes your school website so much more user-friendly.

Get help with page design

In-page analytics provide a visual overlay on your website and shows what people are clicking. This helps you position the popular links in prominent areas so visitors do not have work hard to find a links that they are clicking regularly, making your school's information easy to find.

Know what they're looking for

Any searches within your site can be analyzed as well. Data on searches can help you promote this regularly searched content on links on the homepage and navigation. Also, consider when someone is using the search, you might not have made it easy for them to find the information intuitively.

Learn what visitors use to access your site

Determining what devices your school website visitors are using is an important metric. Desktop, tablet, smartphone - each works with your website in distinct ways. The increasing number of mobile users, for example, indicates your school should be using responsive design or a mobile app. Know how your visitors view your site.

Read a related article:

[How Schools Can use Google Analytics](#)

Google Analytics not only will help your team gain a deeper understanding of your website as it exists now, but provide a benchmark for improvement, and serve as an ongoing website performance measurement tool.

Step 4: Research other school websites

From the no-need-to-reinvent-the-wheel department, your selection committee's due diligence should include seeing *what's working well for other schools*. In addition, a little introspective look at your own site should be included in your website reviews.

Start close. Maybe your school is part of a larger group determined by geography or athletic conference, for example. If you're a private school, you know who your competition is and can easily determine what you like and don't like about their web communications.

Public schools too are faced with competition. Open enrollment, magnet schools, charter schools, online and homeschooling are putting more pressure on districts to check what their 'competitors' websites are doing before proceeding with building their own.

Beyond the schools in your own backyard, check out what the standard is for great websites from schools across the country. There are award-winning school websites that you can learn from. Edustyle, Webby Awards, and the National School Public Relations Association have annual award programs that recognize the leaders in school website design and web communications.



Next Steps



1. *Appoint a lead to assess your current site.*
2. *Examine it objectively using Google Analytics.*
3. *Gather informal input from content managers*
4. *Complete your website "audit" with a report.*

Step 5: Design your website

With a full understanding of your user needs and a clear idea of what you want or don't want in your website, now it's time to put all your research and preliminary planning to work. Remember, as you work through the following design steps, end-user satisfaction – happy, fulfilled website visitors who keep coming back to your website – is really the ultimate goal of good design.

Your specific requirements

Your next step in planning your website is establishing the requirements that will dictate a large part of your ultimate design. It can be daunting to sort through the many features and options your potential website vendor has to offer, so be careful not to take on more than you're willing or capable of handling.

- More is not always better. That is, **your school may not need all the features available.** If you don't need all the bells and whistles, certainly don't ask (and don't pay) for them.
- Make certain your school is equipped to manage features such as discussion boards, parent portals, for example, if they're part of your website design. If third party application integration, for instance, is part of your require-



ments, be certain your IT department is leading that aspect.

Custom design vs. themed templates

You may be a candidate for a custom website, but cost and time may preclude that. Fact is, most CMS providers **have ready-made templates that are 'road-tested' for effective, usable design.**

- By using templates, you'll have a built-in safeguard against over-designing and trying to cram too much content onto each page. Website budget aside, in most cases, you're better off going with a design template that's proven and ready to go. It will also save time in the design and implementation phase.
- In multi-school districts or large schools with multiple departments, use themed templates to reinforce branding standards. If your respective school or department sites are "all over the map" from a design standpoint, take this opportunity to establish some standards.

Read a related article:

[5 Tips for Great School Website Design](#)



1. *Establish requirements using [School Website Buyer's Guide](#).*
2. *Review custom design or template options.*
3. *Commence site architecture mapping.*
4. *Establish file-naming convention.*
5. *Assign content supervisors.*

Step 6: Select a website-provider

Equipped with a fuller understanding of your current website, your specific requirements going forward, and a structure to transform your future website into a more effective communications engine, your team is now ready to choose a CMS provider.

Sifting through the many vendors can be a daunting task. Determining capabilities and differences is much like purchasing an automobile: the spectrum is wide when it comes to performance and even price, but all of them will pretty much get you from point A to point B. How smooth the ride is, service, how long it will last, – determining true value – requires a disciplined approach.

That's why it's important your team use a resource like the [School Website Buyer's Guide](#) to steer your selection. Vendor capability criteria such as usability, design, accessibility, and support can and should be evaluated as objectively as possible. Add to these, **vendor commitment to technology** and a **strategic approach** that demonstrates the ability to integrate your website into

your school's total communications, and you'll be equipped to make an informed decision.

Conclusion

School websites are more important than ever to helping schools and districts achieve not only their communications objectives, but educational goals. That's why it's imperative that, now more than ever, you approach your new website with a planning discipline and a strategic method.

By following the steps outlined in this guide, your school will be prepared to put in place the kind of website that all your users and visitors will come to rely on, keep coming back to, and become an integral part of your school's communications.

Get a strong team together, one comprised of decision makers; survey your all your key user groups; gain a thorough understanding of your site using analytics; make note of what other schools are doing well; establish your unique requirements; then select the website vendor that best fits.

Use this planning guide in conjunction with the [School Website Buyer's Guide](#), and you might find it's easier than you originally thought to get the school website you deserve, and create a powerfully vital communications hub for your entire school community.

Well-organized navigation

Intuitive, organized navigation is well-designed navigation. It's key to a school website's usability. Most website providers will start you off with a **common school or district architecture and show you how to edit** it to your specific needs.

- Organize navigation and sub-navigation with no more than seven links. Studies show people are most likely to make a decision when they have seven links or fewer to choose from. Anything more can be overwhelming. Quick links help lead users to the most frequently requested features or information on your site. Quick links can cut through the clutter, saving readers' time by getting them where they want to go, fast. Keep in mind school pages and teacher pages should be readily accessible on the navigation and home page.
- Do not use 'click here' wording on your links. Instead, use descriptions that are in context with the content. Don't think of the link as a verb; rather the subject matter to which you want the reader to have the option of reading.

Beautiful, strategic images

You'll want to upload your best quality images to your asset library for central organization and to ease the page-building process. Take this opportunity to **establish an intuitive file-naming convention** for all your digital assets if one doesn't already exist.

- From the 'a picture's worth a 1,000 words department,' a great image or a well-positioned video clip can speak volumes on a web page. There certainly should be a place for those on your school's website, and in fact, those

elements can be 'designed' into the site. It's striking that delicate balance, however, between beauty and utility that improves usability.

- Rotating banners (also called sliders) are a nice visual way to keep visitors updated on new, important school events. These can combine images with short text highlights. Images should be easy to change out using a friendly CMS.
- Do not allow the slider to dominate your homepage. The homepage is valuable real estate, and visitors should be easy directed to that next step: what they're likely looking for, or where you want to steer them with a clear call-to-action.

Current, fresh content

Frequently updated content – directories, news, calendar of events, athletics schedule and scores, lunch menus, etc. – is the blocking and tackling of a school websites, so **commit key school personnel to be responsible** for keeping this information fresh.

- This fundamental core content is what most visitors are looking for, and they want to find it fast. It's content that is typically created, edited or otherwise managed by non-technical users, so make sure the tools your CMS provider has to offer are easy to use. School and district news should be fresh. If visitors see stale news, they won't come back.
- The school events calendar, the workhorse of school communications, so make sure it's prominent, always current, and links each event listed to more information.