



District Web site **Makeover:**

Homegrown to Full Blown



By Steve Thornton

Before its recent makeover, our district Web site had remained true to its original 1999 design, back when our existence as a rural school district was ending and we had only four elementary schools and one middle school within our boundaries. Ours was a homegrown effort and though new schools and functions were added to it over the years, it became more apparent with growth—in population, technology advances, and the Internet itself—that we needed much more.

Within our district boundaries, a sea of new homes rose up and we rapidly grew to include three more elementary schools, one more middle school, and at least one more school projected each year for the next 15 years. Our community began to develop a focused identity and soon groups formed to vie for cityhood and to unify our K-8 district to include the local high school. While these efforts remain unsettled, community identity is the phrase of the day and our district is a cornerstone of that identity. Our stakeholders continue to demand more from our Web site as enhanced browser

technologies, increased use of broadband at home and general acceptance of the Internet as a primary communication tool become the norm.

Let's be clear, though. Our homegrown Web site was a great accomplishment when it first went online and it remained a source of pride for a long time measured against the scope of technological change in cyberspace. We owed its existence to the concerted effort of several talented and very creative folks within our organization who expended tremendous energy and time to bring it to reality. So, it was with reluctance that, viewed through the prism of changing times, technologies and demands, we had to concede that change was necessary.

That prism revealed several hallmarks of a Web presence that could no longer serve our growing needs. Our Web site began to look dated as the browsing public became more accustomed to sites that took advantage of newer technologies that presented content in a snappier, more professional manner. Likewise, the various pages of our Web site lacked cohesiveness having been developed

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and maintained by numerous individuals within the organization, each with a different vision and different layout preferences. Hosted on our own servers and largely consisting of CSS and HTML coding, content contributors required specialized software and skills. As a result, changes became complex and time consuming, the content remained largely static, and casual visitors found our sites uninviting and difficult to navigate.

Recognizing the need for change on an intuitive level was the first step in the makeover process. To transmit recognition into action, management had to understand the problem, visualize the solution and commit the necessary resources to make it a reality. In short, we had to have buy-in.

The process began with informal and honest discussions among the superintendent, cabinet, the school board, the management team, staff technology leaders in the classified and certificated ranks and the technology director about the current Web site—about what was not working, what was possible, and what it would take to make it happen. These discussions culminated in a presentation to the governing board that included a live demonstration of an ISP-hosted Web presence that illustrated the relative ease

with which we could have a dynamic, professional Web site that represented the positive energy of our learning community.

Subsequent discussions with district technology leaders, site administration, and our external stakeholders were aided by providing them with access to the ISP's demonstration Web site and by sharing the governing board presentation with them.

Our biggest challenge was to encourage more individuals to become content contributors, both in the design stage and in the continuing process of developing content over time. Only by passing the Web maintenance tasks out to a larger group could we hope to sustain an interesting, dynamic Web presence that would continue to serve us over time.

To accomplish this, we organized into what we called "Site Technology Groups." These consisted of technology leaders from each of the district's operational departments and from each school site. Each school site technology group included the technology aide assigned to the school, the library/media tech, a site administrator, and three or four teachers representing either the various grade levels or subject areas taught within the school. These groups were provided with

enhanced network permissions and support tools to enable them to help further the technology aims of their colleagues and were given subscriptions to an online training resource to help them stay ahead of technology trends and become better technology leaders.

Meetings are held with each of these groups on a bi-monthly basis and they are attended by the technology director, the tech support supervisor, and network

engineer so that district-level support members may serve as a resource to the site teams as they develop their continuing technology vision. The meetings and between-meeting e-mail discussions became natural places to work on our Web site makeover process and enabled us to build a common district vision that supported and enhanced the specific vision of each site and department.

We shared agreement on several components of that vision. We determined that the project would satisfy that vision if it:

- represented the district positively and projected a professional image;
- was capable of becoming a primary communication tool for the community, students, staff and people seeking employment within our growing district;
- was focused on the district's mission;
- represented all district operations;
- contained dynamic, up-to-date content;
- could easily be maintained directly by content contributors;
- provided for template-based Web sites for classroom teachers;
- required minimal training; and
- was relatively inexpensive.

With this vision in place, we received a commitment from the school board and senior management to fund the design work and the subscription service to follow. We then included the proposed subscription service with our E-Rate 470 paperwork since ISP-hosted Web sites are now a priority one E-Ratable service and this is one of the few areas where our district can qualify for E-Rate discounts. Should we receive a funding commitment letter later this year, our cost for this service will be reduced significantly.

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We selected the CyberSchool platform from IES, Inc. (www.cyberschool.com). They provided design and project coordination services which they fulfilled to our tremendous satisfaction. In the early days



of the project, they provided each site with template task checklists requesting such things as a school motto, pictures, mascot, and other graphics. At the same time, they analyzed the content on our existing Web site and made suggestions about how best to present these elements in ways that were more engaging and easy to navigate. They also used an

online system to track changes through the process so that the whole team could see where we were at in the process and what remained to be accomplished. This design team continues their commitment to us post-deployment as we make design adjustment requests and they cheerfully and rapidly apply those enhancements to our site.

We also contracted with a former employee who now operates a small Web-design business to help us with some of the most time-consuming ramp-up tasks. She quickly learned all aspects of the template-based administration functions of the new Web site and began adding existing content into this new framework. She then made visits to each of the district's operational departments and conducted one-on-one training sessions with content providers in those departments.

The site went live last July 1 and we continue to add and change content daily. (visit www.menifeeusd.org) The core of the continuing development team remains the members of our site tech groups. Representatives of each group participated in a full-day training session in mid-June. Each of them went back to their groups to conduct training and helped to develop agreement on how to share maintenance and content development tasks among members. The members of these groups together provide support and encouragement to others within their site and apply gentle positive pressure on their colleagues to continue making the most of our new web presence.

Today, we still have a long shopping list of things we need to add and adjust. In the meantime, we have a consistent look district-wide, our sites are much easier to navigate and content is provided directly by a growing number of staff members who are excited about the opportunity to make a contribution. Staff is rapidly increasing its reliance on this tool to serve as the go-to place for information, forms, and access to other online systems within the organization. A sizable majority of the teachers within our district now have a classroom Web page and we continue to receive strong support and enthusiasm from parents, the community, staff and the school board for our efforts.

The wholesale makeover of our district's Web presence represented a major contribution on the part of many people. But, the result has been well worth the effort. Tangible improvements are obvious. Less obvious is the power and momentum we've gained by working closely together on something meaningful and valuable to all our stakeholders—students, parents, staff, and the community. ■

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