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**The Ultimate Guide to Successful K-12
School District Website Redesign**

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The Ultimate Guide to Successful K-12 School District Website Redesign

So you're redesigning your school district websites, and now you're looking at starting what feels like a massive project. Don't worry - when you hire a website provider, you're hiring an expert in project management. Your website provider should have a plan to guide you through the project. Rally's been developing websites for school districts since 2005: we understand the unique challenges and opportunities school districts face when looking to redesign their websites. It's easy to get overwhelmed when looking at all changes involved, but we've put together a strategy to help you – and your leadership team – successfully prepare for a website redesign. Whether you're looking to hire a new website provider or have just signed on with one, this guide highlights how you can make the most of a provider's expertise and ensure you're getting websites tailored to your district's needs.

INVOLVE STAKEHOLDERS

Connect with Content Editors

Chances are you have many website editors in your school district. Reach out to your school content editors and get their insights. You don't have to involve them every step of the way, but asking what they struggle with, what features they'd like to have, or if there's something they'd like changed can give you a great start for feedback to present to your provider. You can send out a survey to help identify pain points, frustrations, and areas where the current website falls short. This feedback is a great way to learn more about how content editors interact with the back end of the website, rather than the public facing websites. The results will highlight any issues these editors face with using the websites on a regular basis and can build a strong case for needing a more user-friendly content management system (CMS). Including content editors at the beginning of the project helps get them excited about the change and helps them feel heard and valued by your district.

Who Needs to Sign Off?

Identifying the right stakeholders is crucial for a successful redesign. We suggest forming a small website committee that has the power to make decisions about the project. Include representation from district leadership and your Communications and Technology departments so everyone is heard. If you want to consult other stakeholders (staff, parents, students) do that before the project begins and empower your committee to carry that feedback into the project.

The number one cause of website project delays and added costs is that leadership is not involved at all in the planning and design of the project, then they step in and override decisions made by your committee after the work is done. Ensure that your leadership is involved from the beginning to prevent unnecessary delays (or going over budget).

Establish a Base Knowledge

Not all committee members may be regular users of the website. Bring them up to speed on what to expect, their time commitment, and what kind of contribution they need to make. They have to understand the project steps, its objectives, and scope. Your website provider should provide clear steps about the process, so ensure you're sharing this information with your website committee so they know what to expect and how they can contribute.

Lay out the reasons for the redesign: what problems exist in the current websites and how will those be fixed with the redesign? Most importantly, ensure they understand what's being changed and what's not: are you moving to an entirely new content management system or just changing the layout of your existing website? Are you having new features built for your district or using out-of-the-box solutions? Understanding the full scope of the project helps keep committee members on task, while having them consider the best ways to leverage the full potential of the website.

PLANNING FOR THE NEW WEBSITE

Analytics Check

Before diving into the redesign, review your website analytics. Gain insights into user behavior, popular pages, and features that are well-received. Understanding how visitors interact with your current site will inform decisions on what to retain, improve, or introduce in the new design. Review your top pages and most popular search terms. These popular items can help determine which content should be prioritized in the redesigned website.

Community Feedback

Your websites serve one primary purpose: to engage your school district community! So why not ask them what they think? As a website provider, it really helps us to know the pain points of the people who visit the site. Consider putting out a brief survey on your website or social media to collect feedback and insights from parents and students.

Just remember, that one negative opinion isn't necessarily shared by everyone - no matter how loudly it was said! Your analytics will give you a broader picture of how visitors engage with your website. If you're not sure, ask your website provider. At Rally, we have a team of professional designers who follow the latest trends and best practices. The last thing you want is to base your website design around one parent's off-base comment.

Feature Review and Usage Analysis

Evaluate the existing features of your website. Identify which features are widely used and valued by both content editors and community members and which ones are underutilized. This analysis will guide decisions on feature prioritization and help streamline the user experience. Remember, just because you used a feature one way before doesn't mean you can't change your processes, especially if you're changing to a new website provider with different or more features.

If you are integrating with third party tools as part of the redevelopment, think deeply about the reason for the integration. Why does the website need to pull from or push to these external systems? What workflow are you trying to achieve? Who does this integration help?

Integration for the sake of integration alone doesn't always improve your websites - ensure there's a purpose behind every third party technology on your websites.

Post-Launch Flexibility

Ensure that you know what you can change post-launch. This will help keep conversations with your provider on track. If you can change all the copy on your website, then you don't have to spend time in project meetings ensuring it's perfect. Your website copy and images should be flexible (can be changed after launch by your district) and should not have to be finalized during the design phase.

REVIEWING CURRENT WEBSITES

Likes and Dislikes

Conduct a thorough review of your current website. Identify elements that are working well, receiving positive feedback, and aligning with your goals. Pinpoint aspects that are not meeting expectations or causing frustration among content editors.

These likes/dislikes could be visual (it looks bad or doesn't represent your brand), navigational (no one can find what they need), or feature-based (the homepage doesn't show the latest news). Having a list of what you like and dislike is incredibly valuable to your provider - especially if you're doing a custom redesign. This is the best way for us to get to know your district and how you'd prefer to present yourself online, so don't hold back!

Unused Features and Communication Goals

Are there features on your website that aren't being used? And if so, why? If you're changing website providers, will these features be easier to use on the new website? If you don't publish a news blog, but there's still a spot for them on the homepage, that could pose a problem: visitors will see an old post, and assume the whole website is out of date! Knowing which features are most important and frequently used helps the designer highlight the most important content on your website, while removing or changing unused features so the website can still look great.

Does the website support your district's communications goals to the best of its ability? If you want to share bus status information quickly, can you do that? If you want to set up a media section, can you? Review your strategic communications goals to ensure that the website can support them.

Design & Your Brand

Determine if there are design problems or issues that hinder user experience. Is the right content emphasized on the page? Is the menu easy to click through? Are your images being stretched or cropped unexpectedly? Take a look at your homepage: is all the content you want there? Is there anything there that shouldn't be? Check how your website looks on mobile views, and do a test for accessibility requirements to see if improvements need to be made. Talk to your provider about all of your concerns. They should have a process in place to address all of these issues in the design of the new website. Sometimes, additional changes after launch come at an additional cost, so knowing what you want from the layout of your website can save additional costs down the road.

How does the website align with your brand? If you don't have brand guidelines, you can still consider how the look and feel of your website reflects your brand. You can name some adjectives that describe your brand or how you'd like your district to be perceived. For example, you could say, "fun and approachable" or "classic and bold." Choosing a few adjectives can really give your project a strong starting point. Does it look and feel like it belongs to your school district? If you're doing a custom redesign, there's tons of opportunity to build your brand into the website. You want your website to reflect how unique your district is, not look like every other school district website.

LOOKING TO THE REDESIGN

Set Redesign Goals

Having clear goals will guide decision-making throughout the redesign process. Review your analytics, survey results, design frustrations, communications goals, and notes from the first two sections to create clear goals for the redesign. If there are technical issues (such as load

time) with the current website, ensure that the goals address these aspects. Consider what will enhance the user experience for students, parents, teachers, and content editors. Prioritize goals that address identified pain points and challenges faced by users on the current website.

Ensure that the redesign goals align closely with the strategic objectives of the school district. Consider the broader mission and vision statements, as well as any specific strategic plans in place. This should highlight the importance of the project to your leadership team and help create internal support.

Find Example Websites

If you're doing a custom redesign, explore different websites for inspiration! Don't limit yourself to just K-12 websites either - do a little research into the latest design trends. If you see something on a website you really like, ensure you save it so you can show it to your provider. If you're not sure where to start, just try a Google search for "Award Winning Websites." Look for design elements (background images, buttons, animations) features, layouts, and functionalities that resonate with your goals.

Showing these example websites to your provider really helps establish common ground for redesign. Your provider should also be able to share industry best practices to ensure that your redesigned website is not only visually appealing, but also incorporates proven strategies for user engagement.

Prepare Your Branding

A cohesive brand representation fosters a sense of identity and professionalism. Your district is unique, and your website should be too! If your district has established brand guidelines, get those ready to share with your developer. They'll want to present your brand as well as they can, and your guidelines can help ensure the redesign is the best representation.

If you don't have brand guidelines, don't worry! Put together what you have, even if it's just your logo, colours, and tagline. Be open to new interpretations and let the designer find new ways to highlight your district.

A successful redesign is the result of collaboration between your district's stakeholders and the development team. Involving internal stakeholders from the beginning of the project, creating a plan for the redesign based on data, reviewing your current websites for areas of improvement, and setting clear goals make a redesign project much more successful.