



Mounds View school district chat room seeks feedback from parents, residents



Experimental effort seeks feedback from parents, residents who don't attend meetings

BY ELIZABETH MOHR

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Social networking and online forums aren't just for your kids anymore.

In fact, parents in the Mounds View school district who want to know what's happening in their schools and be part of the conversation are encouraged to get online and learn the ropes.

A growing number of districts are tapping into new technologies to communicate with a wider range of parents and community members.

Mounds View Public Schools is experimenting with an online forum called Chalkboard Chat to gather input from parents and residents on future district goals. It was launched Tuesday morning.

"Mounds View is taking a big step out there, and if it's successful, they'll be the leaders," said Marla Davenport, director of learning and technology for TIES, a Minnesota organization that offers technology training and support for schools across the state.

Although some people are still technology-shy, school districts can't afford to ignore the growing group of parents who rely heavily on the Internet for information.

"It's a means that so many people are accustomed to using for quick communication," Mounds View Superintendent Dan Hoverman said. "It's just a part of who we are."

For that reason, many districts offer e-mail updates, and some even use podcasts and webcasts. Almost all districts have Web sites, with many having portals that allow parents to check their children's grades and attendance.

Chat rooms and online forums are used frequently for classroom discussions

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and are particularly effective for students who are shy in class, Davenport said. The perceived anonymity gives them confidence to say things they might not otherwise.

"You may be willing to take more of a risk than you would in a public place with everyone looking at you," Davenport said.

The same concept applies to parents.

Mounds View school officials hope to use Chalkboard Chat to also reach people "who won't get into their car and drive to a meeting," said Colin Sokolowski, district spokesman. Parents are busy and this approach offers them the option of participating when it fits into their schedules.

The district experimented with online discussion with residents this spring, seeking public input during its search for a new superintendent.

"Many more people visited that chat room than attended the (public) meeting - by thousands," Sokolowski said.

Hoverman hopes to use responses to the new online forum in creating the district's strategic plan.

While public input is encouraged, how officials prioritize the numerous issues raised by residents might pose its own challenges.

"How far we can go in addressing those issues will be determined," Hoverman said.

Within hours of launching Chalkboard Chat on Tuesday, several Mounds View parents had posted responses.

Shelly Krause, the fourth poster of the day, said she was nervous about using it because her comments about the amount of homework students get would be there for everyone

to see. But she went for it anyway, seeing it as an easy way to voice her concerns.

"This is certainly simpler than setting up an appointment with the principal," she said. "We'll see if I sound like an idiot to all the other parents. Or maybe I'll get some good feedback."

Either way, she said, "You never know unless you speak up."

Elizabeth Mohr can be reached at emohr@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5162.

Online

To participate in Mounds View schools' online Chalkboard Chat, go to moundsvIEWSchools.org/chat.asp. The discussion board will close Tuesday.