



COUNCIL OF ONTARIO DIRECTORS OF EDUCATION  
CONSEIL ONTARIEN DES DIRECTIONS DE L'ÉDUCATION

# Strategic Communication in the Age of Social Media

LEADERSHIP CONVERSATION





# Executive Summary

In an era where information travels faster than ever, and public trust is both fragile and essential, education leaders find themselves navigating a digital landscape fraught with complexity. Social media, once embraced as a powerful tool for connection, visibility, and real-time communication, now demands a far more nuanced approach and thoughtful evaluation before we engage online. For CEOs, superintendents, and other senior education officials, the stakes are high; the same platforms that can amplify achievements and foster transparency can also fuel misinformation, magnify conflict, and create unrealistic expectations for constant engagement in education matters.

As public education systems strive to remain responsive and inclusive, leaders must grapple with how best to communicate in ways that are ethical, effective, and aligned with the goals of public education. This Leadership Conversation explores the evolving role of social media in public education leadership, examining both its potential and its pitfalls. Grounded in research, policy, and professional best practices, it aims to equip education leaders with the tools and insights needed to lead online practice with integrity, clarity, and purpose.

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*People don't follow  
perfection on social media.  
They follow authenticity.*

- Author unknown

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# The Current Landscape: Challenges and Complexities

Social media channels provide School Board CEOs with a valuable tool for communication, engagement, and transparency within their school districts. It allows them to expand their reach, to share knowledge of public education and demonstrate leadership in a digital age. However, CEOs must navigate potential challenges such as managing online reputations, ensuring responsible communication, and addressing issues like cyberbullying and misinformation.

School boards today operate in a climate of heightened expectations, political scrutiny, polarization, and digital saturation. Social media has dramatically transformed the pace, tone, and reach of public discourse. The current Ontario legislative context includes: [PPM 164 - Requirements for Remote Learning](#), [PPM 128 - The Provincial Code of Conduct](#) and beginning in the 2024/2025 school year, the Ministry of Education instituted a ban on classroom cellphone use and blocked certain social media sites on school networks. The Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner highlights the [Digital Privacy Charter](#) for Ontario schools along with lesson resources to teach children about privacy, responsible behaviours and digital citizenship. These are significant developments that compel district leaders to re-assess their communications policies and practices in light of the current landscape.

For CEOs, this brings urgent new responsibilities—and significant risks. **Key challenges include:**

## Diverse and Diverging Expectations

Families, staff, and communities have varied expectations around tone, content, transparency, and engagement when it comes to using social media for interpersonal communication and/or advocacy. The breadth and scope of issues that emerge daily on social media make it impossible for most organizations and individuals to meet expectations for engagement.

Communication must be inclusive, culturally responsive, and aligned with the vision, mission, values, and rights under Canadian law, [The Ontario Human Rights Code](#), [Occupational Health and Safety Act](#), [Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#), Catholic Values where applicable, and a board's mission, vision, value statements and policies.

## Platform Volatility and Information Overload

The 24/7 nature of social media rewards immediacy over accuracy. Messages and posts can be taken out of context, misinterpreted, or weaponized. CEOs must communicate quickly without compromising accuracy or professionalism. Online engagement can distract from the important responsibilities of leading student achievement, supporting well-being, staff engagement and working with the Board. It is critical to assess the amount of time required to successfully engage online.

# The Current Landscape: Challenges and Complexities

## Misinformation and Public Distrust in the Age of Algorithms

Algorithms often amplify disinformation, misinformation, speculation, and campaigns, allowing them to gain significant traction online. This presents a critical challenge for public education leaders, as without strategic counter-narratives and robust media education in communities, there is a risk of losing public trust or, unintentionally, reinforcing false narratives. Another emerging risk is “deep-fakes” which are images, videos, or audio that have been edited or generated using artificial intelligence, AI-based tools or AV editing software (definition from Wikipedia). It is crucial to address these issues with informed, proactive measures that prioritize seeking truth, gaining understanding from credible sources and fostering transparency.

## Hate Speech, Cyberbullying, and Psychological Harm

Many popular social media platforms increasingly host divisive and harmful content. Leaders must protect staff and students from digital harm while ensuring their own communication does not contribute to polarization or marginalization.

## Erosion of Public-Private Boundaries

The line between personal expression and public duty is blurred online. Increasingly educators are targeted or scrutinized for statements made on private accounts or for personal posts made by staff. Clear policy guidance and professional learning are essential.

## Legal and Ethical Risks

Social media activity must comply with legislation around privacy (e.g., Ontario’s Digital Privacy Charter), anti-hate protections, the Protection of Public Participation legislation, and codes of professional conduct. Missteps may result in reputational damage and/or legal exposure.

These risks and challenges are among many that have made the use of social media a time-consuming and complex undertaking for leaders.

# Key Principles

To lead with integrity and foresight in today's complex environment, system leaders must anchor their communication in a set of principles that guide their and the senior team's actions and decisions.

**Firstly**, CEOs are responsible for professional responsibility and adhering to the standards set by professional codes, such as the [Ontario College of Teachers Standards of Practice](#). This involves demonstrating an ethic of care, respect, equity-mindset, and integrity in all interactions. Leaders should also model civil discourse and hold themselves accountable in their communication.

**Secondly**, clarity and accessibility are crucial. Communication must be straightforward and inclusive of audiences, avoiding unnecessary jargon. It should be designed to reach everyone, making sure it's accessible in various languages, reading levels, and formats—whether through captioned videos, American Sign Language, or alt-text for images.

**Thirdly**, maintaining consistency and alignment require that messaging be coordinated across departments and platforms. Leaders should set the expectation that all communications reflect the values, decisions, and commitments of the organization, creating a unified and consistent voice.

**Lastly**, building trust through communicating understanding is essential. Effective communication is built on a thorough understanding of your audience. It is critical that communication reflects the challenges, concerns, and lived experiences of students, and their families especially during crises or after traumatic events. When information cannot be shared or is confidential, leaders should offer clear explanations as to why. Empathy and relational trust emphasize the importance of care in communication.

**In conclusion**, when using corporate social media accounts, focus on meaningful, high-impact communication. Share stories that reinforce board values, celebrate achievements, and promote connection. Avoid the untenable situation of reacting to every post or comment; instead, lead with purpose and professionalism.

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# **Enhancing Communication Practices in Education:**

## **Recommended Actions for CEOs and System Leaders Responsible for Communication**

In response to evolving communication trends and within the context of current legislative and policy frameworks, the following actions are recommended for CEOs and system leaders to foster transparent, inclusive, and effective communication at a system-level:

**01**  
**Audit Current Communication Practices**

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**02**  
**Get to Know Your Audience**

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**03**  
**Develop and Update Your Social Media Policy Regularly**

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**04**  
**Build Internal Capacity Through Ongoing Professional Development**

**05**  
**Establish a Crisis Communication Plan**

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**06**  
**Create Community Guidelines for Digital Discourse**

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**07**  
**Evaluate the Impact of Communication Strategies**

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**08**  
**Promote Confidence in Public Education Through Engagement**

## 1. Audit Current Communication Practices

Conduct a comprehensive review of communication tools and platforms used across the system. This audit should include an inventory of users, communication purposes, access levels, reach, results or goals achieved, and associated risks such as privacy breaches or misinformation. Decisions should be made about which platforms best serve your corporate goals, policies, practices, professional goals and Catholic values within Catholic districts.

Social media should complement—not replace—trusted communication tools like newsletters, portals, or in-person forums for communicating with staff, and communities. These channels offer more control, reduce misinterpretation, and foster more trusting relationships when shared regularly and address key questions and issues. Communication teams should monitor platforms and advise when to pause, shift, or moderate use (e.g., restrict comments).

## 2. Get to Know Your Audience

Understanding your audience helps you communicate with them more effectively. Use tools like voluntary surveys to students and parents, to collect data on what kind of communications are important to them, how many use social media platforms and which ones, and their preferred methods of receiving communications (e.g. by mail, phone call, email, text message).

Review enrollment data and demographics from Statistics Canada to understand the students and families in your community more broadly, including countries of origin, language most often spoken at home, and other data that could help tailor your communications.

Use social media scans and Google news alerts to supplement your understanding of what is happening in your community. This does not have to mean paying for a tool. Manual with keyword searches (name of your district, names of senior leaders, etc.), bookmarking and periodically checking local social media groups on Facebook or Reddit, and free tools like the Meta Business Suite (used with Facebook and Instagram) should give you enough information to understand your audience.

## 3. Develop and Update Your Social Media Policy Regularly

Establish or revise policies that clearly define acceptable communication practices, including tone, roles and responsibilities, crisis management, and professional boundaries. A robust social media policy is essential to mitigate reputational and legal risks (Ontario College of Teachers, 2020).

## 4. Build Internal Capacity Through Ongoing Professional Development

Invest in ongoing training for system and school leaders in areas such as legal compliance, board policies, human rights, digital citizenship, and media relations. This action aligns with recommendations from the Canadian Teachers' Federation (2019), which highlights the importance of equipping educators with tools to navigate complex digital environments.

Often, effective strategic communication at the system-level demands expertise. Where possible, CEOs should build internal capacity with professionals who understand media relations, human rights, risk management, and public accountability. As needed, and if possible, these teams should collaborate with legal counsel and the senior leadership team on complex issues to ensure legal compliance and credibility.

## 5. Establish a Crisis Communication Plan

Develop structured protocols to manage misinformation, public criticism, or crisis events—especially on social media. The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA, 2020) stresses that effective crisis communication minimizes harm and maintains public trust during disruptive events.

Protocols should include guidance on how to address AI “deepfakes,” including guidance not to repost deep-fake content as that will amplify it and give it more legitimacy. Protocols should also include establishing a “source of truth” key spokespeople or staff can point to on the Board’s website. Boards should develop a decision framework matrix with escalating levels of urgency (e.g. Level 1 - Noise, Level 2 - Misinformation, Level 3 Harm) as well as roles and responsibilities during a crisis – key spokespeople, necessary approvals and essential people to get input from.

## 6. Create Community Guidelines for Digital Discourse

Engage stakeholders—students, families, and staff in providing input into guidelines that reflect diverse perspectives and set expectations for respectful online engagement. Guidelines should be transparent to families and communities through a board’s website and family portals. This participatory approach strengthens inclusivity and democratic governance (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2023; OECD, 2021).

Digital spaces require active stewardship. Staff and students need education and support in media literacy, online ethics, and how to respond to harm. Increasingly, CEOs like other leaders have experienced harassing and discriminatory behaviours online. There is a need to maintain clear protocols to address cyberbullying and misinformation experienced by staff including the CEO.

## 7. Evaluate the Impact of Communication Strategies

Implement continuous feedback loops, including analytics, surveys, and qualitative reviews, to measure the effectiveness of communication efforts and identify areas for improvement (Fullan, 2025). Evaluation helps ensure that strategies align with evolving community needs. Evaluate if your district should be using social media to communicate with students given the documented research and emerging concerns about the impacts on student well-being and health.

## 8. Promote Confidence in Public Education Through Engagement

Shift communication from brand protection to fostering public trust, democratic involvement, and respectful civic discourse. This includes proactively addressing issues like online hate, misinformation, and harassment, as emphasized in the Digital Citizenship Education in Saskatchewan Schools framework (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2020).

***Social media should complement—not replace—trusted communication tools like newsletters, portals, or in-person forums for communicating with staff, and communities.***

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# Alternative Approaches to Communicating Broadly Without Social Media

## EMAIL NEWSLETTERS

## DIRECT MESSAGING

## FAMILY PORTALS

## COMMUNITY AND VIRTUAL FORUMS

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS

## VIDEO MESSAGES

## TRADITIONAL MEDIA

## PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

While social media offers immediacy and wide reach, it is not always the most appropriate or strategic platform for CEO-level communication, particularly in public education where empathy, accuracy, and trust are paramount. There are several well-established, effective alternatives that enable CEOs to communicate broadly while maintaining control over the content of the messaging, fostering engagement, and reinforcing professional credibility.

**Email newsletters and direct messaging and family portals** remain among the most reliable methods. These channels allow for intentional, well-crafted communication that can be tailored to specific audiences, such as staff, families, or community partners. Messages sent via email can be archived, referenced, and translated if needed—supporting accessibility and transparency.

**Community and virtual forums**—whether live or recorded—create opportunities for open dialogue, visible leadership, and authentic connection. These sessions can be used to update stakeholders on system priorities, address concerns, and invite feedback in real time.

**Internal communication platforms** such as **intranets or staff collaboration tools** allow for regular updates within the organization. These tools can foster two-way communication and integrate easily into the routines of professional life, reinforcing a culture of openness.

**Video messages** from the CEO offer a personal and impactful format for system-wide communication. Pre-recorded videos can humanize leadership, convey emotion and tone more effectively than text, and be reused across multiple channels.

**Traditional media and professional networks** also continue to play an important role. Publishing editorials, participating in interviews, or collaborating with professional associations extends a leader's reach while ensuring that messaging is situated within broader professional and public discourse.

By using these diverse tools thoughtfully, a CEO's leadership can engage communities, and staff, meaningfully—without relying on the often unpredictable dynamics of social media.

Reference:

American Association of School Administrators. (2020). *Social media in schools: A guide for school leaders*. Arlington, VA: AASA.

# Conclusion

The challenges of today's digital environment—rapid information cycles, misinformation, polarization, and performative engagement—demand a serious re-examination of how and when school systems use social media. What began as a tool for connection and celebration has, in many cases, become a source of tension, distraction, and reputational risk.

It is no longer enough to “be present” online. CEOs and other public education leaders must ask: *To what end? For whom? At what cost?*

This moment calls for thoughtful recalibration. Social media may continue to have a place in corporate communications but only when its use is strategic, transparent, and aligned with the core purpose of public education. More importantly, leaders must design communication strategies that prioritize safety, trust, and authentic engagement, even if that means moving away from platforms that no longer serve those goals.

In rethinking how to communicate, CEOs must protect what matters most: the well-being, achievement and dignity of students, the professionalism of staff, and the public's trust in education as a cornerstone of a just and democratic society.

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***CEOs must protect what matters most: the well-being, achievement and dignity of students, the professionalism of staff, and the public's trust in education.***

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# For Further Reflection

1. Are we equipped to respond to misinformation, online harassment, or public campaigns targeting our board?
2. Are we regularly reviewing our practices to ensure compliance with privacy, anti-hate, and professional standards?
3. How are online bullying and harassment addressed? How are we actively counter acting digital harms (e.g., hate speech, disinformation, stereotyping)?
4. How are we accounting for language differences, continuous access to the internet, demands of work and other responsibilities?
5. How does our use of social media align with the communication plan and its goals? How aligned is it to the Multi-Year Strategic Plan?
6. What metrics will be used to assess the impact of social media usage and evaluate, if necessary, shifting platforms?
7. What supports are required on an ongoing basis to determine if those responsible for social media have current knowledge, tools, and supports?
8. How do we build capacity in schools to support healthy communication cultures?
9. How are educators and students navigating online spaces safely and responsibly?
10. Which stakeholder groups are not using social media and how are you reaching them?
11. How is the district managing the impact of social media on the emotional and cognitive overload some staff, students, and families are experiencing?

# Appendix

## Tips for Creating and Managing Your Social Media Accounts as CEO

When the CEO and senior leadership teams are creating their own professional or organizational accounts (e.g., on social media channels), they should approach this task with strategic intent, alignment to organizational values and their role and responsibilities. Here are essential tips for ensuring consistency, professionalism, and impact:



**Clarify the Purpose of the Account**



**Pay Attention to Privacy, Security and Safety**



**Align with Organizational Values and Voice**



**Demonstrate Leadership Through Content**



**Set Clear Boundaries and Expectations**



**Build Relationships and Engage**

## 1. Clarify the Purpose of the Account

- Professional vs. Personal: Decide whether the account is strictly professional, semi-personal (e.g., leadership voice), or organizational.
- Define your audience: Who is the primary audience? Staff, stakeholders, public, media, etc.
- Platform Selection: Have we selected the right platform to reach our audience? (Facebook: parents and grandparents, Instagram: parents and students, TikTok: students, LinkedIn: Stakeholders, government, and professionals, X: Journalists) Can we create content that is optimized for that channel? (Videos on Instagram and TikTok, articles and blogs on LinkedIn)
- Communication Goals: Identify goals (e.g., thought leadership, transparency, engagement, crisis communication).

## 2. Align with Organizational Values and Voice

- Tone and Language: Ensure the tone reflects the organization's culture—e.g., respectful, clear, equity and human rights informed posts. Align your voice with your values.
- Consistency: Use shared terminology, messaging, and style across leadership accounts to avoid mixed signals.
- Brand Alignment: If visual branding is used (logos, colours) be consistent with organizational and accessibility standards

## 3. Set Clear Boundaries and Expectations

- Content Types: Define what content is appropriate, e.g., commentary on policy, amplifying staff achievements, updates, thought leadership.
- What to Avoid: Caution against content that is overly personal, reactive, or unvetted. Best practice suggests separating your personal and professional accounts recognizing that you are professionally accountable for your content on either platform.
- Time and Capacity: How often are you expected to post or engage? Who supports content creation or review?

## 4. Pay Attention to Privacy, Security and Safety

- Multi-Factor Authentication: Always enabled for account safety.
- Minimal Personal Info: Avoid oversharing personal or sensitive information for yourself and others referenced in your content.
- Verify the identity of the individuals you are engaging with on specific or sensitive topics.
- Account Ownership: Ensure the account is tied to a professional email and can be transitioned when needed.
- Report inappropriate use through the appropriate internal and external organizations.
- Seek appropriate support when faced with concerns about your or other staff's safety, discrimination, or harassment.

## 5. Demonstrate Leadership Through Content

- Establish your credibility and care: demonstrate your knowledge in relatable and meaningful ways and share relevant resources with your primary audiences.
- Amplify voices of team members, community leaders, and partnerships.
- Align posts with the goals in the Multi-Year Strategic Plan.
- Communicate with Clarity in Crisis: If used during crisis, ensure posts are accurate, timely, and rooted in empathy and fact.

## 6. Build Relationships and Engage

- Respond Thoughtfully: If engaging with comments or reposts, do so respectfully and strategically. Consider whether responding to posts and messages is feasible and advisable.
- Ask Questions: Invite dialogue where appropriate (e.g., "What are your thoughts on X?").
- Avoid engaging with bad-faith actors or anonymous trolls
- Actively engage with your network, especially to amplify positive stories.
- Leave complex disputes for private conversations.

With excerpts from: <https://socialschool4edu.com/helping-your-school-board-and-superintendents-navigate-social-media/>

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