

A Message from the Holmdel Township Board of Education

Building a Better School District Web Site

About ten years ago, two college professors set up an experiment in a local supermarket to test their theories about how people deal with choice. Students dressed up as store employees and set up two display tables with bottles of jams. One table had a limited assortment of six flavors, while the other table was “jam” packed with 24 varieties. So which table do you think sold more jam?

It might seem that more choices would lead to more sales, but the exact opposite happened. The table with the fewer choices sold ten times more jam. The researchers concluded that when we have too many choices, we find it difficult to make a final decision.

You can apply this same theory to communications, especially when it comes to web sites. When members of the Holmdel Board of Education’s Community Relations (CR) Committee looked at our school district site (<http://www.holmdelschools.org>), we recognized the same problem. Over time, the home page had become cluttered with too much information and too many links. We wanted to find a way to make it easier for residents to find important information without a lot of effort or stress.

Good thing we had District Technology Director Anthony Gattini to get us out of this jam.

Earlier in the year, members of the CR Committee met with Anthony, who gave us a crash course on how his team manages the hundreds of pages that the site contains. In fact, the Holmdel School District web site is really a family of web sites, with individual sections dedicated to our schools, our departments and the various parent groups that support our district and its programs.

The committee came to an early consensus around certain objectives. We wanted a dynamic site that could be easily updated to provide information quickly to our constituents. We wanted the site to be visually enticing with more images and colorful graphics. And of course, we needed to corral our expectations. Web maintenance is only one of the many daily responsibilities facing Anthony and the Technology team, so we wanted to make sure the new site would be easy to manage and update to ensure it did not become static or stale.

There is an old joke that to steal an idea from one person is plagiarism, but to steal from many is research. We began looking at a various web sites, from other school districts to notable corporations. We recognized certain patterns of design and used these characteristics to guide how we wanted to refresh our own home page.

First, we noticed that many sites used a fairly consistent approach for organizing information, so certain messages or ideas would be prominent. One popular approach involved setting aside “window space” for large photographs or graphics, designed to highlight a particular story or development. These images would either rotate automatically or allow the visitor to scroll the pictures at his or her own pace.

We liked this concept and adapted it to fit our own needs. If you visit our site, you will notice we setup a rotating series of photographs at the top of the page that regularly promotes the latest news. On its immediate right, we used a Google application to support a more robust calendar than we had in the past. The old calendar only showed a few weeks of events at one time. The new calendar can be scrolled all the way to the end of the school year.

We also noticed that many web sites use “tickers” to highlight breaking news or key upcoming events. We chose to include this feature, too, and you can find it right next to a sign up button for our E-Alert system, which will send notifications directly to your email box.

Below the ticker, we added four colorful boxes with pictures that highlight the latest news within each of our schools. These graphics also provide direct access to each school site. At the bottom of the page, you will find an easy-to-use directory, which acts as a site map. Major navigational links can still be found at the top of the home page as well.

Amazingly, even with all this information, the page neatly fits “above the fold” on most home computer screens. Scrolling has been minimized and clutter completely eliminated.

Carlos Machado, our district webmaster, provided the magic behind all these changes. He took the vision outlined by the committee and created a truly compelling site that currently receives roughly 2,000 visitors every day.

Now, here’s the best part. Due to the experience and technology knowledge of Anthony, Carlos and the rest of the team, we completed all of these changes in-house, so we didn’t need to spend district funds on outside consultants or web designers.

By the way, we were not alone in thinking that it was time to make some changes. Under the leadership of Village Elementary’s Parent School Association President Suzanne Niro and Vice President of Communications Lynn Saporito, the PSA launched a new web portal this fall to serve as a central hub for all the parent associations supporting the district’s schools. A Holmdel design firm, Rahvalor, helped complete the project as a pro bono assignment. You can check it out at <http://www.HolmdelParents.org> or click its link on the District site.

Now we want to know what you think. If you have any thoughts or ideas about the District’s new web design, feel free to contact any of the members of the Community Relations Committee—Chiung-yin Cheng Liu (our chair), Dennis Pavlik, Victor DeSario, or me, Mike Sockol. You can find our email addresses on the new site under the Board of Education section.

In the meantime, once we pick an official “jam” for the school district, we’ll let you know. I’m leaning towards strawberry.

Speaking for the Board of Education and the entire School District, I want to wish you and your loved ones a safe and happy holiday season and a wonderful New Year.

On behalf of my Board colleagues,

***Mr. Mike Sockol*, Board Member**

There are two easy ways to stay informed of district/schools happenings. Please visit the district website at www.holmdelschools.org for event updates, school announcements, district progress reports, board meeting information, and much more. You can also subscribe to our E-Alert at <http://www.holmdel.k12.nj.us/home/joinlist.shtm> to receive email alerts on your choice of topics, such as school security alerts, committee notes, parent support group minutes, the district calendar, career opportunities, and school lunch menus.