

## **Why Every District Needs a Mobile App**

*Ellen Ullman*

In January 2012, the technology staff at Judson Independent School District (ISD) in Texas noticed that 10 or more percent of its website traffic was coming from mobile devices. Chief Technology Officer Steve Young was concerned: "When I visit a website from my phone, it's not enjoyable. The screen is too small and it can be frustrating to find what you're looking for." Young knew that people were using apps for just about everything, and he kept seeing studies showing the proliferation of smartphones and tablets. It was time, he decided, to create an app for his district.

### **App Appeal**

Just as it's almost unthinkable for a district not to have a website, it may soon be unthinkable for a district not to have a mobile app. "School districts need to embrace the capabilities of mobile technology to develop applications that provide valuable information to students, parents, and communities," says Cheryl Scott Williams, executive director of the Learning First Alliance. "Given the ubiquitous use of handheld devices, schools now have one more tool to keep important stakeholders informed of their work, student progress, and community outreach."

In his district of 22,000 students, Young did not have the means to hire a mobile app development company, so he went online to find a less expensive alternative. After a bit of searching, he found Conduit Mobile, a do-it-yourself platform that allows users to create apps as well as mobile websites. The company handles the trickier coding and submits the app to the leading mobile marketplaces.

Young and his two-person staff quickly and easily uploaded content from the district's website, such as news and events, social media feeds, photos, minutes from board meetings, school holidays, calendars, and sports schedules and scores. The Judson ISD Connect Mobile App was launched shortly thereafter.

In all, Young's team spent 100 hours creating the app for less than \$1,000. (They were one of Conduit Mobile's first clients, so they enjoyed discounted

pricing.) Conduit currently charges around \$1,500 for start-up costs and \$100 a month for maintenance. All of the app's content feeds are from other web sources that the Judson ISD tech staff maintains, so there is no special data to manage for the app.

Today, more than 10,000 people have downloaded Judson's app. "That level of download is amazing," says Young. The app is mostly used by parents and students, with the most popular feature being the Parent Center, where students and parents log in to check grades and attendance. "We know people are using it and that's great."

And it's not just Judson residents who are recognizing the app's value; it has also been honored with several awards from tech industry organizations. But Young won't rest on his laurels. He keeps the app current by continually adding new features; next up: lunch menus.

## **Builder-for-Hire**

If you're not a do-it-yourselfer and your district has the available funds, you might want to hire an app development firm.

"Some of our administrators saw that other districts had apps and thought we should have our own," says Amanda S.F. Hartle, communications coordinator at North Hills School District in Pittsburgh, Penn. North Hills has a reputation of being forward-thinking. The district has an online academy and was the first in its area to use e-textbooks, so making an app made a lot of sense.

Hartle started working with SchoolInfoApp in October 2012 and the app was ready to launch in January. Within a few weeks, it had been downloaded more than 1,000 times. Hartle believes that its benefits are a key reason that it has been so well-embraced. For example, parents can quickly see up-to-date calendars for every school so that they instantly know if a sporting event gets rescheduled or if it's dress-up day.

"If your child has a lacrosse game at an unfamiliar district, you can open the app and tap a button for directions or a map," Hartle says. "If the game gets canceled, you'll get a push notification on your phone from the Athletics Department."

Creating the app set the district back \$2,000, and there's a \$2,000 yearly maintenance fee. However, North Hills is subsidizing the fees through advertising.

Hartle adds that updating the app is a breeze. "SchoolInfoApp grabs sports schedules from the website and goes through the site every month to see if they need to pick up anything new." The SchoolInfoApp team imports the information—athletic and event schedules, for example—into their system, all year long. School staff can make updates through an online Admin Manager or send instructions for the SchoolInfoApp support staff to handle. As a communications director, Hartle believes that the more places she can post information, the more likely it is to be read. "People have tweeted about how easy it is to find stuff on our app," she says. "And even though there are families without Internet access, it's hard to buy a phone without a data plan."

## **A More Robust Option**

Community High School District 128 in Vernon Hills, Ill., is another district at the forefront of technology integration. "We saw how much people were using our website and Facebook page, so we thought, 'How about an app?' We can put all the things you find in a million places into one spot that's digital and portable," says Mary Todoric, communications director.

Because the district has been progressive in terms of technology and social media usage, district leaders thought a mobile app was the logical next step. Once Todoric got the green light from her district's administrative council, she looked for a developer. Todoric was particularly interested in selecting a firm that she knew would be around for long-term support. She chose Mosaic by Blackboard (formerly Blackboard Mobile Central) after learning that the company, which had been focused on higher education, was looking to break into K–12.

"They made development painless," says Todoric. "We started in April 2012 and rolled out D128 Mobile in December." Todoric says the district had a lot of input in the app's look and feel, including using the newly designed district logo as a button.

Like the other district apps, D128 Mobile had hundreds of downloads within weeks and garnered a lot of positive feedback from students, staff, and the community. Todoric says it's simple to update, which she loves. "When I post news to Facebook, our homepage gets populated and that automatically populates the app."

Development costs were pretty steep, coming in at \$25,000, which included a one-time start-up fee of \$15,000 and a \$10,000 annual fee. Years two and three will run \$10,500 and \$11,025, respectively. To cover the costs, the district stopped printing and mailing its paper newsmagazine and—

perhaps fitting for this district—turned it into an e-publication.

Currently, D128 Mobile boasts 1,594 users, and Todoric can obtain plenty of useful information about them. "Blackboard Mobile provides access to everything from the number of users and what they are accessing to the types of devices they are using and the total number of runs per day," says Todoric. "Cool stuff!"

## **Innovation Within Reach**

"People assume you have to start from scratch and it's overwhelming to make an app if you're not a programmer," says Eric Lott, webmaster for Brandon School District in Ortonville, Mich. "In reality, there are a lot of tools out there, and it's really easy to design an app."

That may be hard to believe, but Lott, who teaches web design at his district's high school, insists that it is relatively painless to make a simple app that can pull in your district's Twitter feed and schedules.

Brandon Mobile went live in fall 2012 and has been downloaded more than 1,200 times. It cost the seven-school district about \$300 to develop and \$39 per month to maintain.

The Brandon Mobile App includes district news stories from the website, daily lunch menus, athletic schedules, district calendars, social networking links, video announcements from the high school, and a one-touch tap for each school's contact information. As Lott says, "It has the core stuff and contact information people would like to access quickly from their smartphones and tablets."

Lott plans to refine the app this summer by making the content less district-focused so that a user can get school-specific news, lunch menus, and other information. Lott used Conduit Mobile and echoes Young by saying the company made the process easy. "You just drag and drop, click on a module, and you're done," he says.

Although every district has unique communication needs, budgets, and technological capabilities, Lott and others have found that developing an app that engages the school community is well worth the investment. **EU**

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### **App Lessons Learned**

In "The Case for School District Apps," Cody Cunningham, the chief communications officer for the McKinney (Texas) Independent School District, shares lessons learned

from developing and launching his district's mobile app. Let Cunningham's advice shorten your district's learning curve:

Seek input from students, parents, and staff about what they want most.

Take careful consideration before asking students or in-house technology staff develop an app. Just because they can doesn't mean they are the best option.

Be cautious about hiring a firm that charges large annual recurring fees.

Don't underestimate the complexity of integrating your student information system with an app.

Involve multiple departments with emphasis on curriculum, communications, and technology.

Don't limit your research to school districts; universities and companies are generally ahead in app development.

Brand and market the app—perhaps through a communication campaign that includes posters, QR codes, a promotional video, campus giveaways, and social media.

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