

Feature Article

ACCESS DENIED – Is your school district's Home Page an electronic welcome mat or stop sign?

By Elizabeth Jiménez

Back to school season is a time when school front offices are humming with activity, switchboards are flooded with calls, students bring home notes pinned to sweaters or stuffed in backpacks, and many parents check the school district website for information about school calendars, lunch menus, dress code, attendance policies and much more. Most Superintendents in their back-to-school addresses urge principals and teachers to reach out to inform and engage parents because we know what a powerful influence they have on student success. In turn, teachers urge families to attend Back to School Night. All of these scenarios are about communication between home and school, and the flow of information between all members of the student's education team. No school official would purposely send notices home to only certain families nor refuse to take phone calls from parents who do not speak English, nor deny access to the school to students who speak a language other than English. Yet many districts exclude huge numbers of families when it comes to the staple electronic communication tool, the school district website home page.

In completing a small research project recently, I had the occasion to check the websites of the largest school districts in the United States. I was dumbfounded to see that of the five largest school systems (New York City, Los Angeles Unified, Chicago Public Schools, Miami-Dade Public Schools and Clark County Public Schools) only one district's home page had any reference link whatsoever to information in a language other than English. The New York City Department of Education website features a Welcome button in 9 different languages; **English, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish, and Urdu** which links parents and other users to key information in those languages. **Los Angeles Unified, Chicago Public Schools, Miami-Dade County Public Schools and Clark County** website home pages have no links or references to any other languages. Most astounding is that these districts have the largest student enrollments in the nation, and they have, by far, the largest enrollments of English Learners in the United States. Why would these and many other

school systems lock-out their non-English communities from the district's public portal?

Reasons and Excuses

Some web designers told me it just didn't occur to them or that no one had directed them to include language toggles or links in their design. Translation costs are often cited as well. The Digital Divide is another frequently offered explanation for not providing primary language access points on the home page. The digital divide portrays a *haves* and *have-nots* disparity between those who have the hardware and skill to access digital content and those without these tools. Like many explanations of gaps and disparities in education, the problem is described as a deficiency on the part of the students and their families. The rationale for an English-only website home page is that the "other-language" communities don't have hardware or internet access and don't know how to use either. More insidiously, former Chair of the Federal Communication Commission, Michael Powell once dismissed the notion of a digital divide by explaining that there is also a "Mercedes divide", equating computer access to owning a premium priced luxury car. His argument is that not everyone needs such items and the government has no responsibility to provide them. Census data and recent industry market data refute this widely held *have-not* notion fueled by the advent of inexpensive technologies, school and library internet access, the natural lowering of price points and the tidal wave of content from across the globe.

Electronic Exclusion

The English-only home page is an example of electronic exclusion that leaves many students and families behind without access to this portal to their future. Unlike the digital divide, electronic exclusion is not about the users' lack of equipment or knowledge and skill. Electronic exclusion is a choice, a low expectation, a narrow-mindedness on the part of the purveyors of information, which keep some communities locked out.

In the 2007-2008 school year I had the honor of working with the Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent and Board to organize and moderate an historic national two-day summit to examine issues of language acquisition, cultural equity and achievement for all students with a major focus on English Learners, Standard English Learners and Students with Disabilities (see Council of the Great Cities Schools www.cgcs.org/UE/Jan_Feb08.pdf). Over forty national experts from around the country provided expert presentations and engaged in intensive group

conversations with administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, community advocates and parent leaders. The summary of proceedings is available in English and in Spanish at <http://aplussummit.lausd.net>. Twelve work groups focused on four critical areas; Instruction, Professional Development, Policy/Assessment/Accountability, and Parent Engagement. The Parent Engagement work groups formulated eight major recommendations for true partnership between schools and parents, including the following:

Utilize various technology tools to reach parents. LAUSD can improve parent outreach by making all channels of communication available to all parents and not assume that all speakers of other languages are unable to access the internet. Make the district website accessible to all parents by describing things in parent-friendly language and including other language access on the home page. Consider opening school computer labs to families on Saturday mornings.

Great Models and Excellent Examples

There are some fine models and examples of inclusive Home Page design out there for school districts to consider such as Houston ISD (<http://www.houstonisd.org>) or Bakersfield City School District (www.bcsd.com), which toggles between English and the languages of other major community groups allowing interested users access to everything from policies to board minutes to parent advisories and district calendars. Other robust designs come from educational entities such as <http://www.colorincolorado.org/>. Some of the most accessible school district web pages like Metropolitan Nashville Public schools also provide extensive information in Spanish through a link on the home page called MNPS En Español! Boston Public Schools home page has a small Welcome reference in 8 other languages which link to key information documents and notices with basic district information that would be of particular interest to English Learner families.

District	URL	Language feature
New York City Schools	http://schools.nyc.gov/default.aspx	"Welcome" in one of 9 languages to access all posted information
Los Angeles Unified School Dist.	www.lausd.net	None
Chicago Public Schools	http://www.cps.k12.il.us/	None
Miami-Dade Public Schools	http://www.dadeschools.net/	None
Clark County School Dist.	http://www.ccsd.net/	None
Broward County Public Schools	www.browardschools.com/index.htm	"Contact Us" in Spanish, Portuguese & Haitian Creole
Houston Independent School District	http://www.houstonisd.org	Home page offers a toggle to Spanish and to Vietnamese. Lower down on the page the Student handbook is offered in 7 languages in addition to English.
The School District of Philadelphia	www.phila.k12.pa.us/	Features 7 languages posted on the home page
Dallas Independent School District	http://www.dallasisd.org/	Features a button called EN ESPANOL which immediately translates home page to Spanish
Detroit Public Schools	http://www.detroitk12.org/	None
San Diego City Unified School District	http://www.sandi.net/	Features a box on home page where users can access information in Spanish, English, or Somali
Long Beach Unified School District	http://www.lbusd.k12.ca.us/	Features buttons for Spanish and Khmer
Fresno Unified School District	http://www.fresno.k12.ca.us	None
Minneapolis Public Schools	http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us/	"Welcome" links in Hmong, Somali and Spanish. Translates welcome information to each language
Phoenix Elementary School District	http://www.phxelem.k12.az.us/	Features a link to its Strategic Plan listed in English and Spanish
Seattle Public Schools	http://www.seattleschools.org	Features 11 languages, including English posted on the home page
Garden Grove Unified School District	http://www.ggusd.k12.ca.us	The district's 4 main languages are listed under parent resources
San Francisco Unified School District	http://portal.sfusd.edu/template/default.cfm	Features extensive list of translated documents referenced on the home page
Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools	http://www.mnps.org/site3.aspx	Home page offers a toggle which translates entire home page and resources into Spanish.
Boston Public Schools	http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/	Features a welcome box, front and center on the home page in 8 languages
Bakersfield City School District	http://www.bcsd.com/	Features a button called Páginas en español which toggles to an excellent, extensive Spanish version of the home page
Virtual Pre-K Chicago	https://www.virtuak.org/en/help/national	Features user friendly, toggle between English and Spanish including most headings and all information

Bring in External Expertise

Districts looking for guidance might access lowest-common-denominator: Building a Bilingual Website: A Quick Case-Study and the University of Arizona Learning Technologies Center Found in Translation: Creating Bilingual Websites. Basic marketing guidelines can help districts accomplish Electronic Inclusion.

- 1) Design other-language access functionality into the initial home page blue print.
- 2) Work with a translation team to surface and problem-solve issues such as other fonts for various writing systems, fitting the size and length of translated sentences into the corresponding space.
- 3) Articulate clearly for web designers who are your intended audiences, what do your web users most want to know, what do they need to know, and what we want to them to know about your district or school.
- 4) Follow the lead of smart businesses and take a look at the “*competition*” including school districts and non-education bilingual websites as well. Extending the school district website to all communities may be a project that would benefit from some external consultation to interact with and coordinate the various language community interests, examine cost/benefits, and to raise questions about firmly held beliefs.

Conclusion

If parent engagement and inclusion is a true core value then welcoming all parents must be clearly communicated as a major priority to every front office, every guidance counselor, bus driver, health and safety officer, cafeteria worker, and to the webmaster as well.

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