

# Defining the Emerging Role of Social Learning Tools to Connect Students, Parents & Educators

## A Special White Paper based upon the Speak Up 2011 National Findings

Each year, Project Tomorrow®, a national education nonprofit organization, facilitates the annual Speak Up National Research Project. As part of this initiative, we track increasing growth in the use of emerging technologies to address the specific needs and aspirations of students, parents and educators for 21st century learning environments. This year, Project Tomorrow has partnered with Schoolwires, Inc. to create a special white paper on the role of tech-enabled social learning within K-12 education. Increasingly, innovative schools and districts are tapping into the power of social learning tools to create more engaged learning environments for students, share school information effectively and efficiently, and increase teacher productivity. In this white paper we examine the Speak Up 2011 survey data collected from over 416,000 K-12 students, parents and educators to explore how social learning is being used by these education stakeholders and to better understand the value proposition for incorporating such tools into the classroom.

Key findings from this analysis of the Speak Up data include:

- 1. Students, teachers, administrators and parents are increasingly recognizing the value of social learning in both their personal and professional lives.**
- 2. Students, in particular, have heightened aspirations for more effectively leveraging social learning tools to enhance their engagement in the learning process, access more interesting and relevant educational content, tap into additional opportunities for collaboration with peers, advisors and mentors and overall, increase their academic productivity.**
- 3. Despite this strong value proposition, school site administrators and parents continue to have lingering concerns about social networking, Internet access and the role of social learning tools.**
- 4. Within the administration ranks, Speak Up data has revealed a new cohort of school site administrators that is particularly interested in leveraging social learning more extensively within instruction. Those administrators are paving a new path for the innovative use of these tools within their schools and districts.**

As a framework for this discussion of social learning, we will focus on four research questions in the white paper:

- How do we define “social learning” in an education setting?
- Is there an unmet demand for the greater use of social learning within schools?
- What is the value proposition around social learning?
- How can new solutions mitigate some of the concerns that still exist about social learning?



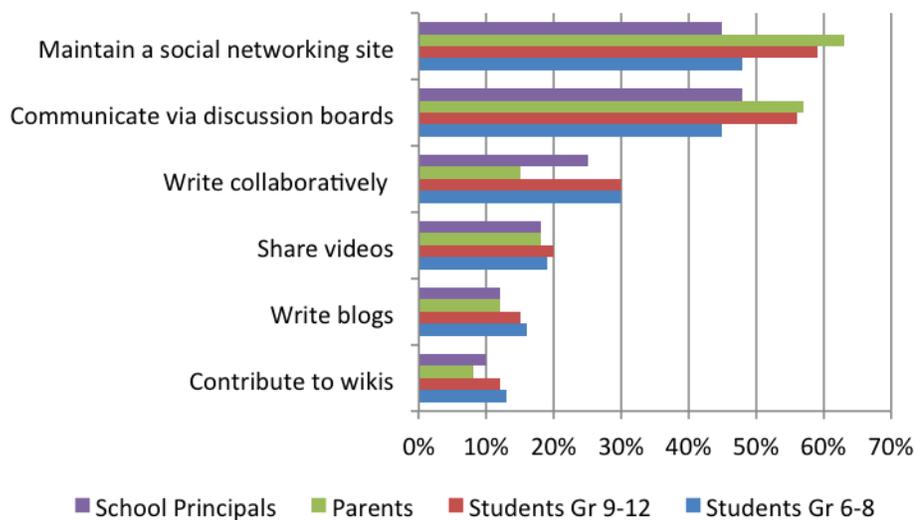
## How do we define “social learning” in an education setting?

In the Speak Up 2009 National Report, *“Creating Our Future: Students Speak Up about their Vision for 21st Century Learning,”* we introduced social-based learning as a key component within the students’ vision. At that time we defined social learning around students’ aspirations for leveraging a wide range of emerging communications and collaboration tools to create and personalize their own networks of experts to inform their education process. Since then the concept of social learning has expanded to include the use of specially designed technology tools to help students develop 21st century workplace skills, engage parents more fully in the learning process, support teachers’ productivity, and provide unique opportunities for the globalization of students’ personal learning networks, all in a safe environment. Inherent in this new definition is a strong need for ensuring information privacy, appropriate use and user safety. In short, emerging technology tools now enable students, parents and educators to create learning networks for collaboration that leverage the best aspects of social media and social networking tools, but with greater efficiency, effectiveness and security.

## Is there an unmet demand for the greater use of social learning within schools?

This evolution in the concept of academic social learning mirrors the increased use of social media and social networking tools in our society. As noted in Figure 1, students are not the only ones currently tapping into social media tools in their personal lives; parents and administrators are also active users of social tools today.

Figure 1: How are you using social media tools for your personal interests?



Speak Up 2011 National Results

The growth in the use of discussion boards and social networking sites over the past three years is particularly noteworthy, especially in terms of parent and administrator use. For example, in 2008, only 27 percent of parents and 12 percent of school site administrators indicated that they were social networking users. Comparatively in 2011, almost two-thirds of parents now regularly update their social networking site and 45 percent of principals are doing the same. This increased familiarity with the tools and a new understanding of the benefits of increased communication and collaboration helps to establish a solid foundation for the use of similar tools within the school environment.

Students are very familiar with the advantages of social learning through the tools they use to support their own learning and pursuit of personal interests outside of school. The students regularly note through the Speak Up surveys their dissatisfaction with not being able to tap into social networking tools within the school day to support learning. When asked how their school could improve technology use, students point out that if the school is unwilling to provide access to Facebook, the following also represent good solutions:

- Let me access school projects from any computer at home or at school (46%)
- Provide tools for me to communicate with my classmates (39%)
- Provide tools to help me organize my schoolwork (38%)
- Provide tools for me to communicate with my teacher (34%)
- Provide tools for me to collaborate with my classmates on schoolwork (32%)

“If a safe method of social networking were to exist, I believe that there is no greater tool to create a sense of community or information sharing.”

— Guidance Counselor (AL)

“A school social learning environment would be fantastic. It needs to be seamless though and simulate the latest social media that kids already use. People expect their digital works to overlap and be immediately accessible.”

— High School Administrator (WI)



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As pointed out in last year's Speak Up National Report, today's students are adept at adapting technology tools to address their needs. Since many schools do not provide their students with tools to facilitate school projects or student collaborations, many students (30 percent of students in grades 6-8 and 46 percent of students in grades 9-12) are already using Facebook regularly to collaborate with their classmates on school projects. So while many schools are banning access to tools such as Facebook and YouTube during the school day, students are increasingly leveraging these tools outside of school, not only to support their personal interactions with friends, but also to address their academic needs.

When asked to design the ultimate school, students back up their desires for a more tech-enabled, collaborative learning process with a wish list of essential social learning tools. In addition to school-wide access to the Internet, students are also interested in safe chat rooms where they can discuss course materials with their classmates (51 percent), tools to support personal organization of schoolwork (45 percent), school or class focused collaboration tools such as blogs, wikis and social networking sites (44 percent), and school portals that provide timely access to key school and class information (41 percent). Unfortunately, not all of these key essentials are supported by school leaders. Many administrators are still stymied by how to create social learning environments that are safe, secure and efficient. Real concerns around student safety and the protection of personal information and student data still exist. Additionally, new challenges are emerging to further cloud the horizon, including how to monitor the use of these tools for academic purposes, issues of digital equity in out-of-school access to online tools, and their teachers' lack of skills to effectively use such tools to support learning goals.

While these challenges are daunting, some school and district administrators are exploring the use of technology enabled social learning tools and their experiences and insights are a valuable source of input for the national discussion.

## What is the value proposition around social learning?

To better understand the views of our nation's administrators on social learning, Speak Up 2011 posed the following open-ended question to school principals:

Many school leaders are interested in the potential of social media and social networking tools to create a greater sense of community and facilitate richer communications and collaborations. But there is still some hesitancy about the use of these tools in a school setting. Imagine that you could develop a "face-book type" social networking environment for your school that utilizes the best features of the popular sites but also be safe, secure and contained. Would this be valuable to you? How would your teachers, students and parents use such an environment? Would it be used just for academics or to connect extracurricular and other community stakeholders into your school as well?

Go ahead – be the next social networking innovator and give us input as to what would really work for schools!

The analysis of these narrative responses provided an important glimpse into the value proposition of social learning from a school site administrator perspective, some of whom are starting to use social learning as a tool for increasing student engagement and community connectivity. In general, the administrators identified seven key benefits of leveraging social learning tools within school as noted in Table 1.

Table 1: The Social Learning Value Proposition

Benefits of Social Learning	Administrator's Perspective
<b>1. School information is shared more effectively and efficiently with parents</b>	"Our parents would enjoy following Twitter-like real time news regarding events on the campus such as road closures, special on-campus events, etc." <i>District Administrator (GA)</i>
<b>2. Helps to extend the learning beyond the school day hours</b>	"Site-based social networking would be very useful with teacher-parent communications as well as student-teacher after school communications. Students that have questions about homework could send their teacher a quick note asking for help right when they need it." <i>High School Principal (OH)</i>

"I think social networking could be implemented effectively if it is being used on a personal level first by the teachers. That will allow the teachers to realize the potential and become more creative in their methods and create pedagogy that is more applicable to this social learning environment."

— High School Administrator (DC)

"There are teachers that use these social media sites themselves and see the value of these as ways to grow professionally, so making the transition to a site as a tool for learning should not be a quantum leap."

— High School Principal (AZ)



<b>3. Increases parental engagement in the learning process and student achievement</b>	<p>"I think the greatest potential use would be to get parents more involved as teachers for their kids. The teacher could post a list of skills being covered in class with corresponding links that the parents could use at home." <i>Elementary School Principal (KS)</i></p>
<b>4. Provides opportunities for more interactive and personalized learning in class</b>	<p>"This would provide more freedom to explore the possibility of providing true individualized instruction to our students through a variety of modalities to tap into each student's potential. School should not be one size fits all." <i>Instructional Technology Coordinator (DC)</i></p>
<b>5. Provides opportunities for innovative student to student collaborations</b>	<p>"Students need to have engaging opportunities to respond to each other's work, writing and ideas using teacher-facilitated blogs and websites. This would give our students an audience for publishing their work and the social interactions they need." <i>Elementary School Principal (CA)</i></p>
<b>6. Increases educator productivity</b>	<p>"It could really help teachers and administrators get a view of the whole student, from attendance to problem areas. All types of data could be sent from one teacher to another if there are issues regarding a particular student." <i>High School Principal (Guam)</i></p>
<b>7. Enables stronger connectivity across the entire school community</b>	<p>"The number one benefit that I can see is the enhanced communications between students, teachers and parents. I would use it to connect our stakeholders and build support for our school in the community." <i>Elementary School Principal (WI)</i></p>

Speak Up 2011 National Results

The value proposition for social networking extends beyond the schoolhouse also. Community organizations that support education are also intrigued and encouraged by the potential of social learning.

*"The Collaborative for Academic Excellence plays an integral role in connecting K-20 stakeholders with the business and workforce partners in our region. We are excited about using Schoolwires' Nimbus™ as a platform for creating an online community that enhances student success by providing a medium for college and career preparation; mentoring and internship opportunities; professional development and peer collaboration in support of project based learning. Our goal is to use Nimbus to bridge the silos that often exist between key stakeholders from the supply side (the educator/education system) and demand side (business and workforce training providers). Focusing on the supply and demand components together will not only influence academic, workforce and community development, but will also lay the foundation for academic excellence in our region."*

*Dr. Armando Aguirre, CEO El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence*

Correspondingly, administrators are increasingly identifying elements of social learning in their school or district visions and plans for 21st century learning. Each year, the Speak Up survey asks administrators to identify the tools or strategies they think hold the greatest potential for increasing student success and achievement. In the Speak Up 2011 results, four key components of social learning were identified by both school site and district level administrators as essentials in their ultimate 21st century school vision. What is very encouraging is the alignment of several of the administrators' views with the aspirations of their students as noted in Figure 2.

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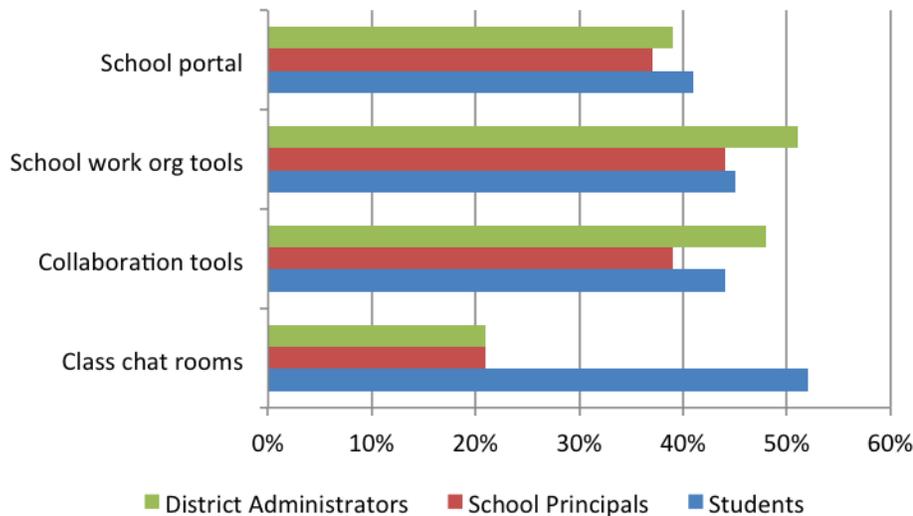
Nimbus is a safe social learning environment where students, teachers and parents can work together using instructional and social learning tools that support a collaborative experience. And Nimbus offers a protected environment that keeps participants safe, with stringent controls and filters to keep communication structured and secure.

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Figure 2: Designing the Ultimate School – what technology would increase student success?



Speak Up 2011 National Results

It should be noted that administrators who choose these options for their “ultimate school” are not just the tech-savvy education leaders who are typically on the forefront of emerging technologies. Rather, this cohort of administrators who value social learning is a board-based coalition representing administrators from elementary, middle and high schools with an average 4 to 10 years of administrative experience. Most noteworthy is that 62% of these administrators self-assess their own tech skills as average compared to their peers. As administrators become personally acquainted with the benefits of social learning, they are more likely to appreciate the potential value of leveraging these tools within their school or district.

## How can new solutions mitigate some of the concerns that still exist about social learning?

Despite this strong value proposition for social learning, some lingering concerns surface when the discussion evolves from vision to implementation. Front and center in this discussion is the need for schools to develop new policies around the safe and appropriate use of social media. As a parallel to the benefits of social learning, the administrators note seven key challenges they face with the effective implementation of social learning. Those challenges are as follows:

### 1. Protecting student safety

- Over the past few years, the term “social networking” has gotten a black eye in the media as not providing a safe sanctuary for student-to-student interactions. A school-based social learning platform must first and foremost provide a high degree of safety to assuage parental concerns. Parents’ concern about the use of commercial social networking tools for cyber bullying (57%) is at an all-time high per the latest Speak Up results.

### 2. Ensuring student information and data privacy

- Parents are also concerned about the privacy of their child’s personal information (72%). With the wide variety of student data becoming more available online, the benefits of access to that data must be balanced with appropriate mechanisms to ensure privacy and data protection.

### 3. Monitoring for academic use only

- Students themselves are increasingly interested in social learning environments that are dedicated to academic or schoolwork discussions and are free of the “drama” of the personal sites. Many schools and districts however are struggling with how to craft effective policies for both students and teachers on the differentiation between school-focused and personal social networking. As more schools and districts explore this space, we expect to see more fully developed, responsible use policies in place around social learning.

### 4. Providing access to all students

- As more educational content and school resources are provided online, the issue of digital equity is again in the headlines. If our goal is to have a more connected community of students, parents and teachers, it is imperative that all students and parents have an equal opportunity to participate. Increasingly, administrators are exploring the use of mobile devices with wireless and/or 3G/4G

“A social networking environment will allow teachers to communicate and share best practices efficiently that will help to improve student learning. This would be also be valuable to me as an administrator. It would help with collaboration among school administrators, teachers, staff and students in terms of popular sites, research-based articles etc. We would have one for academics and one for extracurricular activities.”

— Elementary School Administrator (Guam)

“This would be an outstanding tool for schools. The popularity of social networking sites in the real world should be transferred to the classroom. This tool could be used for all facets of school: instruction, interaction, collaboration and communications.

— Middle School Instructional Tech Coordinator (VA)



capabilities to provide out-of-school connectivity for their students and families. In fact, per the Speak Up results, 55 percent of high school students say that their home Internet connection is now through a mobile device.

#### 5. Teachers' lack of skills in effectively using these tools

- This challenge is similar to what we see with the implementation of digital content or online learning. Administrators, however, are supporting teachers' acquisition of these skills through more tech-enabled professional learning communities. 32 percent are providing blogs and wikis for teachers to share best practices and 30 percent are providing online tools to help teachers collaborate more effectively with each other. Administrators' interest in this area is also noted in their requirements list for new teachers; 45 percent say that they want new hires to have experience using social media tools within instruction.

#### 6. Students' aversion to adults in their social networking spaces

- Replicating the old backyard club house with its hand-painted sign "No adults allowed," the commercial social networking sites such as Facebook are primarily the domain of the students who do not want to see parents or teachers infiltrate that space. Therefore, setting up a school-based social learning environment where students, parents and teachers are equally invited and comfortable provides a distinct advantage to the adaption of Facebook for similar purposes.

#### 7. Ability for an academic tool to satisfactorily mimic commercial product features

- A real challenge however is to ensure that the features and functionality that students are accustomed to with Facebook is available through these new academic social learning environments. Having similar attributes is proof of credibility for students and ensures greater acceptance and sustained use.

"These tools would allow teachers to have conversations with students beyond the school day to support work in class, questions about homework, socratic seminars, discussions about class topics, etc."

— Curriculum Administrator (NE)

## Summary

The explosion of social networking tools within the past decade has tweaked the imagination and excitement of educators — what if we could use similar tools to more effectively engage our students in learning, to share school information more efficiently with parents, and even increase teachers' abilities to collaborate and learn from each other? While the potential for leveraging social learning tools to achieve these goals is still very real, both parents and administrators continue to have lingering concerns about student safety, data privacy and appropriate use of the tools. New research provided through this white paper from the Speak Up 2011 National Project illuminates a new way of thinking about the role of social learning in the classroom. The findings also provide a roadmap for administrators that are interested in exploring this direction to share information more efficiently, to provide new learning opportunities both in and out of the classroom, to increase parental engagement and facilitate strong collaborations between teachers and students. The time is now for schools to take advantage of these innovative social learning tools.

## About Speak Up 2011

Speak Up is a national initiative of Project Tomorrow, the nation's leading education nonprofit organization dedicated to the empowerment of student voices in education. Each year, the Speak Up National Research Project polls K-12 students, parents and educators about the role of technology for learning in and out of school. This survey represents the largest collection of authentic, unfiltered stakeholder voice on digital learning. Since fall 2003, over 2.6 million K-12 students, parents, teachers, librarians, principals, technology leaders and district administrators have shared their views and ideas through Speak Up. K-12 educators, higher education faculty, business and policy leaders report that they regularly use the Speak Up data to inform federal, state and local education programs.

In fall 2011, Project Tomorrow surveyed 330,117 K-12 students, 44,006 parents, 36,477 teachers, 2,025 librarians, 814 district administrators, 3,319 school administrators representing 5616 public and private schools from 1,250 districts. Schools from urban (24 percent), suburban (41 percent) and rural (35 percent) communities are represented. Over one-half of the schools that participated in Speak Up 2010 are Title I eligible (an indicator of student population poverty). The Speak Up 2011 surveys were available online for input between October 10th and December 23rd 2011.

The Speak Up surveys included foundation questions about the use of technology for learning, 21st century skills and schools of the future, as well as emerging technologies (online learning, mobile devices and digital content), science instruction and STEM career exploration. In addition, educators shared the challenges they encounter integrating technology into their schools and districts and how budget challenges have



impacted these decisions. The data results are a convenience sample; schools and districts self-select to participate and facilitate the survey-taking process for their students, educators and parents. Any school or school district in the United States is eligible to participate in Speak Up. In preparation for data analysis, the survey results are matched with school level demographic information, such as Title I, school locale (urban, rural and suburban), and ethnicity selected from the Core of Common Data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov/>). Speak Up data are cross-consulted with NCES statistics to ensure that data represent nation-wide school demographics. The data is analyzed using standard cross-tab analysis. Key variables (such as internet and device access) are tested for statistical significance.

## About Project Tomorrow

Project Tomorrow® is the nation's leading education nonprofit organization dedicated to the empowerment of student voices in education. With 16 years of experience in the K-12 education sector, Project Tomorrow regularly provides consulting and research support about key trends in K-12 science, math and technology education to school districts, government agencies, businesses and higher education.

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### The Schoolwires story

Schoolwires is dedicated to K-12 education, and to the people who are part of every local school community — students, families, teachers, administrators, and supporters of education. From the beginning, we've believed that a successful school district is a product of total community involvement. That's why our Web-based solutions are expressly designed to connect K-12 communities with the information, services and people they need to achieve their district goals. For more than 10 years, our intuitive technologies have been helping administrators and educators, students and parents, communicate and collaborate like never before — to come together around success.

Today, more than 10 million users in the U.S. and China rely on our website, content management and safe social learning solutions to drive engagement in the classroom, locally and across the globe. We're proud to be a part of that. And we remain committed to helping K-12 communities extend their local reach and transcend the boundaries of their districts so that individuals everywhere can achieve their full potential.



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[sales@schoolwires.com](mailto:sales@schoolwires.com)

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