

Back to The Future

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Perez has been feeling blue. Maybe it's all the snow, creeping into the top of my Uggs or my flakey complexion. Try exfoliating with this wind chill. Anyway, I decided the best way to cheer up would be to look at all the CPS school websites and see what's new at each of the schools.

I was shocked to find that the electronic window to many of these schools had lots of cobwebs and grime on them. Some of them were last updated when my assistant, Briitany, still had fashion sense and I, Perez, was a nobody.

The district has made claims that parent and community outreach is very important. To prove this, they have put up a smiley-face website (<http://www.iamcps.org/>) that celebrates the district. It reminds me of the beginning scene of *Blue Velvet* where pictures of the town seem idyllic, before we look beneath the shimmering surface to find the troubling dark world that thrives there. It is not transparency that is offered here, but misdirection and omission.

But look at the local school websites and a different world appears (<http://www.cps-k12.org/schools/Schools.asp>). Too many schools have not touched the website for years. If I look at the calendars at some of these sites, I can relive 2004. If CPS cares about having schools be a part of their individual communities, monitoring these websites and requiring that they be current would be a good start. Each website, at the bottom of the home page should have a line that says, "last updated" with a date from the current decade. A visitor can't tell whether they are reading current information or the latest reform lingo from 10 years ago.

Another thing that curls my extensions is the content these websites offer. It tells a lot when the only link that works goes to the sports page. Doesn't anyone have a fashion club or a journalism page? A visitor should have certain things they can see. The school mission, the philosophy, the physical setting and building, the administration and staff, how the school is organized, its academics, activities, parent connections, help for students. There are more "under construction" signs on these websites than on all the half-completed buildings strewn around the district.

And finally, the design of these websites is eclectic at best. It's like shopping at a Big Lots instead of Saks. Some of the websites are only garish. But others are confusing, difficult to read, or poorly designed. I certainly want every school to have its unique personality on display. Look at what that's done for me! But that can be done and still respect the visitor.

Why bother about this? Because the disarray of these sites demonstrates a lack of respect for the websites' audiences. If we want parents and others to use Power School and Dashboard and other tools for communication, there must be a reason for them to visit the

school's website. But like too much with this administration, what happens at the school level gets lost. Oh sure, they'll find someone to blame for the problem. But what signals have they sent to schools that these websites matter. Have they provided a media or technology person at every school? Have they offered training or help in website development for every school? And does any administrator ever look at these websites?

At the best websites (like mine) people keep coming back because there is always something interesting or topical or magical to find with each visit.

My disclaimer. There are some wonderful, exciting, excellent websites among these school websites. Take some time and explore all of them. If your school does not measure up, ask why not. Start demanding help – in the way of resources and personnel and training.