# Improve communications and safety with **Digital Signage for K-12 Schools**

**DIGITAL SIGNAGE WHITE PAPER**

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We're here to help! If you have any questions about your application or our products, please contact us at **800.572.4935** or **salesteam@visix.com**.

# Introduction

Schools today have a lot on their plates, and many are taking to technology to help them grab their students' attention and communicate more effectively with a generation already immersed in tech.

Just walk around your school and take a look. Chances are that the majority of students are using phones or tablets – looking at videos, texting, searching for and sharing information of all kinds. So it makes sense to engage, educate and alert them with tools they're already comfortable with.

Primary schools, junior highs, high schools and even entire school districts have to be current as they communicate with students, parents, teachers and staff. Digital signage allows you to be up-to-date with attractive colorful still and moving images, and keep everyone informed and in the loop.

Show announcements, alerts, daily lunch menus, library notices, student activities, sporting events – there is no end to the types of things you can present quickly, efficiently and affordable using digital signage.

Streamline and unify communications in your school or district:
- Post news and announcement in real time
- Change what's being displayed often, so it's always fresh and exciting
- Attract your audience with bright, dynamic content
- Reduce paper, waste and printing costs
- Replace those outdated and messy bulletin boards
- Use PowerPoint to easily create content
- Broadcast safety announcements and instructions

# What is Digital Signage?

Simply put, it's using any kind of digital display to present information in a rotating playlist, usually large screens. These screens are placed where people often congregate – lobbies, hallways, cafeterias and outside offices. And if you use a web-based digital signage platform, you can extend your reach to sites all over your school district.

These digital screens are much more appealing than lots of flyers and posters, and don't need to be taken down later and recycled – messages simply go away when the event, or cafeteria menu, or announcement is no longer valid. Digital signage is clean and green.



And because the displays are digital, you can also have movement – images that slowly pan using the "Ken Burns Effect", video, motion graphics; and can even add audio, if that makes sense for where a display is located.

Plus, the upcoming generations are used to receiving information in this way. Just go to any local shopping mall and watch the teens – they see and react to promotions on digital signage, and often go right in and buy what they see on the screens.
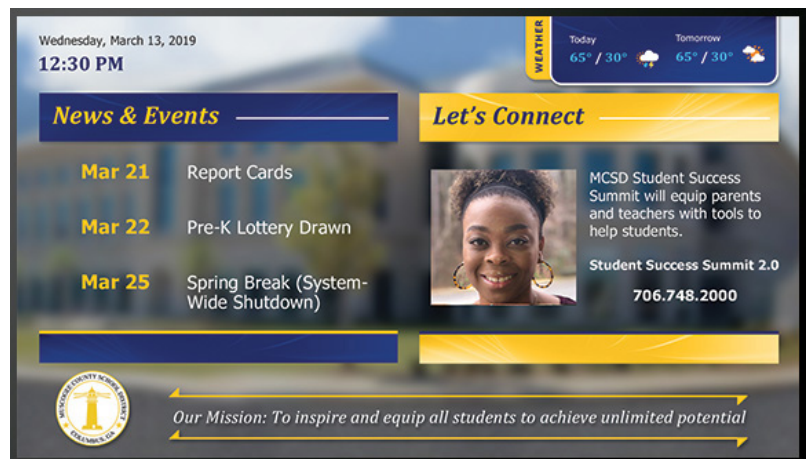
All digital signage systems have three main components:

### Display
This could be an LCD screen or projection display, electronic billboard, scrolling message board, video wall, or even desktop PC monitors. Nowadays, digital signage has also extended its reach to include mobile devices like smartphones and tablets. Someday soon you'll probably also be able to access wearable computers and whatever other new technology is being developed.

### Software
This is how you create, manage, approve and schedule your messages to your displays. Choose how long each message stays up, when the message should retire from the playlist and which messages go to which displays. You can choose a single image that takes up the whole screen, or use multiple windows on screen that include tickers, animations, news feeds and more, all working seamlessly in a unified screen layout that reinforces your brand and your message. A single person with a computer can accomplish all this, or many people at different locations can interact with the system across a network.

### Hardware
These are the machines that distribute and play back your content – anything from network-distributed media players to individual stand-alone players showing PowerPoint slides. In a networked environment, content can be pushed to multiple players at once, or content can be pulled from a server.
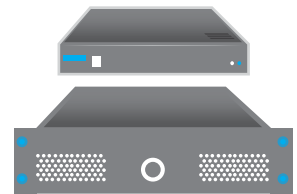
## The Benefits of Digital Signage

Timely, good-looking information on displays around your school or district makes you look 21st century, allows you to react in real time to the changing world inside and outside the school, and enables coordinated campaigns that gets the information people need to the right place at the right time. Digital signage is dynamic, has zero printing and disposal costs, and – key for educational facilities – allows instant safety alerts across the entire building, campus or district.

### For Schools
- Manage your communications from one place, with one set of standards
- Unite your school campus, or your district, with common branding
- Improve workflows for more efficient communications
- Target specific groups when and where they need to be targeted
- Increase participation in events and after-school activities
- Improve connections between teachers, students and admin
- Eliminate mass emails by pushing important information out to displays

### For Students
- Engage and inform with dynamic content
- Recognize student achievement publicly
- Increase school spirit and sense of community
- Promote students' efforts – push extracurricular activities like athletics, drama productions, art club, student organizations, yearbook, etc.
- Reach different learning styles by using different types of media

# Planning Your Strategy

It may seem like a lot to deal with, but if you take a little time to define your goals and understand the possibilities of a digital signage system, you'll save a lot of time.

### The Right People
Many schools simply put management of a digital signage system in the IT department, figuring that it's all computer stuff. While they may be important to successfully deploying and maintaining your system, they will probably not be the ones who use it on a daily basis.

Include everyone who might contribute content in the early stages. This could be teachers, student reps, marketing, HR, admin, web staff, faculty heads, purchasing agents – even your security team. Getting everyone involved and on the same page early can give you insights you might not have had, and gives everyone a sense of ownership in the new system. It's crucial to get buy-in at every level, or people won't use your digital signage system to its fullest potential.

### The Right Goals
What is it that you want to achieve? Outline these goals in as much detail as possible – this will help clarify workflows implementing and using the system, and help you figure out how to measure return on investment once the system is up and running.

Think about how people will use your digital signage system, and what their objectives might be. Once these are clear, consider how it will operate within your school or district. What kind of content will be displayed? Who creates and approves it? Where are those approval standards housed? Where is the hardware going to be and who will maintain and upgrade it? Who manages the software?

Write up a detailed project plan with key action items, timeframes and resources. The more you can cover in advance, the fewer unwelcome surprises, like unexpected costs or delays, will hit you later. Consider things like:

- Where the displays will go
  - Think about traffic flow past them – high traffic areas get more views
  - Placement – putting them too high makes them hard to see or interact with
- What kind of content to use
  - Should you use static images or moving ones? What about video or news feeds?
  - Do you want a color scheme to integrate into surroundings?
  - Should you use audio? (This only makes sense in areas where sound will not be intrusive)
- IT issues
  - Connectivity
  - Bandwidth
  - Network security policies
- Potential revenue sources
  - Grants
  - Advertising from student or faculty organizations and events
  - Advertising from local businesses your students and staff frequent
- Outsourced services
  - Content creation
  - Paid data subscriptions
- Crisis communication plan
- Future expansion of the system

## The Right Infrastructure

Get a qualified IT person involved right from the beginning, and have them do a survey of power, network connectivity and IT security policies for every single location you want to place a digital display in. You wouldn't want to purchase and hang a screen, only to find out later that there's no way to get power or content to it.

## The Right Budget

You need to think about more than just initial costs, and about the foreseeable future – try to budget for 18-24 months, at least. What about software and hardware upgrades in the future, or additional displays and bandwidth as your system expands. What about training your users – at the beginning but also on an ongoing basis. Will you hire designers to periodically refresh your look? And think about technical support costs.

A closed or inflexible system will lock you in, making it difficult to change configurations when you need to. Your digital signage system is sure to attract the attention of other schools, or departments, and soon they will want a piece of the action. Don't box yourself in at the start – it will end up costing you more time and money in the long run. It's better to have a single, well-thought-out system that can grow, than creating a series of smaller, ad hoc systems that have to somehow link together.

## The Right Funding

You probably aren't on your own here – there are numerous resources available for funding a comprehensive digital signage system. Grants, donations, joint ventures with businesses – these are all ways to supplement your costs and get the system you want and need.

When a digital signage system is only used to advertise school events, those in control of budgets can look at it as an unnecessary, even frivolous expense. But a digital signage system is also an alert system for emergency communications, and this is something school boards can get behind. Administrators can make the case that this is an essential tool for your school.

In fact, there are federal funds available for the US Department of Homeland Security (in cooperation with FEMA) and the US Department of Justice (through the COPS – Community Oriented Policing Services – program and Secure Our Schools). These grants are provided through local law enforcement agencies and can offset up to 50% of equipment purchasing costs for systems that enhance school safety and preparedness.

There may also be state distance-learning funds available for schools that need to communicate with facilities on the outskirts of a district. It's also worthwhile to look into technology-related grants on the federal or state level.

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You might even look closer to home – the local municipality, or library, might be interested in collaborating on a community-wide digital signage system.

Then there's the private sector – apply to foundations and philanthropic organizations, as well as corporate sponsors and local businesses.

Leveraging as many of these funding sources as possible can end up drastically reducing costs, and enable you to get the digital signage system you want.

# Choosing a System

Again, work a lot on the front end to save yourself headaches later. Do some research and get a clear picture of your options before you buy anything. And doing things in the right order really helps in the long run.

### Software First, Hardware Second
A local company has offered you a great deal on flat screen displays, but if you don't know how you'll be managing your content, hold off on that purchase. It's the software that people will be interacting with to create content and run your digital signage system, so make sure the hardware supports the software, not the other way around.

If your system is going to live on just one computer and be run by just one person, you might really limit yourself in terms of flexibility and expansion. A web-based system, or purchasing a licensing agreement, enables more people to participate, and gets more variety in the process and the type of content you can deliver. The more people who get involved and get excited, the better overall for the long-term success of your digital signage system.

Consider these points when choosing which software to run:

- It needs to be user-friendly - easy to use, easy to learn and easy to update
- It needs easy import options and/or high-quality content creation tools
- It should have day-part scheduling and automatic message retirement
- It should include alert notification capabilities, preferably CAP-compliant alerts
- It needs to meet the hierarchy you've already worked out in your plan – allow multiple contributors and separate content approvers, and enable both centralized deployment and individual department access
- It needs to meet your technical requirements – file types and data feeds you've already determined you want to use (like supporting EMS, 25Live, Rave Mobile, Blackboard Connect, or other common campus systems you use or want to use).

Also think about the software vendor. Are they primarily a software company or do they just dabble in it? Do they understand digital signage for schools? Will they offer ongoing support and services? Do they have credible references?

### Hardware is an Investment
Buying cheap hardware might save you a bit of money initially, but could cost you more in the long run. However, you don't want to get locked into a single vendor or some proprietary hardware. Your software provider should either be able to supply you with industry-standard hardware, or supply you with the proper specs.

Every year, hardware value depreciates, and things are no longer built to last. Operating systems update and change, I/O interfaces evolve, and physical components fail. Make sure your machines are flexible and adaptable enough to still be of use to you in a few years' time, and as your needs change. Otherwise, you'll have to budget in equipment replacement costs, adding to the overall cost of your system.

### Pilot First
Before launching your system everywhere, run a pilot program in an isolated environment. This lets you evaluate the software and hardware, as well as your processes and workflows. It also lets you evaluate how your content is being received, and what changes you might want to make before rolling out your digital signage school- or district-wide.

This even allows you to test out different branded layouts and content templates, so you look fantastic on day one of the total deployment. You'll see which designs work best, and if your content creators need some design coaching.

It's best to run a pilot for 60-90 days, getting feedback from all stakeholders during the run, and then check in with your digital signage vendor to go over what was successful and what needs adjustment.

# Tailor Content to Your Audiences

Different audiences need different content. Elementary schools need to keep parents in the loop and give their students a sense of community. High schools need to remind busy teens of things like test dates or school events, or promote sports or drama offerings. Think about what you have to promote, and who needs to see it.

- Advertise events during and after school
- Reinforce morning announcements with targeted reminders throughout the day
- Showcase student work and achievements
- Support arts and athletics programs
- Remind students of deadlines, test dates and permission slips
- Promote community programs and volunteer opportunities
- Publish college recruiting information

In addition to what and who, you should consider where your displays are and what sort of content would work best there.

...In hallways, where students go several times a day, display announcements and reminders, countdowns to the next class time, promotions for field trips and student activities, holiday greetings – anything they might need reminding of on a regular basis.

...In classrooms, put up the morning announcements, student recognition, test scores, college application deadlines, announcements for upcoming events, and the like.

...In the cafeteria, show menus and daily specials, nutritional information and advice for eating well.

...In libraries, mention new releases, show library rules and procedures, promote literature used in classes during the year, or display a map to aid students in navigating the library.

...In the gym or stadium, promote upcoming sporting events, practice schedules, or anti-smoking and -drug campaigns.

...In the auditorium, display information related to assembly topics, advertise theatrical shows, announce guest speakers, promote local events, display informative announcements to parents and the public, and show highlights from previous events.

...In the faculty lounge, show scheduling changes, deadlines, and training programs.

Think about traffic flows in different areas – students are in class all day and in the hallways several times throughout the day, while parents and the public may only come to sporting or auditorium events once in a while.
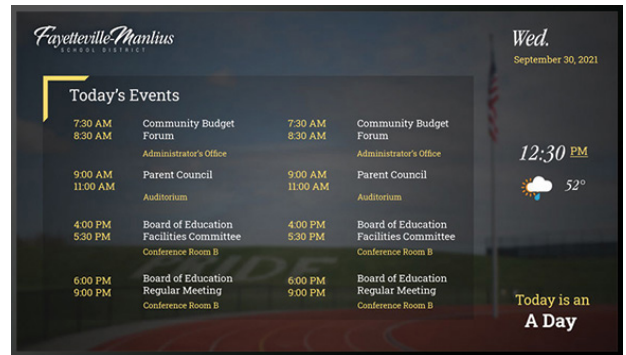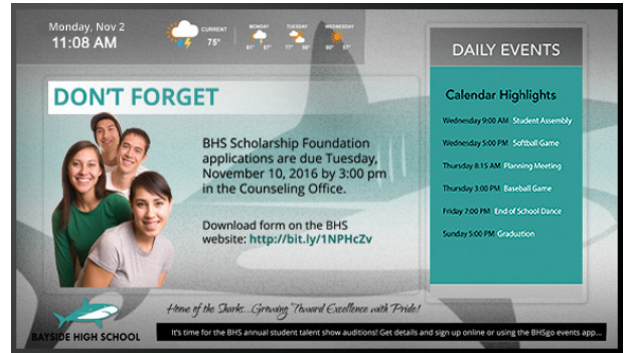
## Grab Their Attention

You need to show timely, relevant information to keep your audience looking. In a very short while, your audience will become used to getting news and updates from your digital signage system. But first you have to get their attention with visual hooks.

Seriously consider using auto-updating messages and ticker feeds. After an initial set-up, these continue refreshing their content automatically. Your audience always gets the most current information, and as they become reliant on screens for this info, they'll be sure to see your other messages.

Some examples:
- Day, date and time
- Weather
- News headlines
- Event schedules
- Webpages and intranets
- Social media feeds
- RSS feeds
- Excel and data

# Get Interactive

Today, it seems nearly everyone is interacting with electronic devices – smartphones, tablets, kiosks. We are used to touching screens to get what we need. So, it makes sense to use interactive screens in your digital signage system:

- You have a single source for lots of information
- Your audience chooses what is relevant to them
- It alleviates the burden of support staff
- There are no printing costs, and no waste
- It's clean and modern

### Interactive Wayfinding & Directories

These are touchable maps that let your audience be self-serve when it comes to getting where they need to go. These can be for a single building, a school campus, or an entire school district. People know who they want to see, and the interactive screen lets them find where they need to go and how to get there.

### Menu Boards

In a cafeteria, you have only a short time to get your audience's attention – so use touchscreens to present menu options and nutrition information in a fun way. You can pair this with an ordering system, streamlining the entire process.

### Library Boards

Incorporate hot spots into your digital signage layout to switch the screen between library catalogs, workstation locations and availability, and more, while still pushing daily announcements and messages to your students.

### Social Media

Instead of just one-way push information flows, social media boards encourage interactivity and participation. Posts attract excitement and buzz, and everyone is kept in the loop with social networks.
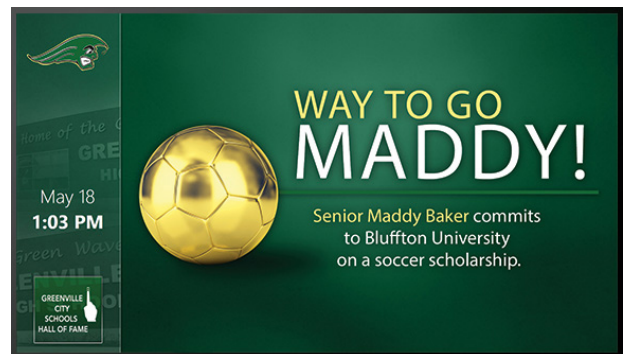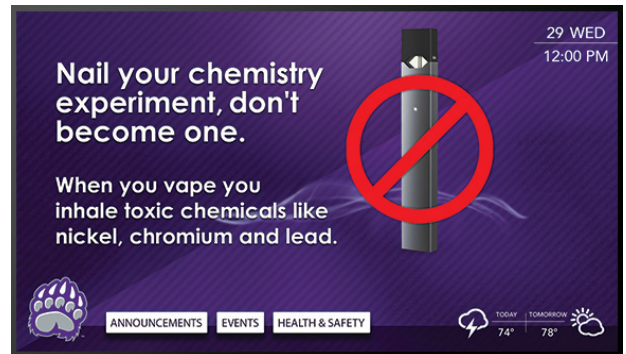
## Stay Safe

In case of an emergency, your displays can instantly preempt your playlists with an alert telling everyone the nature of the emergency and giving clear instructions. Everyone – students, staff, administrators and visitors – are immediately informed of any emergency in real time.

While the initial alert notice is important, it is vital to include a short, clear list of instructions – where people go for safety, what they should do or not do. Without this, your well-intentioned alert system can simply add to the chaos.

A key thing to consider is message saturation – how many displays you have, where they are, where they are placed. If your deployment has only one display in a particular building, will enough people get the message when they need to? If you only have displays near exits, consider placing a few in the interior as well. Every person at your school needs to be able to see the alert. Don't have any blind spots.

Your content management software should be able to trigger alerts on a single, targeted screen, or on all screens simultaneously system wide. Find out what features and configuration possibilities your software offers you. This might affect your choice of software, and could impact any grants you've applied for.

## Conclusion

The days of bulletin boards and posters are over. There is simply no equal to digital signage when it comes to providing information to K-12 students and staff.

Whether its school announcements or event listings, lunch menus or faculty meetings, in-house bulletins or live data feeds, digital signage is flexible, efficient, cost-effective and scalable. What you communicate, and how you communicate it, is limited only by your imagination.
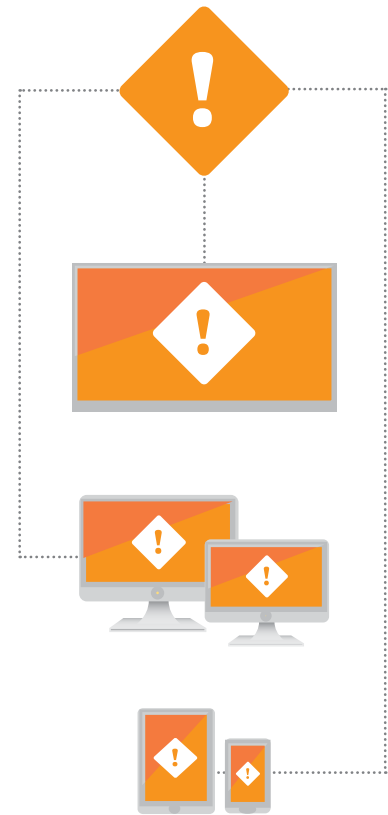
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