Lights, Camera, Engagement!
Using Digital Channels to Reach and Engage Your School Community

By Kalyan Ali Balaven, Host of The Whole Student Podcast & Head of School at Dunn School (CA) and Fran Ryan, Head of School at Broadwater Academy (VA)

When the pandemic paused in-person interactions, school leaders were left scrambling to find innovative ways to get their messages out both internally and externally. EMA recently sat down with two heads of school to learn about their experiences and provide some key takeaways for communicating and engaging with the school community.

Making the Most of Available Resources

“When I arrived at Broadwater Academy in July 2020 during the COVID shutdown, I needed ways to connect with our internal community throughout the pandemic, to communicate needed COVID procedures, and to begin to establish myself as the new leader and shape the culture. We had no budget and limited human resources but we had Zoom,” said Fran Ryan.

Ryan used Zoom to record short videos, starting with informational topics and graduated to more aspirational messages. The videos averaged 260 views—some more than 500—and viewership grew organically beyond the current school community. Ryan believes the videos played a part in engaging the community and increasing enrollment from 270 to 310 students. His advice to other school leaders:

• Get started with a low-cost platform like Zoom
• Keep the videos short and do it in one take without editing
• Post videos Friday evening or Sunday afternoon to garner the most views

Elevating the Message with Podcasts

Kalyan Ali Balaven, Head of School at Dunn School, began his podcasting journey as a guest on another podcast. He saw so much potential in the format for communicating in new ways and better reaching his school’s external audience in order to generate more awareness. “In the wake of COVID, I wanted to explore opportunities to reach our external community with new technology to grow how we were communicating our school brand. Our goal was to talk about the school in a different way, create awareness, and message the whole student (versus the Dunn School) by featuring notable people speaking about the teachers who had inspired them.” The Dunn School’s approach has been effective with the content helping elevate the school as a thought leader.

Dunn School made an initial investment of $20k in the first year for podcast production staff and equipment. Now in its second year, the podcast has raised the independent school’s profile in local and trade press, led to speaking opportunities, and contributed to growth in admissions. It even inspired a new internal student-led podcast. Balaven encourages other schools to take a similar approach:

• Choose content that makes the most of the format
• Consider promoting the communications more widely
• Be open to what’s next, such as the metaverse for campus tours and virtual access

For more on how Fran and Kaly used video and podcasting to communicate and promote their schools with their school community and the wider world, access the QR code at the back of this issue to access their full conversation from the EMA Heads Institute.