

CASE STUDY

From Stale to Storytelling: How Round Lake Schools Built Community with Smore

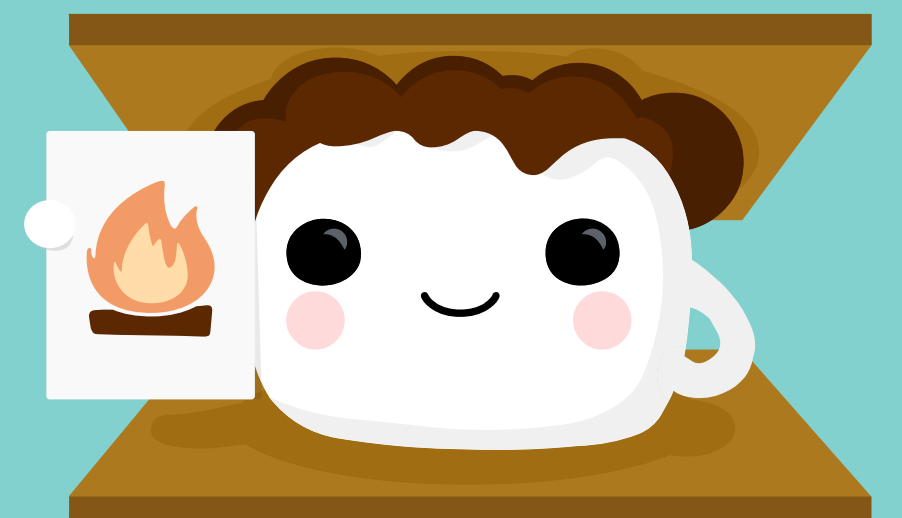


Size: 6,300 students; 10 schools

Number of Employees: 1,000

Products Used: Smore for Teams

Location: Round Lake, IL



Introduction

When Sarah LeBlanc stepped into her role as Communications Coordinator at Round Lake Area Schools, she inherited a staff newsletter that felt, in her words, “a little stale.” The weekly update was informative, but it wasn’t inspiring.

“We realized the newsletter wasn’t building community. It felt more like a chore to produce, and it didn’t make people feel seen or valued,” Sarah recalled.

Together with Gracie Durham, the department’s Digital Media Specialist, they reimagined the newsletter to better celebrate staff and increase engagement. Today, the **Golden Apple** (Round Lake’s monthly newsletter) and the **Friday Extra** (the weekly staff newsletter) are thriving.

Breathing New Life into the Friday Extra

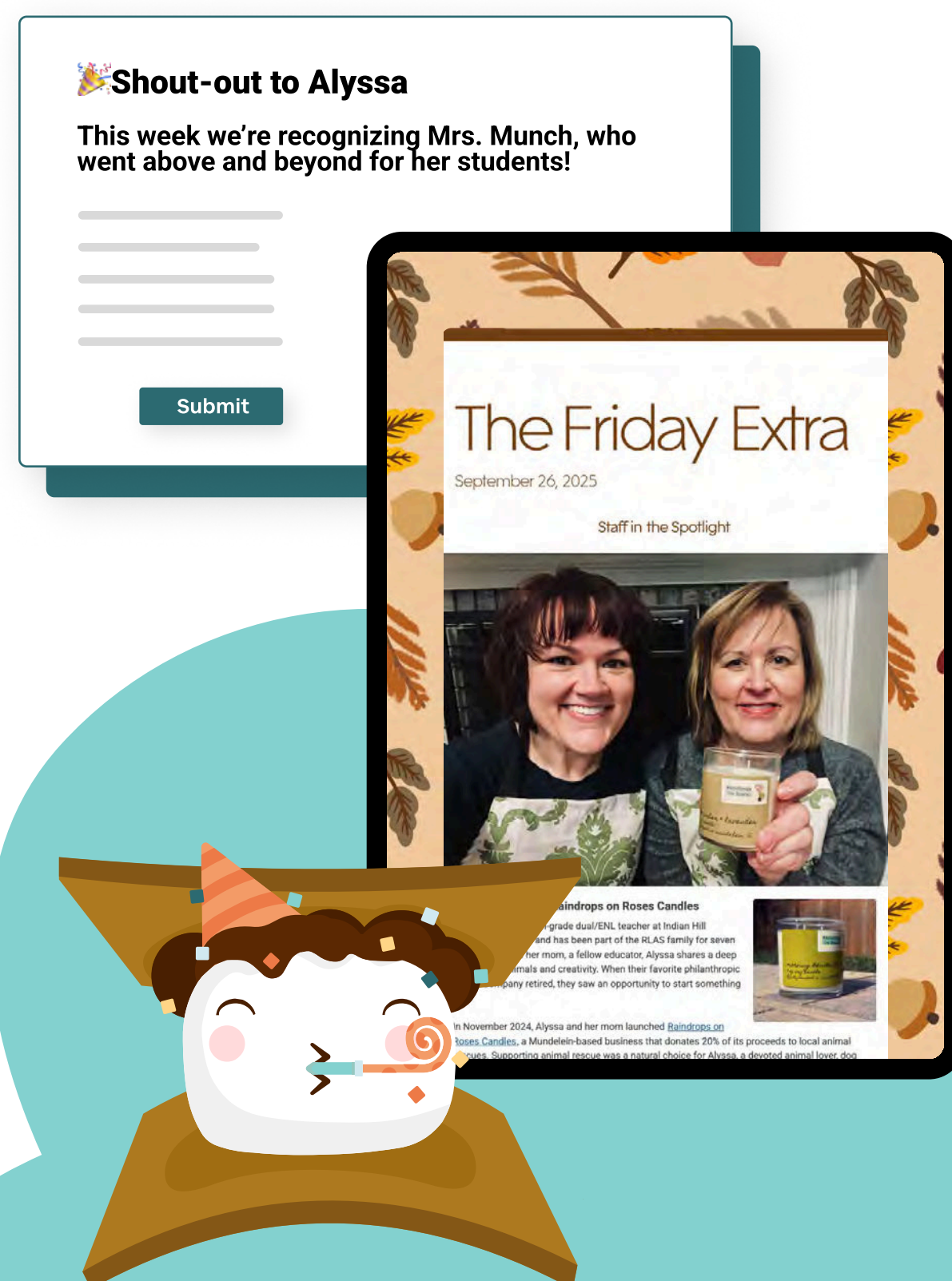
The Friday Extra had existed for years, but Sarah and Gracie dramatically improved it. Instead of simply listing announcements, they turned the newsletter into a weekly celebration of the people who make Round Lake run.

The newsletter spotlights teachers, staff, and even includes fun tidbits about how staff members spend their time outside of school.

To curate the updates, Gracie has embraced crowdsourcing. A simple form allows colleagues to submit shout-outs. She also receives emails throughout the week with blurbs and photos of everything happening across the district.

“It’s become collaborative,” Gracie said.

“Other departments contribute content, so now I’m not fighting to fill space. We actually have more content than we can fit, which is a really good problem to have.”



A recent edition of the Friday Extra featured a teacher who had won a scholarship and traveled abroad, alongside a highlight of his students' theater accomplishments. The teacher was so honored that he shared the recognition on his own social media, broadening the district's positive image.

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Everybody wants to be recognized, whether it's for something big or small. The Friday Extra is our way of showing staff that what they do matters and that they are seen.

Sarah LeBlanc, Communications Coordinator, Round Lake Area Schools

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The Golden Apple: Keeping Families and the Community Informed

While the Friday Extra focuses on Round Lake employees, the Golden Apple newsletter is for everyone: families, staff, and the community. The school newsletter has more than 6,000 recipients and includes important reminders about registration deadlines, upcoming events, and community celebrations.

With so much to cover and so many recipients, the Golden Apple has unique challenges:

“The Golden Apple can be a mammoth sometimes,” Sarah admitted, “so it's really nice to have a table of contents and a translated version. It means families can find what they need and know they're included.”

For that, Smore's features have made a big difference. A simple toggle allows Sarah to turn on the Table of Contents so readers can skip right to the information they care about most. They've also been able to include Spanish speakers by linking to a Spanish version of the newsletter at the top of every edition.



Engagement Without the Extra Work

Producing two newsletters might sound overwhelming, but Smore keeps it manageable.

In fact, Gracie can produce the Friday Extra in less than an hour each week. She explained,

“I can do it in less than an hour because it’s collaborative and Smore makes it simple to add photos, links, and design elements.”

The payoff is clear in the data: with fewer than 1,000 employees, the Friday Extra earns over 1,000 weekly views, showing that staff come back to reread and engage.



Using Newsletters to Promote a Positive Culture

Together, the Friday Extra and Golden Apple have become more than newsletters. They reflect Round Lake’s culture of inclusion, recognition, and connection. Staff feel visible. Families feel informed. And the community is engaged.

That impact resonated when Sarah and Gracie shared their story at the 2025 NSPRA conference, where their session drew a standing-room-only audience. District leaders recognized their own challenges in Round Lake’s journey and saw that a thoughtful, creative approach to engagement was within reach.

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Every district is trying to promote a positive culture. When people saw what we’d done with the Friday Extra, they realized it was achievable for them too.

Sarah LeBlanc, Communications Coordinator, Round Lake Area Schools

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The Takeaway for District Leaders

Round Lake proves that a newsletter can be much more than an obligation. With the right approach, and the right tools, newsletters can help create a sense of community.

Any district can follow their lead. Start small, invite collaboration, and use Smore to shine a light on the people who make your schools thrive.

Ready to engage your community? [Let's talk!](#)

