Creating a School site with Joomla

In this chapter you will learn:

- How Joomla can meet the specific needs of a school website
- What is the best way to organize the content structure for a school website
- What are the best and most reliable extensions to use
- What extensions are available to extend the site
- How can I get a school site up and running quickly and easily

I actually started my Internet career as the technology coordinator for a small school in Vermont almost 10 years ago. One of the things I was responsible for, of course, was the school website. When I think of the time and effort that could have been saved had a CMS like Joomla being available back then it makes me realize how lucky schools are today. I wonder how many realize that such an astonishingly powerful tool to build a website is available for virtually free.

There is one problem with choosing Joomla to setup a school website. These types of sites tend to be medium to large in size. One of the defining characteristics of Joomla is that it is very powerful and flexible, but can be quite time intensive to setup. This leads us of course to this chapter, hopefully an extensive guide to creating and setting up a school website using the Joomla CMS.

Joomlashack School Shack Pack

If you want to save your self a good few hours trying to setup your school site, you can get an entire Joomla installation that was used for this chapter and forms the basis of the Joomla site being demoed at demotemplates.joomlashack.com/school. We like to call these our Shack Packs.

As part of this School Shack Pack the Joomlashack team spent **many** hours creating the sections, categories, navigation and "filler" articles for a small to medium sized school. We also installed and configured all of the extensions and components that are used in the demo and are in this chapter.

You can visit www.joomlashack.com/shop/home.php?cat=4 to purchase this installable Joomla configuration complete with initial content and components.

Why do you need a school website?

A school perhaps is the perfect organization suited towards having a comprehensive website. As I have mentioned elsewhere, 20th Century websites were about one-way communication between the website and the readers. In the 21st century Web 2.0 world websites need to be about interaction and two way communication. What makes a school website interesting is that there are very clearly defined stakeholder groups each with their own needs with respect to this communication.

One thing I find, especially among school administrators, is a knee-jerk reaction to this proposition of two-way communication. Anytime I have suggested, for example, the ability for students to add comments to pages, that has been the immediate reaction of "we couldn't

possibly do that, students would just be posting trash". Basically the reaction is one of fear end of loss of control. Or perhaps a suggestion of posting student work is immediately met with the reaction of privacy concerns. In a nutshell I have found that school organizations have looked at websites as potential areas of liability rather than a tool to enhance the learning process. Bear in mind as you read this that I am an experienced teacher and administrator. I am aware of some of the pitfalls, but also a firm advocate of the huge potential of a rich school website.

What is unusual perhaps about a school website is that there is a clearly defined body of content and also different groups you need to get to it. The key to a successful school website is having different paths to this information based on the user group. Let's look at these groups and their needs.

Students

Sometimes students are relegated to a lesser user on a school website. This is a critical mistake, not only our students the group most invested in the school (it's their education off to all), they also the group most likely to adopt Web technology.

Student's lives frequently revolve around three areas academics, athletics and activities. Students need easy access to these areas of the site. There will also be key information that the school wishes to make sure is easy to find, such as guidance or graduation requirements.

Students are probably primarily a consumer of information on the website. As mentioned above a healthy website should also have mechanisms for interaction.

Teachers and Administrators

A school website can make a huge difference in the way a teacher can communicate and educate. The list is endless, for example publishing course notes, homework, events and for the more adventurous (with appropriate security) class grades.

The biggest challenge for teaches is that adding the web to their toolbox can be overwhelming. Always busy, they need time and help from the IT staff to help them successfully use it. There will be early adopters and those that will probably always struggle, but critical to implementing a successful school website will be a commitment to professional development for the teaching staff.

Parents

The third leg of the stool that is a successful school is the parents. A brief look through research on the topic will tell you that the school which is able to engage the parents into its community is one where the students are more successful. To that end the website can be a powerful tool to achieve that engagement.

The initial goal should be to make a website as sticky and useful as possible for the parents. Principal's blog, e-mail news, calendars of events and student work only examples of things that would keep parents coming back to the site. Ultimately the goal is to have parents contributing to the site initially focusing on early adopters and those already involved such as parent associations.

What features do we need on a school site?

With over 1600 extensions available on the official Joomla extension site it's very easy to add everything and the kitchen sink. There are even specialized components for lunch menus! However a key consideration for a school website is security, some components are not 100% secure and care should be taken with which ones are chosen.

What follows is a discussion of potential solutions to common features for a school website. Please bear in mind that this list is not a guarantee of security. School webmasters that are using Joomla should subscribe to the security boards at the official Joomla forum.
http://forum.joomla.org/index.php/board,372.0.html
http://forum.joomla.org/index.php/board,267.0.html
http://forum.joomla.org/index.php/board,296.0.html

In no particular order a brainstorm of common functionality/extensions might include:
- User registration
- event calendar
- downloadable documents
- polls
- staff directory
- e-mail newsletter
- RSS
- Forms
- site map

We will look at each of these in 10 at the end of the chapter, consider options, and then briefly explain one possible solution.

Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves however, assuming you've just installed Joomla fresh out of the box onto a Web server that's look at a few of the steps needed to get your site into shape.

If you need help how to find Joomla and install it I have two excellent tutorials:

www.compassdesigns.net/joomla-blog/joomla-tips/find-out-how-to-download-joomla.html
www.compassdesigns.net/tutorials/joomla-tutorials/how-to-install-joomla-1.5.html

Downloading and installing the template
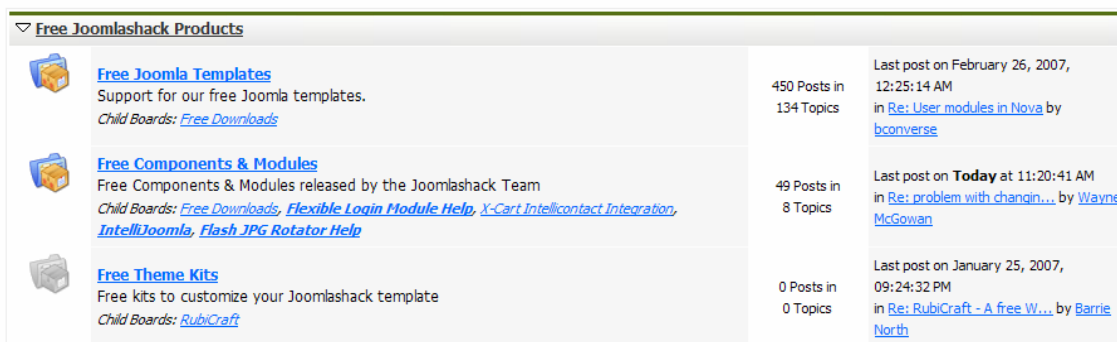
Currently Joomlashack's free templates are available for download in our forum (figure .1):
http://www.joomlashack.com/component/option,com_smf/Itemid,183/

Registration takes a few seconds and then you'll be able to download the template instantly.

The free template used in this chapter can be found at:
www.joomlashack.com/component/option,com_smf/Itemid,183/board,76.0

Figure .1 Free Joomlashack Products

Installing the template is a relatively easy process. Go to your Joomla administrator control panel (admin CP). Use the admin cp menu to navigate to the template installer utility:

Admin CP > Installers > Templates – Site

Use the "Upload Package File" option to browse to your downloaded template and then click on the "Upload File and Install" button.

You should get a message telling you the template was installed successfully. The next steps are a little bit more involved. To configure the module positions you want and the main horizontal navigation

Module positions

The *education* template has eight available module positions. You can see the module positions at any time by going to www.yoursite.com/index.php?tp=1. Looking at this template we can see the following.

To position your modules (e.g., main menu, login, syndicate, polls) in the various template positions, you set the "Position" parameter in each module. Figure .2 shows the available positions on this template.

- **inset**: reserved for search module
- **top**: reserved for horizontal "extended" menu
- **left**: left vertical column, not reserved.
- **right**: right vertical column, not reserved.
- **user1**: Left column between main content and footer.
- **user2**: Middle column between main content and footer.
- **user3**: Right column between main content and footer.
- **footer**: Footer

Most of these are pretty generic in their potential use. Two however were placed with specific in mind. The inset module location is really intended for a search box. The top module location is intended for a horizontal navigation.
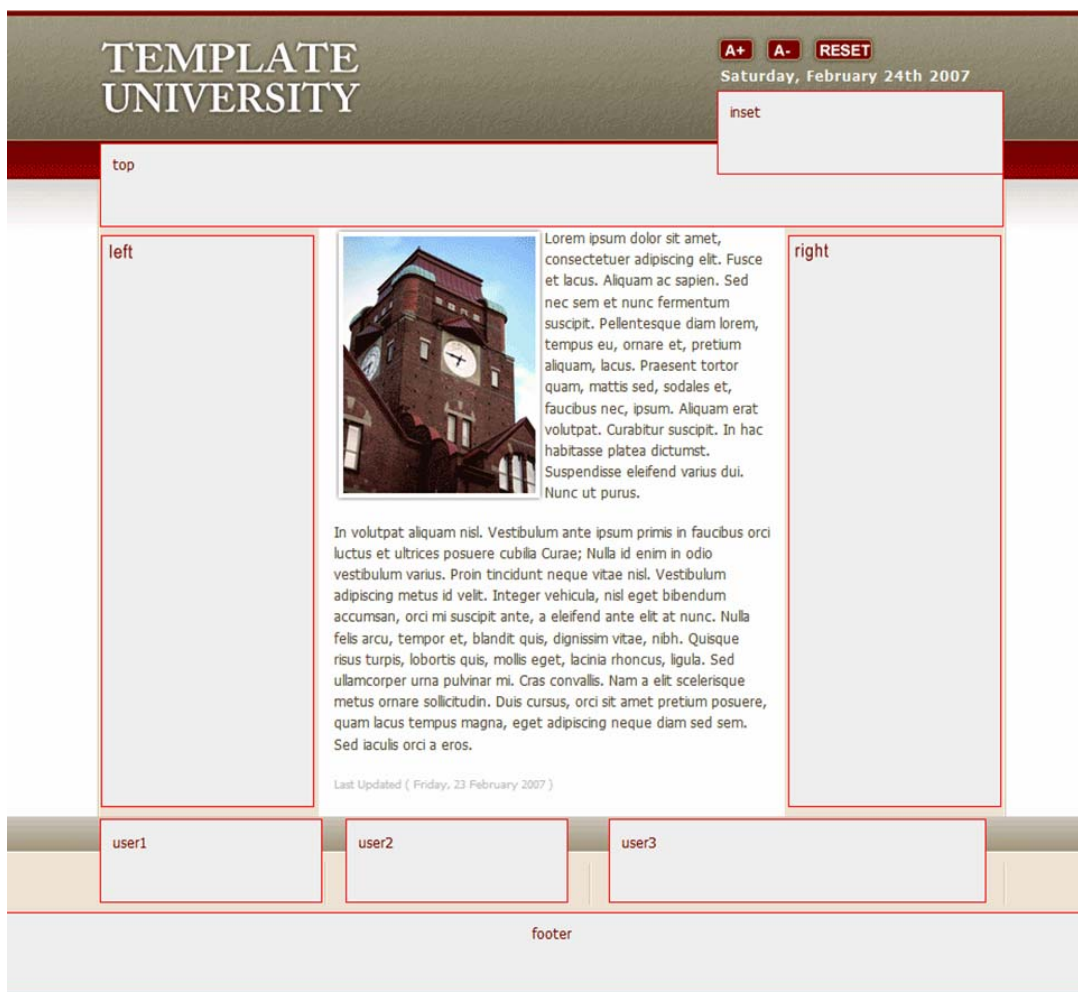
Figure .2 Available Module Positions in Education Template

Search box

If you will be using the text search module on your template (and for a school site you really should be), navigate to your module listing page if you aren't already there:

Admin CP > Modules > Site Modules

Find the module titled "Search". Tick the box next to its name and click the "Edit" button at the top right-hand side of the page.

From the "Position" parameter dropdown menu, select "inset". In the "Module Class Suffix" parameter type a hyphen (or dash) followed by the word "search" so it looks like this "**-search**" without the quote marks.
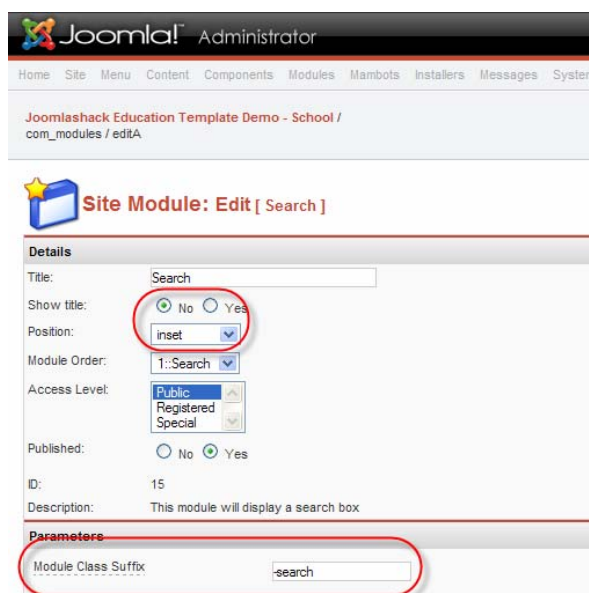
Figure .3 Search Module Parameters

Save your changes.

The main horizontal dropdown menu

A website for a large organization such as a school is likely to have lots of sections, categories and content articles. That makes it an ideal candidate for drop-down navigation. It's a simple effect where rolling over a link shows sub navigation.

Figure .4 Example Menu Dropdown

Many options exist to achieve this effect using JavaScript. However there are big problems with this approach. JavaScript links are more difficult to navigate if you are not using a browser, or have JavaScript turned off. This has big implications for our website's accessibility (viewers using screen readers for example) and for search engine optimization (search engine spiders).

It might not seem that a school website needs to worry about SEO. I don't think that's quite accurate though, we want our content to be well indexed by search engines so that people seeking information can find it easily.

The solution to JavaScript is to use pure CSS to get the same effect. On a screen reader or with JavaScript turned off these links will look like a simple flat list:

- Academics

    - Science
    - Mathematics
    - Foreign Language
    - History/SS
    - Fine Arts
    - English

To achieve our goal we need to do two things.

First we need to setup the main menu so that the links we want to drop down. This is easily done by setting the parent item when we create the menu. Figure 5 shows an example for the science link to the science category.
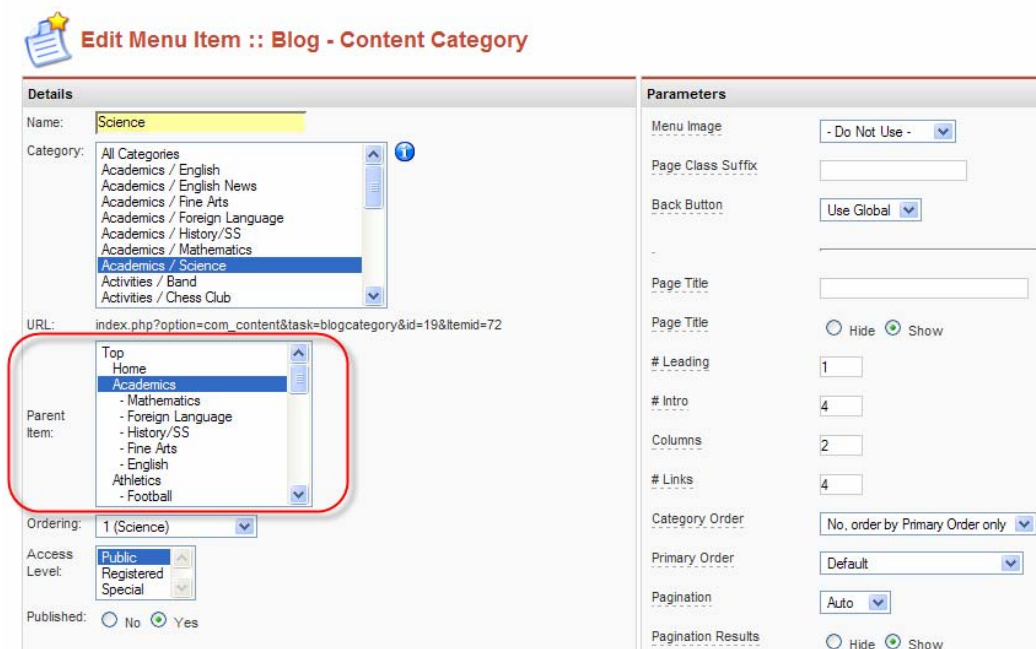
Figure .5 Submenu Item Parameters

Once we have gone through all of our sections in category's, setting the appropriate parent items as we go, our main menu should look something like figure 6.

Figure .6 Example of mainmenu with child menu items

The second step involves a slightly different process depending on what version of Joomla you are using. Joomla will allow you to show and menu either as a table or a flat list. In Joomla 1.0 it is not possible to have parent/sub menu links as a flat list, it's only allows it as a table. This oversight has been fixed in Joomla 1.5. There is an easy solution however, you just need to download and install a third-party module called extended menu. We are going to assume we are working with Joomla 1.0.

If you are using a free template you will need to grab an install a copy of this module. http://extensions.joomla.org/component/option,com_mtree/task,viewlink/link_id,163/Itemid,35/

If you are working from the complete Joomlashack Shack Pack this third-party module is all ready included and configured.

Once you have downloaded the module, you can install it using the module installer. Use the admin cp menu …

> **Admin CP > Installers > Modules**

The installer interface is the same as the one you used to install the template. This time, browse to the extended menu module zip file you just downloaded, select it, then click the install button. You should get a successfully installed message.

Configure Extended Menu Module

Navigate to your newly installed extended menu module:

> **Admin CP > Modules > Site Modules**

Look for the module with the title "Extended Menu". Tick the checkbox beside its name and click the "Edit" button at the top right-hand side of the modules page, you will find a very big list of parameters.

Extended menu is very powerful, but that makes it also quite tricky to make sure your parameters are set correctly. Figure 7 shows a screenshot of the parameters. Carefully examine the screenshot showing the correct setting for what we want to achieve.

Once you have set the main menu up with all the parent/sub links and set up the extended menu parameters you should have a menu that will drop down. Its using the advanced CS that's in the template files. You don't need to worry about that, we did all the hard work for you!

Don't forget to unpublished the original mainmenu module.

Let's now take a detailed look at perhaps possibly the most important part of setting up a complex site like this, how to set up the site structure, or in terms of Joomla, the sections, categories and navigation.

Figure .7a Extended menu parameters

Enable Query Cache	⊙ No ○ Yes
...[output]...	
Parse Access Key	Strip Markup ▾
Link Title	⊙ No ○ Yes
Level Class	Default ▾
Active Menu Class	Both ▾
Element Id	⊙ No ○ Yes
Enable Menu Template	⊙ No ○ Yes
Template Name	menu.html
...[images]...	
Indent Image	None ▾
Indent Image 1	- Use Default - ▾
Indent Image 2	- Use Default - ▾
Indent Image 3	- Use Default - ▾
Indent Image 4	- Use Default - ▾
Indent Image 5	- Use Default - ▾
Indent Image 6	- Use Default - ▾
...[horizontal spacer]...	
Spacer	
End Spacer	
...[select list]...	
Select List Submit Text	Go
Hide Submit Button	Never ▾
...[misc]...	
Resolve Itemid By Content Item	⊙ No ○ Yes
Current/Active Item Highlighting	Smart - Itemid Or Other ▾
Current Item Duplicates	Convert To Active ▾
Access Keys	
Exact Access Level	⊙ No ○ Yes

Figure .7a Extended menu parameters

Organizing your content on a School Website

It is important that you understand some of the basics of how Joomla organizes its content and the structure it uses. If you haven't already, make sure you read through the chapter on this. You can also find a version on the Compass Designs website:

www.compassdesigns.net/tutorials/joomla-tutorials/a-beginners-guide-to-organizing-your-content.html

As previously mentioned the different groups, students, parents and teachers to a certain extent represent paths to the same core content of academics, Athletics and activities. There will be a lot more going on in each user group's area, that this structure will form the core of our school website.

As we think about our site design, we will try and use the following principle, designed to try and manage a large site with lots of contributors

Each group/person will have a single main page on the site that is theirs. So whether it's Mr Hardy's English class, the Guidance counselor or the varsity basketball team, we'll try and have a one to one relationship between people and pages.

One of the main reasons we are doing this is to distribute content generation. This will solve two problems. If more people are involved in the content of the site, more people will use the site in huts in its chances of success. Additionally it means that one person is not responsible for generating huge amounts of content, usually the technology coordinator or Webmaster this means that that role becomes one more off being a gatekeeper rather than having to create the whole site.

Using the English department as an example, let's examine how we can set up a page.

How goal is to have a departmental page that will show the various classes/courses, have a link to that page and then show some news about the department.

The concept here is that each course will have its own page. This enables teachers to have meaningful input into what is on that page. Thus the site organization here is:

Section = Academics
Category = English
Page 1 = Freshman English - Mr Hardy
Page 2 = Sophomore English - Mr Stevenson
Etc

We then create a **blog** link to a **category** in the **mainmenu**. In this example, we also make it a child link of Academics to enable the dropdown menu.
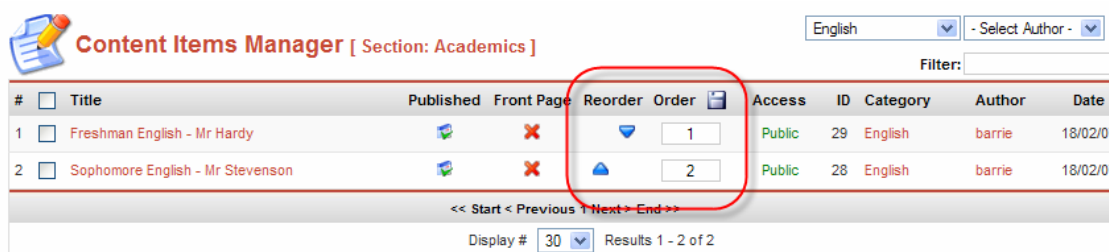
This will show all the content articles in the English category as a blog, that is, with the introductory text shown and a link to read more. It's important that in our link parameters, we have some key settings, shown in figure .8.

Figure .8 English Menu Link Parameters

Here we have # Intro set to 4. This means that there will be four articles with the introduction text show. In our case, for 4 years of English. The way I am setting this up you would make this number equal to the number of classes/courses.

We only have one column, though you could change that, and no articles shown as links. I have also set the order to be ordering. This means that I can control the order of the articles by going to the Content Manager and adjust the article order using the reorder function, circled in red in Figure .9.

Figure .9 English Category Article Order

The English category page is shown completed in figure .10.

The first area of text under the Department header "The English curriculum" is the category description. We are using this so we have content on the page before the course descriptions. This could be as long or as short as needed. This is created by editing the category itself: **Content > Category Manager > English** in this example. An additional step is also required to show it. We need to go the menu link for this page: **Menu > mainmenu > English** and set **Description** to **show**.

I also wanted to have news for each department (e.g. English). There are a couple of ways you could do this.

You could have all the news articles in the **English** category. The way we have the link parameters set up they could "overflow" and appears as links below the main content. You would of course have to set the **# Links** value to a positive number and you would be constantly adjusting the article order in the content manager.
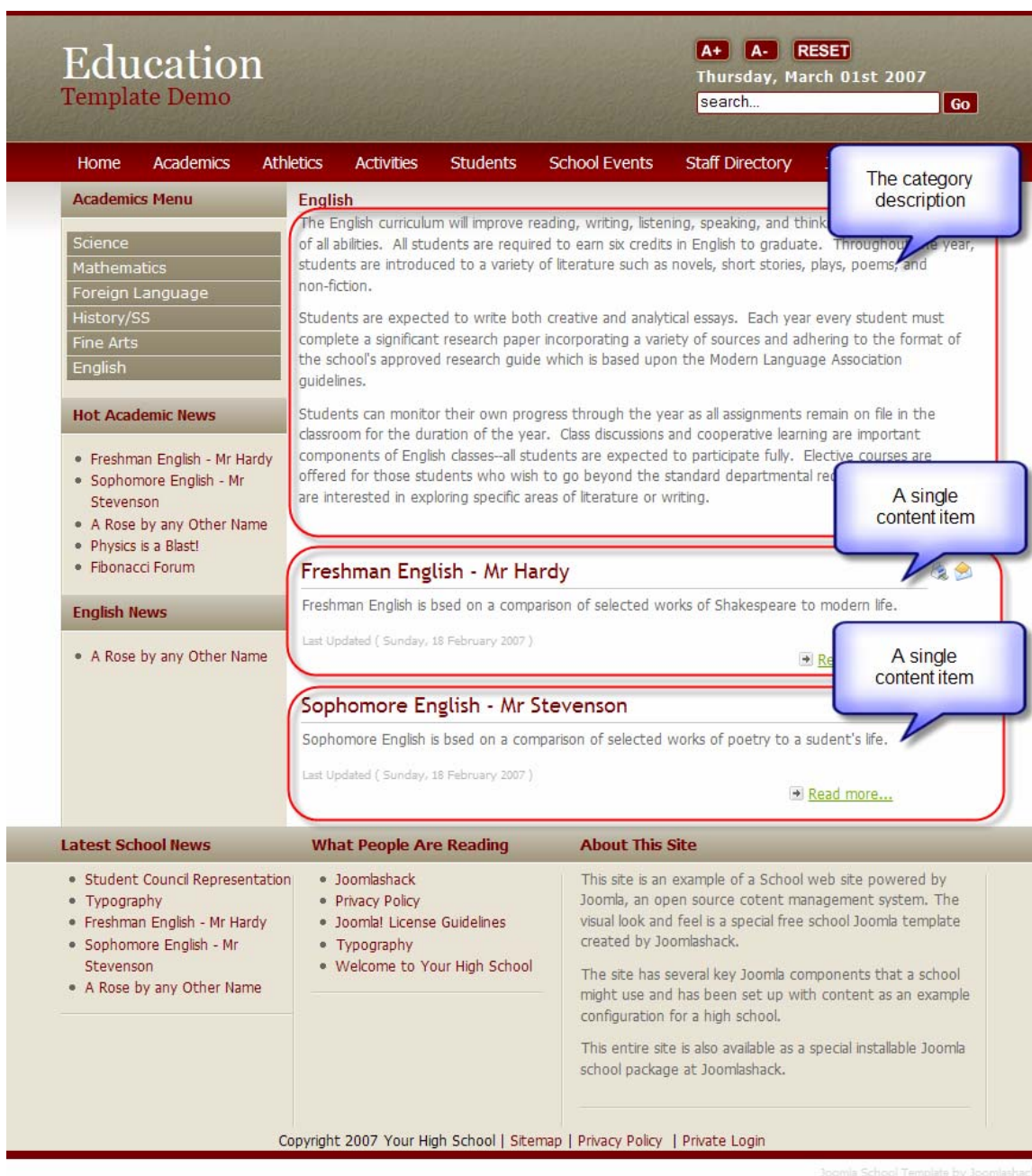
Figure .10 English Department Page – A Joomla Category

If you have news articles more often, you might want to use a strategy as I did here. I created a new category, **English News** and then made a Latest News module and set it to load in the left column. Now stories that are submitted will automatically be shown dynamically with no effort from the webmaster. Sounds good to me!

It should be easy to see how this structure can be extended to other parts of the site. Here would be two examples, sports and administration.

Section = Athletics
Category = Basketball
Page 1 = 9th Grade Girls
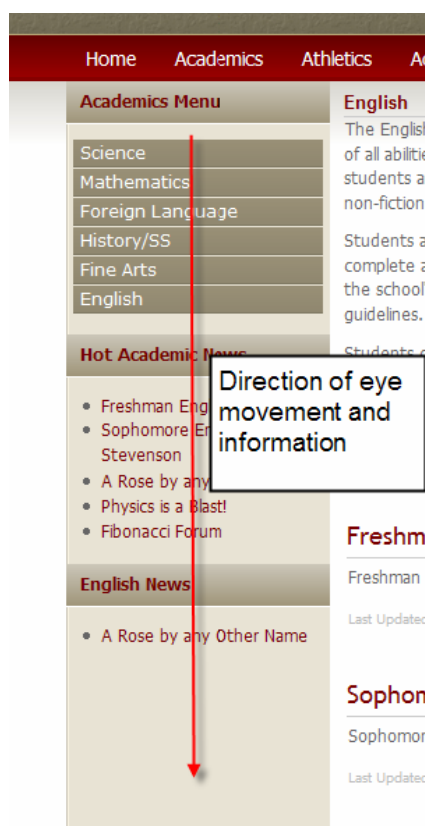Page 2 = 10th Grade Boys
Etc

Section = Administration
Category = High School Team
Page 1 = Mrs P Rincipal
Page 2 = Mr V Ice Principal
Etc

Setting up the left column

Looking at the basic page again, in this example the English department, we've actually carefully chosen what is in the left column, here shown in figure .11

The top menu, "academics menu", contains links to all the departments.

The next module is showing links to articles that during the academics section. This means from a hierarchical point of view these links are the next level down from the academics menu.

The third module is showing news from a specific department, in this case English. It can be thought of as the next level down in the informational structure.

The effect of this for the site visitor is to present them with a continuum of information starting from a broad level and going down to a narrow one. Studies that track eye movement on websites have shown that a visitor will tend to start in the top left, so the movement of the eye down the page matches a changing organization from broad and narrow. A technique like this is important for usability.

Let's take a look at each of those modules in turn.

Academics menu

If you are using only a default Joomla installation you would have to create a new menu and then insert links to you each category that you wanted. The problem with this approach is that it is not dynamic, if you add a new category you have to remember to go and add the link. You would also have to adjust what pages the module appeared on as we will see in a second.

There is also another big problem with this approach. You will end up with two sets of links to each and category, one in the horizontal navigation, and one in the left-hand sub navigation. The problem is that Joomla decides what settings and parameters to have for a page, for example with the two had optical titles as links, by the parameters set in the **menu link**. With two sets of links to each page Joomla will become a little confused and it will be difficult to get the page is laid out as you want them to.

A much better approach is to use a third-party module called extended menu. If you are using a free template you will need to grab an install a copy of this module.
http://extensions.joomla.org/component/option,com_mtree/task,viewlink/link_id,163/Itemid,35/

If you are working from the complete Joomlashack Shack Pack this third-party module is all ready included.

Once installed you will have a new module called extended menu. We used that one for a main horizontal menu, we actually need to use extended menu to achieve the drop down effect with pure CSS rather than JavaScript.

We need to make a few copies of this module, one for each section. This is very easy to do, just select the checkbox for the extended menu module and then click copy.
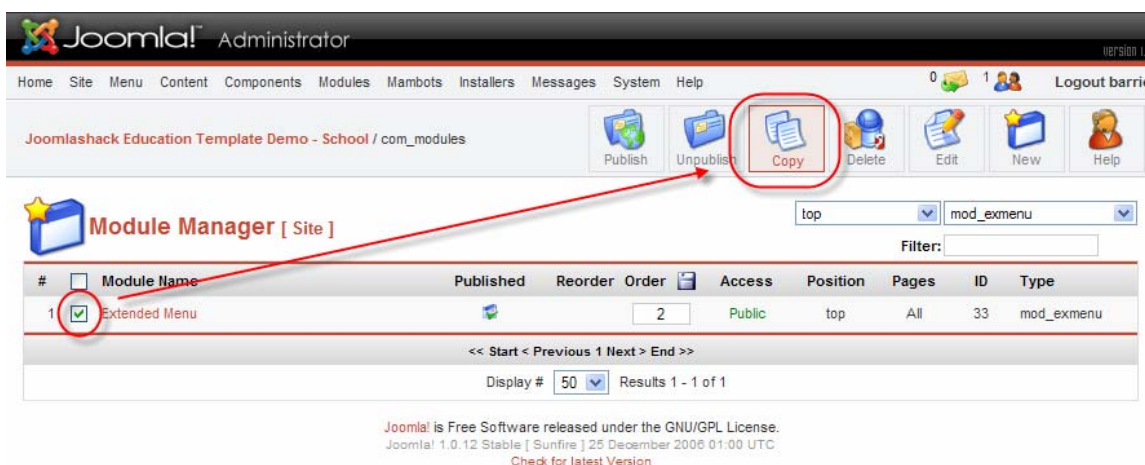

Figure .12 Copying the initial Extended menu

Note in figure .12 a filter is used for all of mod_exmenu to make it clearer. You will then have a new module as shown in figure .13.
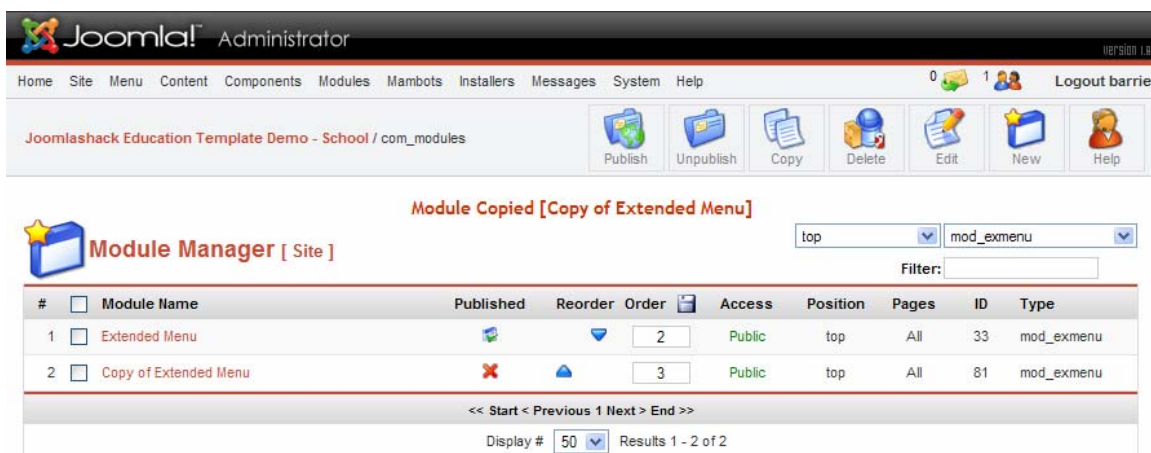
Figure .13 First copy of Extended Menu

Open up that module and change the name to academics menu and then do the process again for each of our sections. You should then have off a dozen or so copies of extended menu as we can see in figure .14
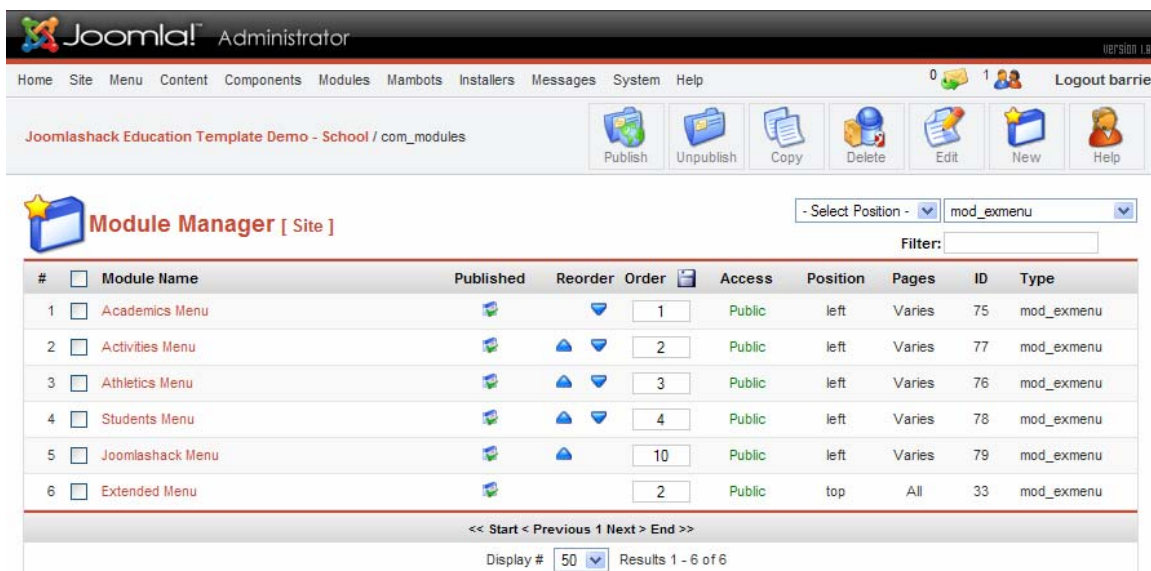

Figure .14 Category Menus with Extended Menu

The next part is a little more complex. We will need to go into each module in turn and carefully select the right settings to achieve the effect we want. Using the academics menu as an example your settings should be as shown on the next page. The key settings are circled in red in figure 15; the rest can be left as default when it is copied.

Note that we have set what pages/items we want this module to appear on by selecting the menu links on the right-hand side of the screen. You can select multiple pages by keeping the control button pressed.

Figure .15 Extended Menu parameters for departmental menu

The Footer and a Hidden Menu

There are many occasions on a website where you will want to generate links to content without necessarily having a published menu. For example, it's universally recognized that if you are trying to drive traffic to your site from a specific place, you need a unique landing page to do it. Examples:

- Google AdWords/PPC
- An email you send out about something
- A unique ad you have placed in a magazine/site

If you have invested in this you definitely don't want to just send them to your homepage (Google will even penalize you for it). So, what I do is make a static content item with relevant information and create a hidden menu link to it. This strategy will significantly improve your ROI.

In the context of a school website, this might be links from other schools/district websites. The technique I will describe here is one I have called the "hidden menu". I'll apply it to the footer of this site, shown in figure .16

Copyright 2007 Your High School | Sitemap | Privacy Policy | Private Login
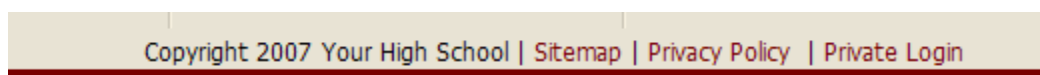
Figure .16 Education site footer menu

Now, you might ask why you would not just make the footer menu a plain old Joomla menu published in that module location. Well, as you can see from the image, we have some text in the module as well. You can't do that with a menu very easily, so are using a custom html module.

The first step is to create a menu, I'll call it Blank Menu for Links. We then add links to that men to whatever we need, in this case a few static content items and our sitemap.

Menu Manager [Blank Menu for Links]   Max Levels 10 ☑ Filter:

#	☐	Menu Item	Published	Reorder	Order 💾	Access	Itemid	Type	CID
1	☐	Privacy Policy	🔄	🔽	1	Public	57	Link – Static Content	22
2	☐	Private Login	🔄	🔺 🔽	3	Public	59	Component – Login	15
3	☐	Sitemap	🔄	🔺	5	Public	69	Component – Joomap	41

<< Start < Previous 1 Next > End >>
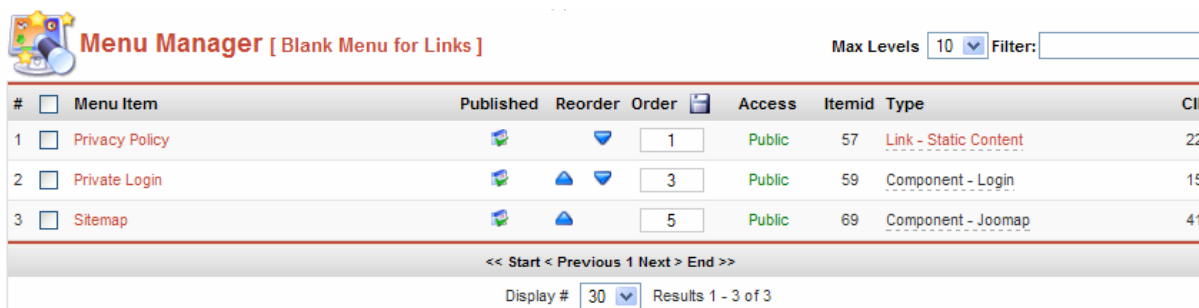
Display # 30 ☑ Results 1 - 3 of 3

Figure .17 Links in the Blank Menu

We then make sure the actual module for this menu is unpublished (we won't use it) and create a new user/custom module in the module manager.

To that module, we add the text and html we need for our footer module, figure .18.

Figure .18 Footer user module set up

Note that I am using WYSIWYGPro here, so your editor will differ slightly.

To find the URL's for the links we need, we just head over the the menu item we creater a few moments ago. Let's take the Privacy Policy as an example.
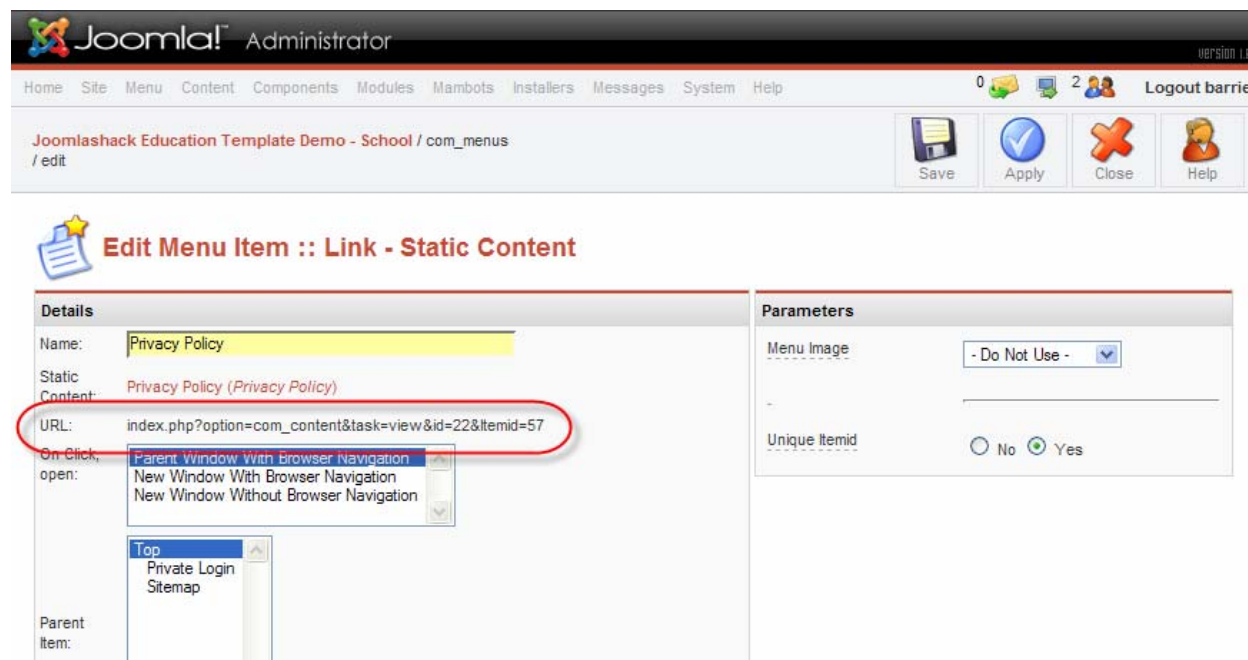

Figure .19 Getting the URL from a menu item

Here you can see the URL to create the link with. Note that its advisable to NOT include the http://www.yoursite.com but to just include the URL starting from the index.php. This makes it more transferable.

Adding Basic Functionality to your School Website

At the beginning of this chapter, we brainstormed a list of possible functionality we would like our site to have. Let's examine each one in turn and see what options are available.

User Registration

One of the most powerful features of Joomla is that is allows several layers of permission. At the most basic these are:

- Guests
- Users
- Administrators

When setting up a school website, you will need to think a little about the needs and size of your school, and how you want these user groups to interact with the site. Lets take a few examples:

- A small school
  If we have a few people responsible for adding content and don't want much student interactivity, we might use the following structure:
    o Guests = Parents and Students
    o Users = teachers

o Administrators = webmaster
This structure allows information to be made available only to the teachers. It would also allow them to easily submit content that could then be approved by the webmaster.

- A medium school
  If we want to get more involvement from students in the site, we might move them up a level.
  o Guests = Parents
  o Users = teachers and Students
  o Administrators = webmaster
  This structure allows more involvement and interaction between the teachers and students behind a private registered security wall. For example, teachers and students could easily share work using a document management extension like Docman.. It would also allow them to easily submit content that could then be approved by the webmaster.

- A large school
  If we want to have significant involvement from all stakeholders in the school community, we might use:
  o Guests = Public
  o Users = Students, teachers, parents
  o Administrators = webmaster
  This structure is one that intends to leverage the website o increase communication between all the groups. It opens the door for such projects as a student digital portfolio that can be shared privately online with parents, teachers and peers.

Note to illustrate the differences, I have used the size of the school as a delineator. One could just as easily replace with "desire to adopt web technology".

Events Calendar

There are two main event calendars that have been developed for Joomla and are available from 3rd party developers.

- **Events Calendar/JEvents**
  forge.joomla.org/sf/frs/do/viewRelease/projects.jevents/frs.events.jevents_1_4_0

- **JCal Pro**
  dev.anything-digital.com/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=3&Itemid=53

Both of these calendars are solid choices for a school. In our demo we used JCal Pro, but there was no compelling reason.

We have added a link to the calendar component in the main horizontal menu that leads to a full page calendar, shown in figure .20.
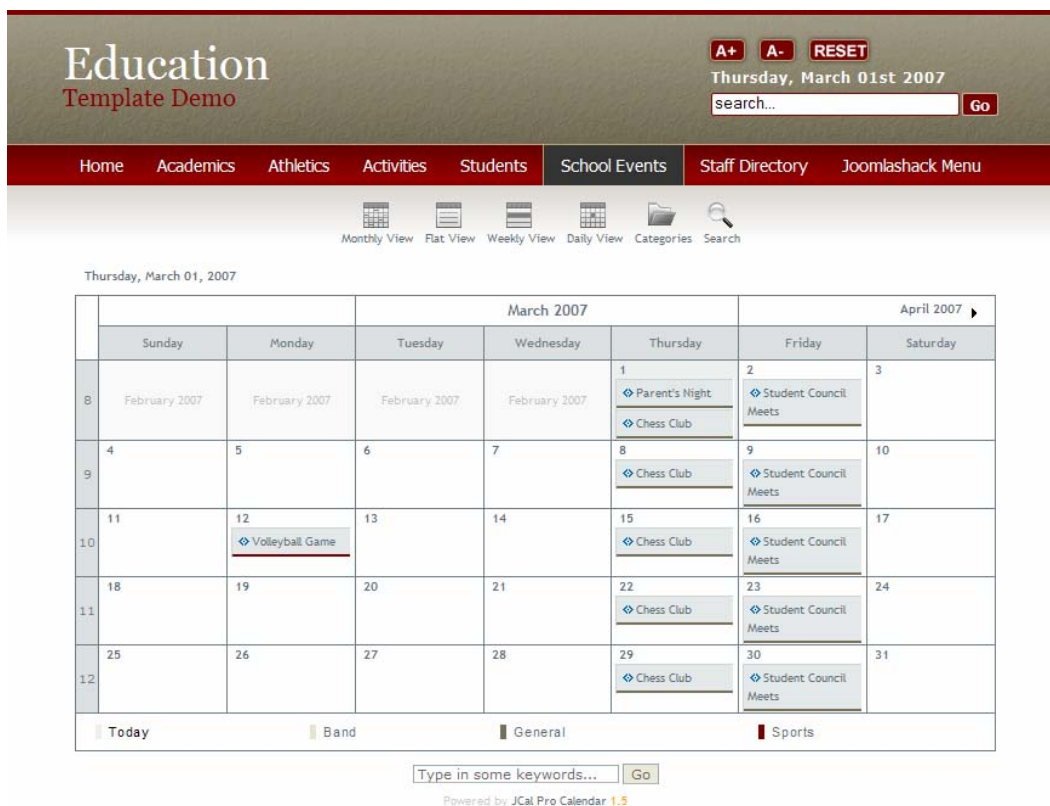
Figure .20 Full page display of JCal

Also we added the **latest events** module in the right column on the home page. Both of the calendars described above have this module.

Downloadable documents

- A school website is likely to have a lot of documents that might be in PDF form available for easy downloading. Examples might include:
  Course descriptions
- Meeting minutes
- Hard copy of newsletter
- Hard copy of forms
- Student work (digital portfolio perhaps)

There are two main extensions for Joomla that give the potential for document management.

- DOCMan
  http://forge.joomla.org/sf/frs/do/viewSummary/projects.docman/frs

- ReMOSitory
  http://www.remository.com/index.php?option=com_remository&func=fileinfo&id=431

Both are good extensions, but at the time of writing, Docman has not had many updates in the last year. It has even developed a bug where its configuration file deletes itself and a 3rd party module has been developed to fix this problem; DocMan Repair Module 1.0.0.

Although Docman is probably better suited to pure document management, as opposed to file downloading like Remository, we have decided to go with Remository for this installation.
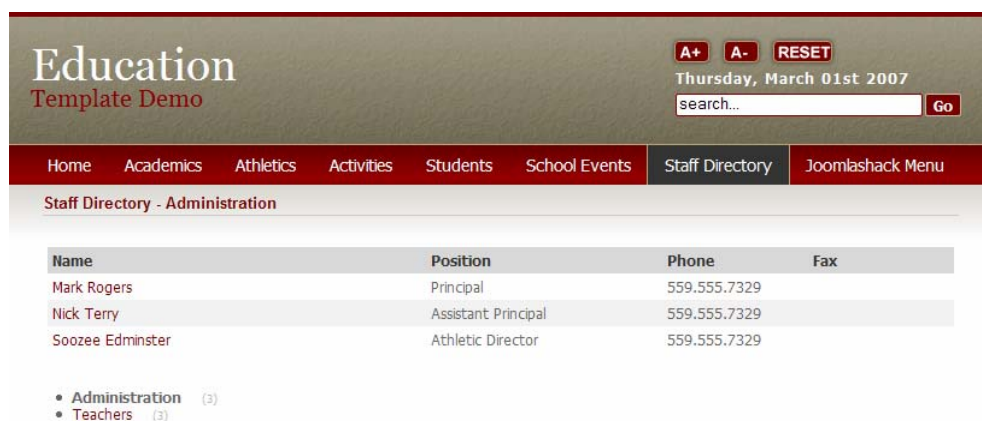
Polls

Basic poll functionality is built into the default installation of Joomla. There is nothing more to do here than craft the questions and post the poll to what pages you want it to be on through the module settings.

Remember that you can make multiple polls so each area can have its own.

Staff directory

For medium to small schools, this is probably most easily achieved through the core Joomla contacts component. That is the approach that has been used on our demo site. You can see it in action here:
demotemplates.joomlashack.com/school/index.php?option=com_contact&catid=42&Itemid=63

Figure .21 Default Joomla directory/contacts component

For larger schools, you might want to consider using a more complete directory component. There are a few available; my recommendation would be Mosets Tree available at www.mosets.com. It's priced (at time of writing) at $99.

E-mail newsletter

An e-mail newsletter is a very important part of the school website. Schools often push out newsletters to any of the stakeholder groups, students, teachers or parents. Being able to migrate this traditional paper-based communication to electronic e-mail can mean big cost savings for the school.

If you have visited www.compasseddesigns.net you will have seen I have an extensive review of some of the new sets options available:

www.compassdesigns.net/joomla-blog/joomla-reviews/joomla-email-newsletter-review.html

The e-mail components reviewed included:
- Letterman

- [Anjel](#)
- [Yanc](#)
- [MosListMessenger](#)

One newsletter component that was not available at that time, but has since become my preferred choice, is Acajoom. Two of the reasons I have grown to like this particular newsletter component is its ease of integration into the Joomla registration process and that it can be upgraded to a version that has an autoresponder.

Acajoom comes in three versions:

- Acajoom News
  The basic free component that allows all the usual email newsletter features.
- Acajoom Plus
  A commercial upgrade that adds autoresponder functionality
- Acajoom Pro
  A second commercial upgrade that allows autogeneration of emails from post a Joomla content article.

For a school website, the most basic free version is good enough for our needs.

Figure .21 Free Acajoom News component

Here you can see an initial list. With a component such as Acajoom, you can make lists for all sorts of things. Each club could have one, faculty meeting announcements, parent newsletters, snow alerts. The list is quite endless.

Should you want to add the functionality in the upgrades, you can get [Acajoom Plus at Joomlashack.](#)

RSS

Another tremendously useful feature of Joomla is its ability to work with RSS (Real Simple Syndication)

Joomla has two main functions. One is that it can provide an RSS off content from the website; secondly it can display RSS feeds from other places.

In demo we have the syndication button on the homepage in the left column. In Joomla RSS syndication comes from content that is in the homepage. To provide content from other categories deeper in the site a third-party component would have to be used. For our purposes the target audience is probably site visitors that want to use RSS to get latest news. For that syndication of the homepage only will be adequate.

Displaying an RSS feed has interesting possibilities for a school site. Imagine a scenario of a school district with perhaps half a dozen schools in it. Each school and the school district itself could have a website, maybe even powered by Joomla, and each site could be feeding RSS feeds to be published on the others. So an example of what this might look like would be a school website showing news from the district's website, all automatically without any extra effort needed.

On our demo site we have shown the feed capability not with the RSS feed that would loaded in the main column, but too small a feeds that loading modules on the right column. These can be found in the Joomlashack menu, one is from the official Joomla.org RSS feed, and the other is Joomlashack's own RSS feed.

Figure .22 Example of RSS newsfeed in a module

So these links circled in red are all generated dynamically. If the news changes on the other website these links will be automatically updated.

Forms

A form is an absolutely critical part of a website, any website. As discussed, key to a successful website is opening up the flow of communication between the organization and the site viewer.

Joomla includes on basic as part of its installation a simple **contact us** form. If you want to get visitor input for anything else, you will need to install a form extension.

There are a few major candidates:

- **FacileForms**
  www.facileforms.biz/component/option,com_docman/task,cat_view/gid,89/Itemid,96/

- **Phil Taylor's Phil-A-Form**
  www.phil-taylor.com/Joomla/Components/Phil-A-Form/

- **perForms**
  performs.jext.info/

FacileForms is very powerful, but quite complex to set up, and Phil-A-Form is a commercial component. For this application, we would recommend performs. Besides, we use it ourselves at www.joomlashack.com and are a great advocate of the "eat your own dogfood" philosophy!

Performs is simple to use, but more than adequate for most sites. There is an excellent quick tutorial at the dev site; jext.info/content/view/9/20/

Sitemap

A sitemap is a very important part of the website, especially a larger one like a school. Usually it contains links to all pages that are in the website.

To generate this by hand would be monstrously time-consuming, but again this is where the dynamic nature of a CMS like Joomla saves the day. There are a two main third-party sitemaps that are installable extensions.

- **Joomap**
  developer.joomla.org/sf/frs/do/viewSummary/projects.joomap/frs

- **samSiteMap**
  developer.joomla.org/sf/frs/do/viewSummary/projects.samsitemap/frs

We elected to use Joomap, mainly for its simplicity and its more widespread use. As shown in the demo, it will produce a sitemap as shown in figure .23.
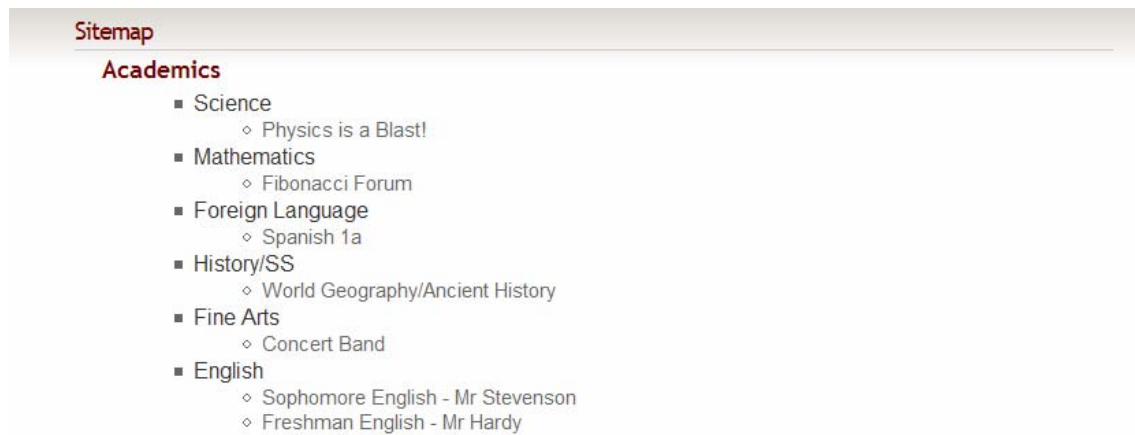
Figure .23

Extending your school website beyond the basics

If you want to extend your Joomla powered school website, we have set up a forum at www.joomlashack.com especially for school webmasters to meet and swap ideas and get help with problems.

Registration is free and you can find it at:
www.joomlashack.com/component/option,com_smf/Itemid,183/board,74.0

There are also some specific Joomla extensions especially for schools at the Joomla extension site:
extensions.joomla.org/component/option,com_mtree/task,listcats/cat_id,1852/Itemid,35/

- Joomla LMS
- E-Portfolio component for Joomla
- School Lunch Menu Component

Appendix A: Joomlashack School Shack Pack

Introducing the **Joomlashack Shack Pack for Schools!** Our team of Joomla experts has been hard at work creating a complete turnkey Joomla website that you can install in seconds and **save hours of work**. Some of the steps included:

- Research and review of the needs of a schools, college and universities.
- Creating a suitable content organization (sections and categories), site map and navigation
- Sought out the best and most reliable extensions
- Installed and configured them all to work together, with Joomla and with the template
- Wrote an extensive 30+ page Joomla tutorial specific to schools of what we did, and more importantly why we did it.

We bundled the result together with some great extras for you to get started with your site:

- A complete installable Joomla package including components and content. Exactly as you see in the our Joomla School website demo
- A high quality free school Joomla template designed by Joomlashack
- A coupon for 50% off one of our commercial Joomla templates
- Our own popular 80 page Joomla users manual
- A free forum for Joomla users in schools to come together and talk about their own needs and successes

The School Shack Pack includes:

- Joomla
- Email Newsletter
- Calendar
- Forms
- Sitemap
- Document Manager
- Extended menu for a pure CSS drop down navigation
- Basic ideas for content to get you started
- Four free use templates designed for schools

This whole site will install on your server in a few easy clicks. We think that this service is exactly what you need to get started with Joomla. Think of it as the ultimate beginner's kit. **Thousands of hours of Joomla expertise and experience squeezed into a single downloadable file.**

If you need a host, you can get two free months hosting from Rochen for your new school web site, details on purchase. Also available from Dreamhost is Free hosting for 501©(3)'s in the US.

Get Yours today!