

PART I

Establishing Communication

The Foundation of Success

“If you’re the only one who knows something, it’s a secret.”

In days past, schools did not always need solid communication and public relations programs. The school was there, the teachers were there, parents sent their children, the law said so—and that was it!

Half a century ago, more than three-quarters of the families in both rural and urban communities across the United States had children in public schools. Today, fewer than one-quarter of families have children in public schools, leaving many community members with no direct line of communication with their local schools.

Thus, the traditional modes of communication from the school to the public—report cards, parent-teacher conferences, calls home when a child misbehaved, open house, flyers announcing special events, a newsletter, sporadic media coverage of special activities—were deemed adequate for keeping the community informed. But today, these methods, although still important pieces of a comprehensive communication plan, are simply not sufficient to build the broad-based support schools need to be successful.

The rightness of your “cause” (your position, your district’s mission) aside, people just aren’t going to take your word for it anymore. They want to see results, accountability, proof. Can you blame them for being skeptical in the face of the current, widespread public furor over the crisis in American education? However, it has been demonstrated that, over the long haul, communities will support a school system that exhibits a solid, measurable commitment to quality.

As a professional educator or public education supporter, you know that in most schools throughout the country, most educators are doing a good job with most students. Yet the public’s knowledge of and confidence in public education does not always reflect

these achievements. It is up to you to be the principal communicator, to make sure your community has the best possible image of your school, because it is their school, too. You must strive for constituency “buy-in.”

Public schools are sizable financial enterprises. Many school districts, especially in rural areas, are their community’s largest employers. School board members and administrators are responsible for managing large amounts of tax dollars. With that fiscal accountability comes the responsibility of informing federal, state, and local taxpayers (the stockholders in the enterprise of public education) in honest terms about how their money is spent, how their investment is managed, and what return they are getting from their dollars.

The siren song of “No new taxes!” is strong in this economic and political climate of deficit reduction and fiscal restraint. After all, it is easier to rationalize withholding financial, political, and even moral support from an institution than from the individual taxpayer who is struggling to pay the mortgage or to obtain affordable health care.

The school that takes its communication role seriously is the school that will receive the greatest public support when a program need arises or a crisis occurs. Public confidence cannot be bought. It must be earned through the daily actions of the entire school family and through a planned communication effort involving all education supporters, from the local school principal and PTA president to the district superintendent and the governing board.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

What is communication? It is an exchange of information between people. Conveying information alone does not involve an exchange; it is simply the act of providing someone with data, a one-way flow. When we communicate with someone, what are we really attempting to do? Most of the time, we are trying to change or mold that person’s attitude about something so that it becomes congruent with our own. Information is disposable; it can be presented, reviewed, or discarded—and with no attempt at changing attitudes, it may be simply a one-shot process. But you must make communication and attitude formation a continuous process.

Everyone involved in education is a communicator—a good one or a not-so-good one. As a principal or other educational leader, one of your major challenges is to build a schoolwide team of people who can effectively carry a positive message into the community about your school or district.

The communication process begins with determining what is currently being communicated about your school and deciding whether or not this is really what you wish to communicate. It then requires developing a strategy with an action plan that targets the opinion leaders within your community. These people will add their own perceptions to what is communicated and share their versions of the information with their constituencies. Local media will either reinforce the communication or add its own interpretation. Parents with students in your school will have their own assessments, as will your faculty and staff. This leads you back to Step 1, and the process begins over again. Once you understand the process of communication, you can begin to build understanding and support for your school.

DEALING WITH PERCEPTIONS

Educators tend to communicate with the public on the basis of facts, but the public does not always care about facts. Most people tend to function on the basis of individual perceptions. Each involved group operates according to a general consensus of what its members perceive. With the media adding its own spin, the public becomes confused and confidence levels toward schools drop.

As an example of perception, suppose two people witness a hit-and-run accident. When the police ask what color the car was, one witness says “gray” and the other says “green.” Who is correct? The fact that the car was actually blue loses out to the perceptions of the witnesses.

Recognizing that perception is often more powerful than reality, how do you address this incongruity, a matter over which you may feel you have no control? First, you try to look at your school from the points of view of your varied constituencies. When you realize what their perceptions are and understand why, then you are ready to plan and work to bring perception and reality closer together.

As in any other major enterprise, good public relations and positive public perception are important keys to a successful school operation. These keys are almost as important to schools as what goes on in the classroom—because they greatly enable schools to be more effective in providing quality education.

OPINION LEADERS

There are diverse groups of people involved with the schools. As an educational leader, you at various times deal with the following people:

- Governing board members
- The superintendent’s public information officer
- Central office staff
- Principals
- Teachers
- Support staff
- Students
- Parents
- Social service providers
- Community members
- Business leaders
- Legislators
- The media

Within most of these groups are individuals who function as opinion leaders. They are the people to whom others in the group turn for information and advice. How do you identify these citizens who have a following, who have credibility within the group, be it for their trustworthiness or for their expertise?

These opinion makers can be any number of informal leaders: the school secretary, the 25-year teacher, the president of the PTA, the local grocer or dry cleaner, the bank vice

president. Always be aware that, in one way or another, these opinion leaders have an interest in the schools of their community.

One of the interesting characteristics of opinion leaders is that they are seldom the loudmouths in their group. The person who complains at every PTA meeting is not an opinion leader. An opinion leader, generally, is the one who stands to speak when it is important and has a valid statement to make. These citizens are usually activists and positivists, and it is vital that you cultivate their support.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

In spite of our best efforts to be effective communicators, we aren't always successful in reaching our desired goals. This is true for many professionals, but especially true for educators because they tend to be so focused and dedicated to simply getting the job done that it seems almost unprofessional to be seen and heard tooting their own horn. This terminal modesty is a dangerous by-product of dedication to the task at hand.

Former high school teacher, coach, and principal (and Governing Board President as of spring, 2008), Orin K. Fulton of Agua Fria High School in Avondale, Arizona, doesn't mince words: "Publicize throughout the community your student successes in everything—athletics, academics, performance groups, success rates. Don't hide your good qualities—flaunt them!" Here's a challenge for you:

- Inform the public about your school's programs and activities.
- Build confidence in what you, your faculty, and staff are doing for students.
- Restore the partnership between parents, teachers, and community in meeting students' needs.
- Rally support for the total educational program.
- Enrich the home, school, and community by improving educational opportunities for all.

Now, that's a tall order. How can you possibly accomplish all of those tasks? Chapter 2 will explain how to

- identify the image your school presents and identify the community's perception of your school.
- develop a strategic plan.
- develop an action plan to implement your strategic plan.
- become an educator who communicates and put your plans to work.

If community members are made aware of the quality work your school is doing in educating their children, they will support your efforts wholeheartedly. You, as well as the students and their parents, faculty, and staff—in fact, the entire community—will reap the benefits of such a partnership. Confidence in American education will be renewed—step by step, student by student, family by family, school by school, and community by community.

Let the communicating begin.

Commandments for Communicators

1. Thou shalt accept that it is *difficult* to communicate clearly.
2. Thou shalt know what thy message is.
3. Thou shalt define what thine objective is.
4. Thou shalt remember who thine audience is.
5. Thou shalt simplify.
6. Thou shalt repeat. Thou shalt repeat.
7. Thou shalt respect the power of the parable.
8. Thou shalt weave humor into the fabric of thine message.
9. Thou shalt analyze how thy message has been received.
10. Thou shalt stop when thou hast no more to say.

Source: John Jay Daly, Daly Communications, Chevy Chase, MD.