

THE COMPETITIVE EDGE **Looking in, seeing beyond and reaching out**

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School communications need to be better than ever before. The abundance of misinformation and the speed with which it travels requires that school leaders multiply their communication efforts and pathways. The challenge is for educators to tap into the same resources the rest of the world is using and to do it in a selective and professional manner. Electronic newsletters, expanded district/school web sites, interactive surveys, and blog sites can be low cost ways to supplement traditional communications. Educators no longer control the topics or timelines for dispersing information, but they can ensure timely responses, anticipate issues and maintain a steady stream of correct information.

Ensure timely responses

- Respond to every relevant phone call, e-mail or letter within one working day, even if only to give a timeline for a thorough response. One Minnesota school district has even turned that expectation into a policy for all staff.
- Address emerging issues as quickly as possible. Test scores, anticipated program or boundary changes, incidents involving violence or injury, policy adjustments, taxes and referenda, learning gaps, school status, changes in personnel, etc., are issues of interest around which stories will be created in the absence of accurate information.
- Determine and publish a process for constituents to use when questions or concerns arise.
- Get the good news out fast. Whenever there is something to celebrate, have it posted on websites, included in newsletters, sent to staff and submitted to local media while the information is still relevant.
- Structure talking points about significant issues and distribute them to the appropriate people as soon as possible.

Anticipate issues

- Schedule regular time to research and review to relevant topics.
- Acknowledge and address the November elections as a prevailing issue for the future of education.
 - Share information with your stakeholders about the impact of elections on a quality system of public education.
 - Examine candidates' history, affiliations and objectives related to public education, taxes, local control, and federal and state intrusion.
 - Encourage your stakeholders to be active citizens, and suggest some nonpartisan criteria they might employ to identify the candidates they will support.
 - Build communication bridges to all candidates in your area, as you may be working together in the future. Focus on vision, issues and objectives rather than on individual personalities.
 - Congratulate the elected officials immediately after they are chosen, and indicate your desire to visit regularly and to work together on creative solutions to complex challenges.

Maintain a steady stream of correct information

- Demonstrate that you value stakeholder relationships through the use of interactive communications; surveys; focus groups; frequent visits to school sites and/or classrooms; regularly scheduled coffees with the principal/superintendent; columns in newsletters/newspapers; personal notes to staff, community members, and students on appropriate occasions; etc.
- Schedule regular and frequent communications on your calendar, just as you would a meeting.
- Formalize communication expectations for yourself, staff and parents.
- Model respectful listening through note-taking, feedback, and clarification.
- Test communication drafts for accuracy and attitude by having someone else review them prior to release.