

# COMMUNICATION



PLUS

School PR News You Can Use

June/July 2008

## This month's mailing includes:

- **Keeping the main thing the main thing**

With the myriad comments and concerns school boards address on a daily basis, it can be difficult to focus on the ultimate goal of student achievement. Use this framework as a basis for handling the many issues that can take your eye off the ball.

- **Recruiting new teachers**

A well-defined recruitment effort focused on a wide variety of opportunities to recruit and retain new and experienced teachers is essential to hiring quality staff members. This tip sheet suggests ways to recruit the best employees and include people in your community in the process.

- **Using data to communicate**

While data is very valuable for communicating about decisions, using too much data or presenting it in ways that are difficult to understand can backfire on you. Unnecessary data can alienate an audience or even anger people who are overwhelmed by the amount of data or way it is presented. This tip sheet suggests ways to present data so the information works for you rather than against you.

- **Communicating about assessment**

With today's emphasis on testing, it's hard for school board members and administrators to keep in mind the myriad ways teachers monitor how students are doing and whether they can apply the lessons they are learning. Check out what teachers in your district are doing to assess student progress, and find ways to present this broader perspective of student achievement to community members, parents and those with no children in your schools.

- **Insights family newsletter**

This month's family newsletter focuses on how families can protect their children from cyberbullying.

- **Ready-to-print art**

The ready-to-print art included with this issue focuses on the opening of school for a new year.

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### For school board members

## Keeping “the main thing the main thing”

There is no end to the subjects school boards must address during meetings and in one-on-one conversations. Topics can range from displeasure with school bus stops to nutritional values of lunch menus, to concerns over a school’s student enrollment numbers and building capacity. School board members around the country can point to questions they’ve been asked or complaints they’ve received about topics that often times may not seem to have anything to do with what is supposed to be their main focus – student achievement.

In board discussions and everyday conversations, it is sometimes difficult to “keep the main thing the main thing” because educating young people isn’t done in isolation. Many other factors influence the learning process. And often emotional concerns give those factors top billing.

To help maintain your focus on the education of young people, consider the topics with which you deal in the context of the key responsibilities of school boards as outlined by the National School Boards Association – vision, standards, assessment, accountability, alignment, climate, collaborative relationships and continuous improvement.

Addressing questions about school bus stops, student travel times and distances, school start and stop times, staff qualifications, school funding, enrollment increases and declines, lunch, nutrition and health fall within this framework and have a place in school board discussions, but with the caveat, “How does a decision about this topic affect the education of our students?”

Consider the questions below and think of ways you can use the framework as a basis for handling the many topics with which you must deal while still focusing on educating young people.

### → **Vision**

When was the last time your board discussed the district’s vision? Does your district have a clearly-written and easily understood vision statement? Was the community involved in its development? Does it reflect the work of the district? Does it emphasize educating young people as the district’s primary focus? Is the statement included in all district publications and on your Web site?

### → **Standards**

Are you able to explain what “standards” mean in your district? If you are asked to speak at a parent meeting about academic standards, can you do it? Do you understand the standards? Why they are important? And why, as a board member, have you approved the standards adopted for your school district?

### → **Assessment**

Are you able to discuss the assessments used in your district and what information they provide educators? If an angry parent called you demanding to know why grades are issued as they are, would you be able to explain academic assessments or know who to refer that parent to for an answer? What is your district doing to help parents understand the assessment criteria used in your district not only for students, but for staff and district operations as well?

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## → **Accountability**

How are you holding yourself, your fellow board members and the district's staff accountable for educating young people? Do you have a systematic review process for all the district's operations – one that addresses the impact of each on student learning? How does the board hold itself accountable for student learning?

## → **Alignment**

How are you aligning resources to enhance learning experiences for students? Are board decisions supporting district efforts to provide necessary resources to classrooms? Have you considered enhancing your resources through community partnerships, grants or other sources? What has the board set as criteria for budget development? Does the staff clearly understand the priorities you have established and why?

## → **Climate**

Do you know what the climate is in your district? Climate can be a far-reaching concept that can include attitudes and atmosphere (staff morale, student safety) as well as facilities and environment (clean air, environmentally sound construction).

Do you make regular visits to schools, classrooms, and other district facilities? Do you initiate conversations with staff, parents and others in the community or do you wait for them to contact you? If asked, how would you describe the district's climate to a parent who is new in the district?

## → **Collaborative relationships**

Collaborative relationships don't just happen, they require nurturing and support. What does the board do to foster relationships with the staff, parents and others in the community to enhance student learning? Are you supportive of internships and community exchange programs for staff and students? Are you recognized in the community as advocates for improved student learning?

## → **Continuous improvement**

What is your district doing to ensure continuous improvement in student learning? Do you support staff in-service and learning opportunities? Do board members participate in conferences and meetings to learn about the latest trends and developments in student learning?

After answering these questions, think about where some of the many topics with which you deal fit into the framework – and how the issue you are addressing impacts the education process. By doing this you may find it is a bit easier to keep the main thing the main thing and to keep your focus on the education of all students.

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*Contributed by: Jackie Smith, communications consultant*

*Note: Check with CASB or the National School Boards Association for additional information about the key work of school boards and guidance for handling your role as a school board member.*

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## **Communicating teacher quality builds community support**

Research tells us that quality teachers are key to successful student achievement and that parent and community support boosts student achievement. Hiring the best teachers available and making sure your community is told about your district's highly qualified staff can be a win-win situation for students and for the school district.

A well-defined recruitment effort focused on a wide variety of opportunities to recruit and retain new and experienced teachers is essential to hiring quality staff members. Below are some ways to recruit the best employees and include people in your community in the process.

### **Recruiting new teachers**

Make recruiting a community-wide effort. Organize an advisory task force including representatives from local businesses, civic organizations, the Chamber of Commerce and parent organizations, in addition to representatives of school employee unions and district administrators. Use the group to help design a plan to attract new teachers to the community. This effort is similar to a campaign a community might mount when trying to lure a new business to the area. The task force needs to create ways to attract and retain new teachers fresh out of college and with limited resources.

- ➔ To get started, the task force might consider:
  - Providing promotional incentives such as discount shopping coupons with local merchants;
  - Highlighting affordable housing in the community;
  - Encouraging the local ministerial association to have special events to welcome new teachers;
  - Involving the local visitor and tourism bureau and local real estate agents in developing recruitment materials;
  - Involving the entire community in a celebration for teachers at the beginning of the school year; and
  - Distributing a handbook introducing new teachers and recognizing all teachers' contributions.
- ➔ It's also important to do an internal analysis of the district's recruitment practices.
  - Could the district be more creative?
  - Are you recruiting teachers year-around? If not, maybe it's time to start.
  - Could the district coordinate with surrounding districts to hold a regional recruiting fair?
  - What about recruiting future teachers from the district's high school students? Do you have a program similar to the once-popular Future Teachers of America?
  - Do you work with teacher training universities to encourage people who have been working in private industry to become teachers?
  - Do you provide student teachers a positive learning experience in the district?
- ➔ Make sure your recruitment materials look professional. If you want to attract qualified candidates, develop well-designed recruitment materials that meet professional and personal needs. Effective recruitment materials include:

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- A clear and concise statement of the district’s vision, mission and goals;
  - Demographic information about the community, such as major employers, housing opportunities, shopping centers, and recreational and cultural activities;
  - Multicultural information about the schools and the community;
  - Academic program information and federally-required Adequate Yearly Progress information;
  - Special program information including unique state and federal grants, volunteer programs, partnerships and community programs;
  - Professional development opportunities and ways the district supports new teachers;
  - Certification information for new or transferring teachers;
  - Information about the application process, current openings, compensation and employee benefits; and
  - Information about the community.
- Use the district Web site. A well-designed Web site with easy-to-find information about the school district and community; up-to-date information about employment opportunities, compensation and benefits, and information on the application process is vital in today’s Internet-based communication culture.
- Make sure your district has the following characteristics and then describe them in your teacher-recruitment materials and on the district’s Web site:
- Well-behaved students eager to learn;
  - Supportive parents;
  - Supportive administrators, school board and parents; and
  - Effective and motivated teachers who will mentor new teachers.
- Organize recruitment teams. Recruitment teams should include principals, teachers and community members. A well-trained recruitment team will have a positive impact on the district’s ability to recruit. Community participation will have a two-fold benefit:
- Positive, community representatives who can speak to the benefits of living in the community, and
  - Community representatives who can carry the message to other community members about the high-quality applicants the district is interviewing.

Train the teams in effective hiring practices, recruitment criteria, and ways to identify and screen potential candidates. For team use, provide a strong visual presentation about district schools and programs, and the community.

### **Once you’ve hired the best, tell the community.**

- Feature photos and biographies of new and returning teachers on district and school Web sites.
- At the start of the school year, invite parents to each of the district’s schools to meet the teachers. Create a booklet featuring a photo and background of each teacher to share with parents.
- Invite the community to a “welcome back to school” party at the beginning of the school year to meet new and returning teachers. Develop interactive activities for community members and teachers.
- Feature teacher profiles in building and district newsletters, and key communicator newsletters.
- Create a regular school board agenda item to recognize teachers who have done outstanding work.

*Contributed by: Margaret Peterson, APR, communications consultant*

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## Communicating data in clear terms

The call for public organizations to be accountable carries with it the need to be believable. That often requires using facts and figures to demonstrate that reliable information was examined as a decision was made or to verify measurable progress in some area.

While data is very valuable for communicating about decisions, using too much data or presenting it in ways that are difficult to understand can backfire. Unnecessary data can alienate an audience or even anger people who are overwhelmed by the amount of data or the way it is presented.

Following are some ways to present data so that the information works for you rather than against you:

### → **Determine which information matters the most.**

When making decisions, there are usually large amounts of data to consider. All of it may be important to the decision, but there are probably only a few pieces that pertain to the main concerns of the public. Or there may be one piece of data that stands out as the main reason for the ultimate decision. If you use that one study or one piece of data and communicate it in an easily-understood way, your need for communicating more data will probably be very limited. You may need to provide lists of data used to make a decision, but you will probably not need to provide or interpret all of the data used.

### → **Keep it short.**

When dealing with a controversy or making a difficult decision, the temptation may be to make sure the public knows everything you know. Even if you have used the method described above to narrow your data, the one study that influenced you the most may contain many pages of tables, graphs and explanations. Try summarizing all of that data in one or two simple sentences using words that you might use when talking with someone about the issues. For example, a school board considering a promotion policy might examine many different studies focused on the implications of promoting or not promoting students to the next grade level. That data might be summed up by stating, "Most studies of students who were made to repeat a grade show that several years later they have not progressed. In fact, they are usually farther behind than ever."

A summary statement of this type suggests that you examined many studies and drew a conclusion based on the findings of those studies. In some cases, you might want to give a list of the studies used to make the decision, but, in most cases, that will not be necessary. However, you should have such a list available should there be questions from a patron.

### → **Keep it simple.**

When talking about data, use simple words. In some cases, one data picture is worth more than a thousand words. For example, when showing that students in a specific school consistently score above the state average on statewide achievement tests, a simple bar graph illustrating that school's average score compared with the state average score tells the story.

→ **Present the data in understandable terms.**

Think about something in everyday life that illustrates the point made by your data. For example, if increased food costs are causing a school district to raise the price of school lunches, give the increase in the cost of one carton of milk over the past year and apply that to how many cartons of milk you serve each day or for a year.

If the increase in the cost of fuel is causing the district to have to change student transportation routes or trim the budget in other areas, give the average cost of transporting one student to school a year ago compared with today's cost and tell how many students are transported to school.

These kinds of explanations remind people of your primary mission – educating students. It also reminds them of basic student needs. It will also help people in your community think about the impact things they experience every day have on students and schools.

Your short-term aim should be to help people easily understand why the schools have certain problems and to arouse their sympathy and support. The long-term results will speak for themselves.

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*Contributed by: Gay Campbell, APR, communications consultant*

## Measuring achievement is more than tests

It's not uncommon these days to view efforts to meet state and national academic standards as a testing game. The media looks at state and national test scores to see if your schools are measuring up and to see if the various grade levels being tested are above or below national, state and other school averages. Then they report the results in a format that looks like box scores on the sports page.

With all this emphasis on testing, it's hard for school board members and administrators to keep in mind the myriad ways teachers monitor how students are doing and whether they can apply the lessons they are learning.

Check out what teachers in your district are doing to assess student progress, and find ways to present this broader perspective of student achievement to community members, both parents and those with no children in your schools.

Some of the assessment techniques other than tests you may find are:

- ➔ **Assessment stations** are areas designated by a teacher that are used specifically for assessment purposes. These areas may be located inside or outside the classroom. A teacher may decide to use assessment stations to have students demonstrate a skill, make observations or manipulate materials. A teacher may observe and keep records of student performance, or students may work through assessment stations, recording their work in a written format.
- ➔ **Individual assessments** focus on individual student progress. Assessment activities constructed by a teacher are completed individually by the students. Teachers have students work individually on written assignments, presentations or performance assessment tasks to assess individual progress.
- ➔ **Group assessments** focus on the progress a group of students makes by cooperating and collaborating to complete assessment activities organized by the teacher. To assess social skills and cooperative learning processes, teachers may have students complete written assignments or make presentations.
- ➔ **Contracts** are agreements between an individual student, or a group of students and a teacher regarding what activity will be undertaken, who will do it, how it will be done, when it will be completed and how it will be evaluated according to teacher-established criteria.
- ➔ **Self- and peer-assessments** refer to the students' own assessment of their progress in knowledge, skills, processes or attitudes, or to student assessment of other students. Peer- assessments can be conducted either individually or collaboratively in groups.
- ➔ **Student-led conferences** are one form of self-assessment currently in use. This type of self-evaluation encourages a student to become involved in setting criteria for evaluation of his or her work. Used sensitively, with more emphasis on student growth and self-understanding than on arriving at a final grade, self-evaluation can contribute to a student's ability to structure his or her learning. It can increase a student's ownership of the learning process.
- ➔ **Portfolios** are collections of student work that assist students and teachers in making judgments about a student's learning progress. Samples of work to be included may be selected by the student, by the teacher, or by the student and teacher in consultation.

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- ➔ **Senior projects** are major research or intern-type experiences that high school seniors must complete in order to graduate. Often these projects are community-service based. They are designed to not only increase the student's knowledge and skills, but also benefit the field of study or the organization that is the object of the project.

### **Tell the assessment story.**

Once you've identified the many ways teachers gather information to assess their students' achievement, let your community know how teachers are monitoring learning, not merely auditing the absorption of facts for a test. Five tips for telling the assessment story are listed below:

- ➔ Encourage teachers to include information about the ways they are monitoring student progress in any classroom newsletters they send home or on their individual Web sites.
- ➔ Show building administrators ways to include reports about assessment and student achievement in their school newsletters, on their school Web sites, or in presentations to parent and other community groups.
- ➔ Use district publications to show the various ways student achievement is measured through stories that feature one teacher, one student, or one program in order to help readers – especially those with no children in school – understand how a particular type of assessment improves instruction and student learning.
- ➔ Create an assessment section on the district Web site that includes more than the latest test scores. Use brief “case studies” to show the variety of ways teachers assess student progress and ways these kinds of assessments are helping students apply what they learn.
- ➔ Find ways to showcase student learning and assessment techniques in presentations to community groups. Consider having students and teachers make these presentations at a school board meeting, a Chamber of Commerce or community organization meeting, or a senior center gathering.

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*Contributed by: Jeanne Magmer, APR, communications consultant*