

CHAPTER 7

Building and maintaining relationships in your community

Strong, positive relationships play an important role in being an effective school board member, and creating those relationships can be one of the most fulfilling aspects of your position.

Without good working relationships, even the best plans cannot come to fruition. To maintain the support needed for a successful school district, school boards must build these relationships internally – with each other, the superintendent and the staff – and externally – with parents, the community, other local government, state and federal officials.

A successful board devotes a significant amount of time and attention nurturing its relationships and encouraging two-way communication with the various publics it serves.

In the first chapter, we discussed board member relationships and how boards work, and in the following chapter, we will discuss the relationship between a board and its superintendent.

This chapter will focus on the board’s relationships with the diverse and demanding audiences mentioned above – namely, the many communities within your community. Inside the district, this includes administrators, teachers, students and parents. Beyond that, there are business leaders, local officials, community activists and other residents and taxpayers in your community.

These relationships overlap in many ways, but have one key similarity: They are all important to you.

A PLANNED PUBLIC RELATIONS SYSTEM PROMOTES A HEALTHY DISTRICT

If you’ve just weathered a crisis or failed a tax election, you may be painfully aware of the need for an organized system of communicating with the staff and community. If not, you may be lulled into thinking you don’t need to spend money on “PR” because everything is going okay. Don’t be fooled.

Positive public relations is as essential to student achievement in your school district as well-articulated curricula, and neither should be left to chance. An effective school district public relations program creates an environment in which the district can achieve its goals. It also demonstrates a school district’s accountability to the taxpayers – or shareholders – of the school district.

School districts that have the support of their staff and community pass needed tax elections. Boards and administrators that employ systems to discover and manage issues often can spot a crisis before it happens. School leaders who work to keep employees informed and involved generally have happier employees who enjoy their jobs and work hard to do their part in educating students.

CASBtip

For assistance with board relationship challenges, contact CASB at governing@casb.org

Just as regular exercise promotes a healthy body, an ongoing program of public relations promotes a healthy school district.

Many school boards and administrators fear spending taxpayer money on public relations. This fear can be quickly dispelled if they realize what a good public relations program is . . . and is not.

It *is* wrong to spend taxpayer dollars on efforts to cover up bad decisions or to “spin” the school district’s story into a false positive light. But that is not what school public relations is all about.

An effective public relations program supports the district’s mission. It creates a positive environment for student achievement by helping the school district align its goals with the expectations the community has for its schools. Thus, school public relations requires a planned system of two-way communication – a system that listens to the district’s publics and is accountable to those publics.

A SCHOOL BOARD’S ROLE

A school board’s role in governing the school district is both corporate and familial. This means that a board makes decisions as a corporate body, but also has a role in maintaining positive relationships between the school district and its many publics.

CASBtip

Great governing is vital for board success. We have found the following essential roles and standards for boards to be effective in meeting the goal of great governing.

Essential roles

- Setting clear expectations
- Creating conditions for success
- Holding the system accountable to expectations
- Building collective will
- Learning together as a board team

Standards

- Operating as a visionary, ethical governance team
- Providing effective leadership for improved student learning
- Acting with fiscal responsibility
- Complying with state/federal law and board policy
- Establishing a human resource system that enables all people to contribute meaningfully
- Ensuring safe and equitable access to learning
- Building effective legislative and community relationships

Thanks, in part, to the Lighthouse Project

BEGIN WITH BOARD POLICY

A school board’s role in governing the school district is both corporate and familial. This means that a board makes decisions as a corporate body, but also has a role in maintaining positive relationships between the school district and its many publics.

As a corporate body, a board adopts policies that govern the school district, including those that direct the staff’s public relations or school district accountability efforts. These policies should address the familial role of the school board. For example, a board should have policies that consider how it will communicate with the public as well as listen to the public.

A board should also have policies or operating norms that address members’ relationships and communication with each other, with the superintendent and with district staff. A board that models honest, straightforward communication will go a long way toward promoting positive relations between the district and the community.

A school board policy that requires two-way communication with internal and external publics will reinforce the importance of strong relationships with the community and set the tone for school district accountability. Many other school board policies are essential to good community relations, including those that address:

- Communication within the school district
- How the public may obtain information from the school district
- Procedures used when the public wishes to speak at a school board meeting
- How the district will interact with the news media and others
- A commitment to engaging the community

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Many school districts have a strategic plan that guides district actions. This strategic plan should address the role of public relations in meeting school district goals. Many strategic plans contain specific strategies and action steps for building positive relationships with the staff and community. Your school district's community relations program should be included in the district's strategic plan and targeted at achieving the overall goals of the school district. In addition, staff, parents and other community members are great partners for a board in the process to develop or refine a strategic plan.

STAFF RELATIONSHIPS: THE KEY TO A GOOD PUBLIC IMAGE

The relationship between district leadership and its staff can either make or break a district's reputation. When teachers, administrators and support personnel are well-informed about board policies and are proud of the work they are doing, they tell their friends and neighbors and do much to instill a positive public image for their schools and school district. Conversely, a district leadership team with poor staff relationships can almost always expect a negative public image.

A school board can go a long way toward promoting good will and understanding simply by governing effectively and communicating well. All district personnel, both licensed and classified, should work within the parameters of written board policies covering such items as duties, salaries, insurance, absences, leaves, resignations, dismissal and other items applicable to a particular group. A board must ensure these policies are clearly communicated to staff. Board policies should provide opportunities for employees to share ideas, concerns and expertise as efforts are made to improve district services and the policies themselves.

Employees generally speak highly of an employer when they feel valued. Appreciation and respect are rewards that any school board can afford to give its employees.

EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION PROCESSES

Most boards and superintendents use a variety of tools to communicate with staff. Board meetings are, of course, open to all employees. It is important that the staff be familiar with the work of the board and vice versa. Some boards periodically schedule meetings with staff to gain firsthand knowledge of the workings of various departments. Some superintendents meet with staff and then report to the board. Some boards schedule informal gatherings to get better acquainted with employees. Others meet on occasion with committees representing employees. School districts often use bulletins or online newsletters to help keep employees informed of the board's vision or board action. In many districts, it is common practice for staff committees to be assigned responsibility for studying specific problems and issues.

CASB recommends that boards establish appropriate avenues for communicating with administrators as well as licensed and support staff. Generally, board-staff communications are coordinated through the superintendent. In particular, all official communications, policies and directives of staff interest and concern should be communicated to staff members through the superintendent. In all circumstances, district leadership should communicate important information to staff before it is communicated to parents or the community at large.

School visits offer excellent opportunities for two-way communication between a board and staff. Many boards work with the superintendent to maintain a regular schedule for school visits. Individual board members interested in visiting schools or in volunteering should make arrangements through the principal with the full knowledge of the superintendent and fellow board members. Board members must regard these visits as informal expressions of interest and not as “inspections” or visits for supervisory or administrative purposes. Members should share information gleaned from school visits with the full board-superintendent team.

Staff and board members share a keen interest in the schools and in public education. Board members can anticipate informal discussion on education issues when they see staff outside of the district and should be cognizant of proper communication channels, even in informal settings.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS: A CHECKLIST

- Does the board have a policy specifying community relations goals and objectives?
- Is there a step-by-step plan for implementing this policy that specifies each aspect of the communication or community relations program, and who will be responsible for that aspect?
- Do you have a plan for dealing effectively with the news media?
- If you have delegated community relations responsibilities to some staff members, have you made adequate budgetary provisions to support the program?
- Is the superintendent asked to regularly report on the progress of the community relations program?
- Has the board stressed the importance of good communication throughout the school community?
- Is community relations training included in the in-service programs for district employees?
- Does the district have a publication directed to its employees?
- Is there a planned way of communicating with parents and nonparents?
- Is there a plan for feedback from both staff members and the public?
- Does the board use its meetings as a vehicle for communication and feedback?
- Does the district use citizen advisory committees?
- Do school board members participate in school and community events and stay in touch with other public service and government agencies?
- Does the board observe an appropriate chain of command for resolving complaints or grievances raised by school staff or patrons?
- Are all communication efforts evaluated at least annually?
- Does the board have a designated spokesperson?
- Does the public have easy access to board agendas, policies, financial data, student achievement data and other information?
- Are public surveys, community conversations or other tools used before the board takes action on major policy items such as the budget or school closings? Do you use your board meetings to showcase district programs and emphasize student achievement?

Adapted from Becoming a Better Board Member, a publication of the National School Boards Association

THE BOARD AS LINK TO THE COMMUNITY

As laypeople elected to govern the public schools, the school board can view itself as link between the school district and the community-at-large. This implies a responsibility to maintain open and honest two-way communications that build relationships between the district and the public it serves. This is a weighty responsibility!

ACCOUNTABILITY, IT'S THE LAW

Ultimately, relationships are effective if there is a strong sense of accountability. For school boards in Colorado, accountability is part of the law.

State law requires each board of education to appoint or create a process for a school district accountability committee. C.R.S. § 22-11-301. The committee has statutory powers and duties, including making recommendations to the board concerning the school district's budget priorities. C.R.S. § 22-11-302. In addition to budget issues, the district accountability committee's areas of study must be cooperatively determined at least annually by the board and the committee. As amended by the state legislature in the Education Accountability Act of 2009 (the Act), district accountability committees must also advise and provide recommendations to the board concerning the contents of the district's performance, improvement, priority improvement, or turnaround plan, for purposes of the district's accreditation. The district's accreditation category determines the type of plan required.

State law also requires an accountability committee at each school. C.R.S. § 22-11-401. In many smaller districts (500 students or less), the district accountability committee may function in both capacities. Similar to the district accountability committee, school accountability committees have statutory powers and duties, including making recommendations to the principal concerning the school's budget priorities. C.R.S. § 22-11-402. As amended by the Act, school accountability committees must also provide recommendations concerning the school's performance, improvement, priority improvement or turnaround plan for purposes of the school's accreditation. The school's accreditation category determines the type of plan required. The Act also requires a school accountability committee to meet at least quarterly to discuss whether school leadership, personnel, and infrastructure are advancing or impeding implementation of the school's performance, improvement, priority improvement or turnaround plan or other progress pertinent to the school's accreditation contract with the board of education.

Accountability committees are important key communicators for the school district. Beyond the legal requirements, boards and superintendents can rely on these engaged stakeholders to study issues, participate in planning sessions or carry out other tasks important to the school or district. Keeping accountability committee members informed, soliciting their opinions and asking them to help educate others can extend the board's reach into the community and help the board anticipate issues.

HANDLING COMPLAINTS – OR WHAT TO DO IN THE GROCERY STORE LINE

Board policy should address the board’s process for hearing and addressing public complaints and input. Still there may be times when individuals attempt to direct complaints or expressions of concern about district operations to an individual board member. Even if the member wishes to listen with courtesy and sincerity, it is generally advisable to refer the person to the superintendent or administrator who has responsibilities in the area of concern. It is almost never advisable for the board member to assume direct responsibility for a problem, particularly when student or staff relations are involved.

AT THE BOARD MEETING

Occasionally, a person or group of people will come to a board meeting to express concern. The board should anticipate these events by having in place a well-developed and communicated protocol for public comment that is used at all times. These procedures often address the amount of time individuals are permitted to speak, the civil tone expected and state that the board will not be making decisions on issues that are not on the agenda.

Whether public concern is founded on fact or fiction, the board should take a leadership role, understanding that individuals addressing the board are often nervous, frustrated, angry or feel “wronged” in some way. As in one-on-one conversations, courteous and sincere listening can go a long way to diffuse a potentially difficult situation.

WHAT IS THE MEDIA AND HOW DO WE RELATE TO THEM?

The definition of “media” is changing. At one time, school boards could expect ongoing coverage from a local newspaper reporter familiar with the education beat. Today, news is delivered primarily electronically through television, radio, online news sources and blogs, and word travels rapidly through social media. Fewer newspapers exist, and those that do operate with a much leaner staff. Reporters who are well-versed in the intricacies of public education are few and far between. This provides school boards both an opportunity and a responsibility to reach out to the media using a well-developed plan.

But first, a board must understand how the media views its role. Reporters feel a responsibility to the public to report what they see and hear. What they report in the news and what they say in their editorial comments influences the public’s attitude toward the schools. If media attend a board meeting and observe that trivial rather than important matters are being discussed, that is what they will present to the public. If they observe dissension among the board, news reports will reflect that dissension. If reporters hear discussions of significant issues along with constructive and civil debate, there is a better chance for meaningful coverage of school issues. It is also helpful to understand the definition of news: something new, unusual or noteworthy. From a media perspective, this often includes conflict, crisis and even the bizarre.

It behooves a school board to direct the superintendent to develop a media-relations plan as part of the overall district communications plan. While the media’s job does not necessarily include promoting the school district, a media plan allows the district to be proactive with the news media and often results in more favorable coverage. The absence of a plan often renders the district reactive to the media. And, in the event of a crisis in the district, a well-developed media plan is essential.

WHAT'S IN A MEDIA RELATIONS PLAN?

The plan should include a clear definition of district spokespersons. In general, a school board should speak to the media only on board or board policy issues. The board president generally serves as the official spokesperson for the board, and individual board members should refer media questions to the spokesperson when possible. The superintendent or designated district staff members should speak to the media on all other district matters. However, when dissention is present, the media will often try to get “both sides of the story.” This means when there is disagreement among board members or among board and staff, reporters will focus on the conflict. Individual members should resist the urge to participate in this kind of coverage, as it can exacerbate the situation and reflect negatively on the district’s image.

The district’s media plan should include strategies for building positive working relationships with media representatives. The media should be kept advised of major school district initiatives, district accomplishments, scheduled activities in the district and other newsworthy issues. Similarly, when crises arise or there is “bad news” to report, the media should be given factual information in a timely and fair manner. The district’s media relations plan should outline steps to be taken in reporting to the media during a crisis.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Mark Twain once said, “A lie can travel halfway around the world, while the truth is putting on its shoes.” With the advent of social media, this old adage is more true than ever. School boards should think carefully about what is posted on social media, knowing that comments and photos can be spread widely in a manner of minutes, can be misrepresented and cannot be erased or taken back. Individual board members should treat social media as they do any other interaction with the public, understanding that people often confuse a board member’s personal opinion with an official position of the board as a whole.

CRISIS COMMUNICATION: PREPARE FOR THE UNEXPECTED

Every school district should have a written plan for communicating during a crisis, and then with good fortune, never have to use it. In the context of public relations, a crisis could include such situations as a group of angry citizens, student protest, personnel issue, weather event, a school shooting or any number of other events that affect students, the schools or the district as a whole. Obviously in any crisis, the safety and security of students and staff are paramount. But also, the manner in which a crisis is handled directly affects the district’s reputation.

The most important factor in maintaining a good reputation in a difficult situation is how well the school district communicates year-round. Relationships that are nurtured on an ongoing basis generally remain strong during a crisis. Staff and community members who are accustomed to receiving regular and trusted information from district leaders will turn to them for the facts during a crisis. A board should ensure that the superintendent has in place a written plan for communicating during a crisis. The plan should include such items as designated spokespersons, vehicles for communication, audiences who will receive communication and in what order, and guidelines for what information may be communicated.

NOW, GET OUT THERE AND ENGAGE YOUR COMMUNITY

To govern effectively, you must first know your community's competing community values that come into play in board decision-making. You must know what your community wants for your schools and for the community.

An effective way to get this information is through community engagement. To understand public engagement, it is often helpful to start with what it is not. It is not a newsletter, a survey or an effort to get community "buy in" to a decision already made.

Community engagement is a long-term effort to generate community dialogue around broad issues that affect a school district and the community it serves. Engaging community members in face-to-face discussions about things important to them provides insight into what they value and how that affects what you are doing as a school district. It also can begin to create a shared sense of direction and a willingness to share responsibility.

Here are some tips for successfully engaging your community:

BEGIN WITH THE RIGHT ISSUE

You don't have to engage the community on every decision the board makes, but you should engage them in the big issues that have broad impact. Colorado school boards have engaged community members in dialogue about such things as:

- The mission and vision of the school district
- District budget priorities
- Graduation guidelines
- The search for a new superintendent

In each of these instances, boards relied on data and staff expertise as part of its decision-making process. However, community engagement allowed boards to bring something else to the table – the "voices" of the community and a better understanding of the community values affected by the issue.

FRAME THE ISSUE IN COMMUNITY TERMS

It is important that boards and educators think "outside the box" in community engagement. If you want the public to participate in a discussion about the issue, it must be framed in terms that will be attractive and meaningful enough to get them to come to the meeting. For example, rather than asking a group of parents to help you decide the mission of the school district, it might be more effective to ask them to discuss how the school district can work to ensure that their child gets the best education possible. You will still get helpful information to help the board revisit the mission; it will just be framed in different terms.

CREATE CONVERSATION, NOT EDUCATION

The crux of community engagement is face-to-face dialogue on issues. This effort is most effective when it is conducted through small-group discussions. These discussions can take place in homes, churches, workplaces, recreation centers or schools – anyplace that people comfortably gather. Discussions should be guided, but not "managed." There should be an agenda, yet participants should also be allowed the freedom to say what is on their minds. The meetings should be facilitated either by a school board member or an outside facilitator and notes should be kept from each meeting. This is a time for board members and district officials to listen, not a time to educate the public on what you are doing.

KEEP THE CONVERSATIONS GOING

There are a variety of ways to structure a public engagement program and no one way is right or wrong. However it is important that engagement efforts be ongoing. Asking community members to discuss issues only when you want something – for example to pass a bond or mill levy election – will make them distrustful. The ideal would be to have several groups of people discussing several different issues. Sometimes a group will want to have more than one meeting on a topic. Letting the group take on "a life of its own" often has benefits.

DON'T FORGET STAFF AND STUDENTS

They are part of your school district community, and more important, your district family. Be sure that they are included in your engagement process. Keep staff informed about what you are hearing from the community. Providing them a better understanding of community values will only help their work.

The key to effective engagement efforts is to have a well-planned system that invites people to participate with the board in discussing issues. When it works best, it encourages individuals to arrive at their own solutions to a common concern.

POINTS TO REMEMBER IN STICKY SITUATIONS

Test yourself by answering some of the questions below. There is rarely one right answer. The key is to remember the principles behind sound, reasonable responses.

THE SPLIT VOTE

Question: *Can you comment on the board's unanimous vote to approve a controversial plan to cut the music program?*

Your Answer: _____

Example of a good response: *I had my opportunity at the board table to convince the other members, and I wasn't able to do that. Now we will move forward with this decision and support families as they make the transition to a new school.*

THE UNANIMOUS VOTE

Question: *You were opposed to closing that school but the board voted against you. How are you going to deal with parents from that school?*

Your Answer: _____

Example of a good response: *With tight budgets, the board has had to make some very difficult choices. After weighing the options, we voted to discontinue the music program. Our hope is when the budget outlook is better, we will be able to revisit the decision.*

Points to remember in these situations:

- Don't rehash the discussion that occurred at the board table
- Don't air your disappointment with fellow board members or staff
- Don't assign blame
- Support and abide by the board's decision

THE HOT TOPIC

Question: *How do you feel about the nutritional value of the meals the students get in school?*

Your Answer: _____

Example of a good response: *Our food services program follows federal and state guidelines that apply to the nutritional value of the meals served to our students. The best person to provide a more detailed picture is our Director of Food Services, who can be contacted through the central office.*

Points to remember in this situation:

- Explain the background
- Stick to facts
- Don't make predictions
- Outline the process
- Assure proper procedure
- When appropriate, refer to staff

AN INCIDENT OR CRISIS

Question: *The teacher who was arrested has a history of this in other states. Did the district do a background check before hiring him?*

Your Answer: _____

Example of a good response: *I cannot speak to that specifically as it is a personnel issue. We do have a process, and the superintendent will be able to detail the specifics of that process for you. However, I can tell you, our responsibility, first and foremost, is student safety. We have the appropriate staff on campus to help students deal with this situation. The administration will review policies and procedures and if necessary, make recommendations to the board.*

Points to remember in this situation:

- Follow the law (personnel, student privacy)
- Let the board spokesperson, district spokesperson or police speak to the specifics
- Convey that the district is in control
- Assure student safety and student support