



Start with a Solid Foundation: Communication Strategies for New Superintendents

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Guiding Principle for Communication in Districts

- The perceived quality of the education program in your district depends largely on the interactions and relationships that stakeholders have with your district.



What is a Communication Plan?

- A communication plan is your road map for how you will effectively communicate with your stakeholders on an ongoing basis. Like a budget, a communication plan will help identify how and what a district will communicate. In addition to having an overall communication plan, you may also develop short-range communication plans to address specific issues.



Effective Communication

- Mass communication – used to inform. Mass communication techniques do not change attitudes or behaviors. These techniques can reinforce attitudes and behaviors, and can create awareness by sharing information.
- Interpersonal communication – used to connect on a personal level. Interpersonal communication techniques are more likely to lead to a change in a person's attitudes or behaviors.



Hierarchy of Effective Communication

- One-to-one, face-to-face
- Small group discussion or meeting
- Speaking before a large group
- Phone conversation
- Hand-written, personal note
- Typewritten, personal letter
- Personal “form letter”
- Mass produced, non-personal letter
- Brochure sent as a direct-mail piece
- Articles in a newsletter
- News carried in the press
- Advertising in media
- Others – billboards, give-aways, etc.



Types of Communication Processes

- No communication process
- Event, issue or crisis based communication
- Regular, ongoing communication
- Strategic, integrated communication



Relationships Are Key

- Positive relationships are essential for superintendents to be successful. And the key to establishing positive relationships is on-going, two-way communication with key stakeholders.



How We Judge Quality

- Consistent and logical decisions
- Visibility of school leaders
- Respect for the past
- Competitiveness of athletic teams
- Visibility of students and teachers
- Behavior of students
- Pertinence of information they receive
- Condition of buildings and grounds
- Test scores compared to other districts
- Days that school is not in session
- Attire of teachers and other staff
- Comments from employees
- What other people say about your schools
- Response to a crisis
- The Boston Public Test
- And anything else they want!



Develop a 100-day Listening Plan

- Be intentional about getting acquainted
- Tell people how you plan to connect with them
- Solicit comments from key stakeholders
- Establish an early presence in your district and community



Assess your District's Communication Program and Investment

- Find out how information is shared
- Find out who feeds the grapevine and with what information
- Determine staff and community attitudes about the district
- Determine what's in place and what's missing
- Consider an audit or review of your district's communication program



Develop a Communication Plan

- If you don't have a plan, it will never get done
- Layout your communication objectives and strategies to achieve them
- Plan demonstrates that communication is a priority
- Build a lesson plan on how to communicate



Make an Investment in Communication

- Effective communication only happens through making it a priority
- Investment does not always mean financial investment
- Time, effort, human resources
- What is a supportive community and engaged staff worth to you?



Identify and Seek Out Opinion Leaders

- Find out the people who have influence in your community and district
- Create a data base of these leaders
- Build relationships with your opinion leaders
- Regularly communicate with them



Explain Reasons Behind Decisions

- Help people to think strategically
- Provide people with a way to focus on what's really important
- Streamline discussion process by using executive summary guide
- Provides communication outline for every key issue and decision



Attach Communication Thinking to Every Decision

- Add one key question to all important agenda items
- Add, “How will we communicate this issue or decision”
- Begins to make communication a routine part of what you do
- Gets people to think about community reaction while decision is being made



Establish and Use a Communication Protocol

- Format provides a tool to think about communication
- Allows people to think through issues before responding
- Another way to make communication a routine part of what you do



Review Your Crisis Communication Plan

- Be ready before the crisis occurs
- Update the plan and train staff on regular basis
- Plan is no good if no one knows how to use it
- You will be judged on your response to the crisis



Create Key Messages

- What are the top three things you want your community to know this year?
- Establish those key ideas and share them
- Incorporate those key thoughts in everything you do
- Frame the discussion for your stakeholders
- Help them to understand your perspective



Practice Message Discipline

- Speak with one clear voice
- Repeat what you want people to remember
- Saying many things usually means we will remember nothing



Communicate from the Inside Out

- We need to communicate with both internal and external audiences
- Start with internal audiences
- Your own staff can help you communicate with external audiences
- Leaving them out of the loop will hurt your reputation



Pay Attention To What You Pay Attention To

- First impressions are incredibly powerful
- People make judgments based on what they see and hear
- Marketing happens continuously
- We need to pay attention to the messages we are sending



Make Communication Part of Everyone's Job

- You cannot do this alone
- Everyone is responsible for communication and building relationships
- Establish expectations for all staff
- Insist on effective communication from all staff
- Staff cannot not be effective if they don't communicate well



Share Bad News and Move On

- Bad news happens
- Share it all at once rather than spreading it out
- Share steps to help people to move past the bad news
- Sprinkle good news continuously



Manage Your Media Relationships

- Talk to your reporters on a regular basis
- Let them know how you will work with them
- Share key issues with them before sharing to the public



Step Around Media and Gatekeepers

- Media are gatekeepers of information to your stakeholders
- Step around them and go direct to your stakeholders
- Use a variety of mass and interpersonal communication strategies
- Target your opinion leaders



Engage Your Community

- Listen to the entire community not just squeaky wheels
- Feedback allows you to know what is happening in your community
- Listen more than you talk
- Work to connect people as owners of your district



Feed the Loops

- Stakeholders have formal and informal networks for sharing information
- Many employees are part of communication loops
- Get information to others so it can be shared
- Secretaries should be the best-informed people in your district



Train Your People

- Teach your staff how to communicate and build relationships
- Teach them the power of the first impression
- Help them understand the many communication aspects of their jobs



Manage Your Reputation

- What is your district known for?
- Is it a reputation that is positive or negative?
- What do you need to do to change a negative reputation?
- How can I reinforce a positive reputation?



Tell Stories about Your District

- Bring the emotion back to your district
- Don't tell me facts, tell me what it means to people
- Connect with the heart of your community to re-engage them



Final Thoughts – Questions To Consider

- Are you spending my tax dollars wisely?
- Are my kids safe in your schools? How do you know?
- Are my kids getting a high quality education in your schools? How do you know?
- If you had 20 seconds to tell the world about your district, what would you say?