

A tale of two headlines

Restoring public trust through communication, transparency and engagement

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It was the worst of times; it was the best of times.

The worst in my 10 years as a school district communications specialist was in November 2000, in the wake of a second consecutive failed levy referendum and a third straight year of budget cuts looming on the horizon.

The best of times was in November 2005, following voter approval of three separate levy questions that promised to renew, increase and extend local funding for our district for the next 10 years on all three questions.

The biggest difference between the disappointment of 2000 and the delight of 2005 can best be summed up by two editorial headlines that appeared in local newspapers following each election.

“It’s a matter of trust: Voters demand standards from school boards before passing levy referendums” read the headline in the November 25, 2000 issue of *Thisweek Newspapers*.

Five years later the headline read: **“Board, levy votes send a message of trust to district.”** (*Rosemount Town Pages*, November 11, 2005)

The common denominator in both headlines, and both elections, was public trust – the single biggest difference between success and failure in almost every election.

In an era when school districts must regularly seek voter approval of local funding just to maintain the status quo, building trust with the public is more important than ever. Despite our best efforts to educate voters on the need for levy funding, the fact is many voters base their decision not so much on the specifics of the issues at hand, but rather on the gut-level feelings of trust and confidence (or lack thereof) that they have in the district and its schools.

Like any relationship, the keys to building and maintaining trust with the public are open, honest communication and a willingness to listen to and involve stakeholders in decisions that affect the district.

Communicate Regularly

Clear, concise and consistent communication is critical to the success of any organization, particularly in the public sector. Communication cannot be an afterthought or something we will get to if we have time; communication should be timely, purposeful and strategic. Think about upcoming initiatives, issues or goals in your district and strategically plan out and provide information over time that speaks to those topics. Doing so can build understanding and support for your ideas, as well as flesh out any opposition leading up to a decision.

In the weeks and months following the levy defeat in 2000, our district developed and implemented a new, more aggressive communications plan aimed at increasing the amount of and access to information delivered electronically, in print and in person. We unveiled a new, expanded website that featured timely

news and information, and launched an email list service which provided thousands of parents and district residents with regular updates on School Board actions, district finances, student achievements and more.

Be Open, Honest and Transparent

In addition to communicating regularly and with a purpose, school leaders must be open and honest, and provide the public with a transparent view of district operations. In order to truly earn the public's trust, districts must be willing to share information about the issues and problems we face, not just the positive news we all like to see in the papers.

The goal is not to answer every possible question a citizen might have or share every piece of information about your district. Instead, the goal is to reach a point in your communication where every citizen believes that they *could* call the district, if they wanted, and could expect to get an honest answer to whatever question they might have.

In District 196, one of the simple things we did to increase transparency and trust with our public was to provide easy access to the current and previous years' budgets and financial documents on the district website.

Involve and Engage the Public

The public was never more interested or engaged in the activities of our district than in the weeks following the 2000 levy defeat. One by one, parents marched to the podium at School Board meetings to say they didn't get enough information about the levy or understand the seriousness of the vote. It was a typical response from concerned parents who did not like the prospect of more budget cuts in their children's schools.

We took advantage of this heightened level of interest in the district and invited members of the public to a series of meetings to help identify the additional cuts that would need to be made. It was our first big step in what has become an ongoing effort to actively involve the public in decisions that affect the district. One of the obvious keys to successful public engagement is to provide ample opportunities for input – in person, in writing and/or online surveys. More importantly, district leaders must be willing to listen to that input and have it reflected in the decisions they make.

The two editorials mentioned at the beginning of this article are displayed on a shelf in my office. I keep them close at hand and glance at them often to remind me how important it is to foster a relationship of trust with the public, how easily that trust can be lost if neglected or betrayed, and how hard it is to earn it back once it's gone.