

Talking Points
For use and sharing by educational leaders in Minnesota

COMPETITION… It’s here to stay

**Key Messages:**

- Public schools must now compete for the profound privilege of educating Minnesota’s children for the future.
- Today’s educational leaders need to also be public relations leaders for their schools to successfully compete.

Public schools as the preferred entryway to future well-being and prosperity was assumed when many of our current school leaders were preparing to become school administrators. For most of those leaders little or no training was required in the area of public relations. Yet that has become an increasingly large part of the job for effective superintendents and principals. Following are reminders of ways to improve the public relations for your school or district.

1. **Be public**
   Minnesota is known by those who follow test scores and studies for its good schools and high student achievement. But for those who have only the press, pundits and personal experiences to go by, Minnesota’s status is not quite so clear. The same holds true for individual schools and school districts. Most people don’t know the NAEP, TIMMS or ACT scores. Very few people know about the other student achievement assessment strategies a school or district employs. When it comes to competition, achievement only counts if people know about it.

2. **Be personal**
   Beyond academic achievement, people largely go by their own or others’ personal experiences. Do they walk into a school building or district office and feel like they are trespassing…or like they are stakeholders in an important endeavor? Are conferences more about students’ futures or their pasts? Do they hear about how their schools are progressing? Are class/school/district communications clear about challenges, successes and future plans? Are senior citizens incorporated into the schools and school district, or are they just called upon for an occasional vote? Are high expectations set and training available for all school/district personnel to serve as public relations representatives to the people they encounter?

3. **Be genuine**
   Stakeholders are most likely to be supportive when they feel they have been treated honestly and heard with an open mind. As a school leader do you consciously develop the capacity for genuine and diverse conversations and problem solving within their schools and districts? There is no effective substitute for authenticity when building relationships.

4. **Be clear**
   The mission and vision of public school(s) is to help students reach their fullest potential. While each student may respond differently to a unique type of school grouping, instructional style, expectations, or curriculum, it is important that all stakeholders understand that the goal of educators is to individualize setting and instruction to the degree that is possible to optimize student learning.

Clearly acknowledge that educators, like students and parents, are on a continual path toward improved outcomes.
5. **Be collaborative**
   Effective school leaders continually assess the ways in which parents, organizations, businesses and lawmakers perceive the schools and how those stakeholders can play a meaningful role in continued and growing school success.

   Collaborations require an initial investment of time, but the payoff can be significant and ongoing. For example, what might be the impact of summer “math mentors” in your district to improve summer learning retention? Are there new or improved ways to partner with volunteer groups, city government, faith communities or libraries? Are there retired or active teachers willing to donate just an hour a week in the summer or after school to help close the learning gap? How can you creatively engage legislators, city council and school board members in district initiatives?

6. **Be a responsible risk-taker**
   Increased competition may be just the impetus public school stakeholders need to speed up innovation. Schools can either create and model innovation or—as history has shown—innovation will eventually be mandated. The choice for educators may be between changes based on best practices, educational expertise and experience…or changes based on partisan politics and competition for instructional dollars. Risk is a part of change that can’t be avoided but it can be guided.

7. **Be aware**
   The Indiana Supreme Court recently upheld the constitutionality of that state’s school voucher program. Under that finding, about 62% of all Indiana families are eligible for state aid to help pay for private or religious schooling. The competition to public education has been empowered. If quality is not delivered and communicated public schools may begin to lose their place as the greatest and often only access all learners have to better lives and more productive futures.

8. **Be consistent**
   Frequent and clearly communicated messages will encourage loyalty and support among stakeholders. It is crucial that employees and community leaders know what those messages are including mission and vision and that they are informed about specific issues that arise.

   Establish and affirm the proper path for employees, students, parents and community members to register concerns and gather and share information.

9. **Be good**
   Your job is not just to sell the role of public schools and educational leaders, but rather to continually improve them to achieve higher levels of social and academic student success. The “product” you are promoting will ultimately be as valued as the quality it represents.

   The Minnesota Department of Education has committed public education in our state to be “Leading for educational excellence and equity. Every day for every one.” If school leaders advance that mission and turn it into a reality, Minnesota’s high quality system of public education will continue to thrive as the preferred entryway to future well-being and prosperity.

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These materials are provided by
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