

May 2019

ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Do you have a key communicator network?

Forward-thinking communicators stay current on new technologies and look to social media for effective, targeted outreach. But sometimes it is helpful to go back to basics and remember that personal contact is the most effective communication method when building support for schools. People talk to people, and those people talk to other people, and so on. A key communicator program help districts harness those conversations to share and receive information from a variety of sources.

What is a key communicator program?

A key communicator network is an organized network of people who represent all segments of your community. It is made up of parents, students, business representatives and community members who care about schools. They are respected and they have influence within their networks. Key communicators agree to attend regular key communicator meetings and receive email updates to share with their community.

A key communicator network allows a school district to get accurate news out to the staff and community quickly and provides third-party credibility by sharing information from respected community members, rather than just district staff. Research shows that people believe their friends and neighbors more than they believe official sources of information about a product or a service.

The aim of a key communicator network is to build partnerships and enhance efforts to create two-way communications. Key communicators share information with their networks from the district and bring back opinions and questions from their contacts.

Who are key communicators?

Key communicators are adults and students who talk to and are believed by many people in the community. Key communicators represent the many different demographic segments of the community as well as the various segments of the school district staff. They may or may not be in positions of authority or officially-recognized leaders, but they have earned respect in their communities and they are part of a larger network. They are the people others ask, “What do you think about...?”

These opinion leaders have an interest in schools. Critics should definitely be invited to be part of this network. In a group of 10 people, one or two critics usually add a needed bit of credibility. Experience has shown that after involvement in a key communicator process, critics frequently become supporters.

Starting a new key communicator program

For subscription information, contact WSSDA at (800) 562-8927 or (360) 493-9231.

For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

Reproduction rights for materials distributed as part of *On Call* are granted only to subscribing districts and are restricted to distribution as part of their local public relations programs.



(Over)

A good time to start a key communicator system is in the fall. While key communicators are most helpful in a time of trouble or turmoil, you need to establish mutual trust and credibility before depending on them to call when they hear a rumor or to set someone straight who is spreading misinformation about the schools.

Once the key communicators are identified, it is critical to communicate with them regularly on a personal, one-to-one basis. Their calls, text messages and e-mails to school officials should be returned immediately, and their requests for information answered promptly. If they are expected to share good news about the schools, they must have that information in a timely and understandable fashion. In addition, school officials should contact key communicators whenever there is a need to get information out quickly in order to counteract rumors or to defuse a potential crisis

Key communicators should, in turn, contact school officials when they hear rumblings, rumors, questions or ideas from people in the community. They provide a quick, informal reading of the pulse of the community when a major decision must be made or when a sensitive issue is about to erupt.

Tips to start your key communicator program

Identify potential members

Setting up a new key communicator program involves inviting specific people who represent all demographics in the community and specific people who have noteworthy influence. Bring together a small group of trusted staff and community members who know your district. Ask them to brainstorm a list of influential people throughout the community. Remember that opinion leaders are determined by “people power” not “position power.” While the bank president may be an opinion leader, so might the hairdresser, bartender or supermarket checkout clerk. Ask them to survey their friends and neighbors for the names and addresses of people they feel fit this description.

Tell them to give those names and addresses to your key communicator organizer who will combine the lists and determine the names that appear most often. These are the people who will become the nucleus of your key communicator system. Study the list of names to be sure that identifiable groups are represented. Students and employees are key sources of information about schools, so be sure that the key communicators from within the schools are part of this list. In addition, analyze each key communicator in terms of district or specific school or area impact.

Send invitations

Send a personalized letter to each person on the list to explain the concept and point out how he or she can assist the district. Assure them it will not require an extensive time commitment. Point out that you are not asking them to do anything that they aren’t already doing but that you want to be sure they know some important information about the schools.

Follow up

Follow up with a personal phone call. Letters alone attract only about half of those invited to meetings. A call by the superintendent or a school board member will usually generate a larger turnout.

Plan the meeting

Hold the meeting at a school or in the district office. Keep the agenda and the tone informal. Explain the key communicator concept and illustrate how it might work by sharing specific examples of things that have happened in your district. Try a lunch meeting. These are busy

people, but they do have to take time for lunch. Don't structure the group or appoint a chairperson or committees.

Clarify the purpose

Emphasize that the key communicator program is built on two-way communications. You will keep them informed about what's going on, and you want them to tell you about rumblings in the community, questions that many people seem to be asking, or rumors that are flying.

Be responsive

Keep them informed. Send them monthly e-mails, background reports, school board agendas and minutes — anything that will help them help you. Return their calls promptly. Nothing will turn off a key communicator more quickly than not getting your attention when they have something to report or a question that needs answering.

Assess the program

As the year progresses, track your contacts with key communicators to help you evaluate the program. Periodically review the list of key communicators to make sure it continues to represent the community. Ask key communicators for their assessment of the program. Send key communicators an annual, personal thank you letter for being part of the network.

Sample Key Communicator invitation letter

Dear (Community Member),

There is nothing more important to the future of our community than the education of our young people. We'd like to ask you for your help. The school board and I are inviting you to be part of a very important network of opinion leaders that we are organizing this fall. It won't take much of your time – just one hour for a luncheon, prepared by our cafeteria staff, on (date) at (time and place).

This Key Communicator Network will give us an opportunity to share information with you on a regular basis about what's happening in our schools and, most importantly, allow you to communicate directly with me. We are asking you to receive a monthly e-mail with information about your schools. In return, I am asking you to share that information with friends and family and to call, e-mail or text me any time you have or hear questions or concerns about our schools.

I hope you will be part of our key communicator group. (Name) from my office will be calling you soon to find out if you can join us on (date).

Thank you for your time and interest in our schools and our community's youth.

Sincerely
(Name)
Superintendent