

October 2019

ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Where do you find your good news stories?

Opportunities abound to share good news about your school district.

I prefer the term “good news” to “positive news,” as the latter implies more of a value judgment; the district is managing the news to portray itself in a positive light, which becomes counter-productive. In contrast, “good news” avoids that spin while presenting informative and explanatory pieces along with news of student, staff, and district achievements.

Finding stories throughout that continuum can require out-of-the-box thinking, planning, and a school board and administration that are “all in.” Equally important is the commitment of teachers, classified employees and other line staff who will alert you to good news and who understand how to recognize that news.

Here are a few ideas for generating that discussion.

Heed the buzz

What is the buzz — the things about a class or an event or a personal/group achievement that has everyone talking? You might think of them as the stories that staff or students share around the dinner table (although dining together at the table is becoming less common). These items might be nuggets for a newsletter or social media, or they might be worth a story pitch to news outlets.

The key is to get staff and students to share items with you instead of assuming that no one will be interested, that they must gather all the details first, or — as too often happens — that you already know.

Start earlier than you think you need to

Many opportunities for news get overlooked or delayed until their news value is lost.

For example, a science fair is worth internal news coverage but probably not coverage by the media. These days, even newspapers avoid covering static events in favor of ones that produce good video. Some newspapers require reporters to produce video with every story. For video, the students’ actual construction of intriguing science projects would be much more interesting than the fair itself, so start the coverage process early.

Along with posting your own videos and photographs on your website and social media, consider sharing them with each sponsor of an event — especially if the video highlights and/or thanks the sponsor.

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Recruit student moviemakers

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Even though my communications work includes being a professional videographer, I continue to be surprised when school districts needlessly hire video companies instead of using experienced, reliable students.

Students can put together good mini-movies of that science project construction for use on your website and social media, and potentially as B-roll for news media. Such work has an educational value for the students, requiring them to combine the science of photography and sound with the art of communication — interviewing, writing scripts and narrating via sound or captions.

Consider hiring students. You also could work with student media, student clubs or classes to pursue video-related projects. Your school district also could host a student video contest on a specific topic with meaningful prizes, such as giving members of the winning high school team their own parking spots for the rest of the school year.

Most videos will be short, less than a couple of minutes. Shorter is almost always better. A quick search of the internet will lead you to the latest trends and recommendations for video lengths and approaches.

Once you post your videos to YouTube and other social media, remember to track the analytics.

Share the curiosity

What is it that you always wondered? That curiosity can become a story, especially with student-created video.

Follow the preparations for a prom, a play or a concert. Have a school custodian strap a GoPro or similar camera to her or his head and record “a day in the life of.” Have students record a school bus driver on the job, a video that could be a good recruiting tool for drivers. Do that with a principal, sports coach, or another intriguing person.

Another option is to have students prepare a video about the complexities of completing a student schedule, the school budget, or a special education plan, which could build empathy for those decision-makers as well as an understanding of their work.

Twitter can be your friend

Encourage teachers and others to tweet every school day about what they’re doing at school, using software to collect those tweets in a rolling feed displayed on the home page of your district website. This might seem controversial, but districts are doing this successfully. Look online for examples during this new school year.

Your district staff must have a thorough understanding of your policies on social media, student identification, and inclusion of students in photographs and video. Initially, you might want someone well-versed in effective social media to review the tweets before publication and to gently coach the participants as needed.

This is not an invitation to simply heap more work on educators. As with any form of media, there must be a clear rationale for why it is being employed, who the target audiences are, and what the desired outcomes are. Social media simply for the sake of social media is counter-productive — a waste of time, resources, and staff goodwill.

(Over)

Staff members who embrace the tweet-a-day philosophy — not a requirement! — will find it worthwhile. The tweets can help parents, colleagues, and the public better understand the daily progression of the classroom.

Additionally, there are several other valuable reasons to tweet like sharing classroom ideas that another teacher might find helpful; seeking ideas and resources from others; honoring students and volunteers for their ideas or achievements; providing a daily recap for or by students (and student teachers); highlighting upcoming school events; thanking business partners; being a source of story ideas for local news media (because they'll follow you on Twitter); and building the public's habit of following the district Twitter account for the latest news.

As appropriate, Twitter's limited length also can be used like the short-journal apps that have become popular. A tweet is a nifty way to focus a person's goal for the day or sum up the day's progress, albeit in a public forum.

These approaches can work for social media besides Twitter. The advantage of Twitter is the recognition that it is quick and short. It embraces brevity as a virtue instead of an obstacle. It can appeal to a variety of audiences. And so far, it remains relatively straightforward, unlike some social media platforms that use complicated algorithms to determine what shows up where.

Reminder: you don't have to be on all the social media platforms. Stick to three or four that work for you.

Speaking of journals

Keep a running list of your "good news" ideas and of staff members whom you can count on to suggest other ideas and to honestly evaluate yours. Categorize these ideas by which are appropriate for school or district newsletters; video or in-person presentations at school board, service club or other community meetings; social media; the district website; press releases and pitches for news coverage; and others uses.

Create your own events

High schools regularly hold signing ceremonies for student-athletes who commit to play sports at a college. Why not hold similar ceremonies for students who commit to apprenticeships in the trades?

Because signing ceremonies for apprenticeships are uncommon, they are one way that schools can gain media coverage while fulfilling educational goals — in this case, signaling that entering the trades is just as worthy, rewarding, and important as attending college. Indeed, any resulting media coverage is a bonus to the positive message sent to students.

Or what about ceremonies for students who commit to summer or post-high school internships? The employers or educational institutions providing those internships could be interested in your photographs or videos of those signings.

Or have ceremonies honoring students who join the military, or students who will attend the local community college, or educators who gain additional certifications and skills.

In a similar vein, invite civic leaders to try their hand at being trained as bus drivers — again, a potential recruiting tool for drivers — or serving as referees and umpires during a preseason

sports practice, or acting as interviewers/commentators for a culinary arts competition. Each of those could become interesting video.

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Opportunities abound for good news stories. Seek them and tell them.

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