



On Call

When something changes, prepare your office staff to serve customers efficiently, consistently

Schools are exciting places because they are always changing. Innovation is fun and interesting for the people leading the innovation. But for staff, student and parents who are on the receiving end, new ways of doing things can be confusing, frustrating and downright threatening.

Most schools and school districts do a good job of external communications about innovations. They let people know what new things are on the horizon and why. But often, they overlook a key audience with a very special need for information: the people who will be on the frontlines answering parent questions and hearing their feedback.

In a school, teachers are busy teaching and administrators are busy keeping things running most of the time. So, they are generally not the people answering the questions that arise when something changes. Sure, parents may eventually work their way to the teachers because they have some access to them before and after school. And likewise, administrators might be available early and late in the day. But most often, both ends of the day are very busy with the logistics of getting kids to class in the morning and back home in the afternoon.

So, who is answering the questions? Mostly office staff. In addition to all of the other things they are expected to do, they are also expected to answer the phone and talk to people in person. Front office staff are very skilled at talking to people. They know how to be polite and supportive, but that only goes so far. Front office staff need two things when big changes are afoot in the school.

Make sure office staff are in the loop

First, they need the talking points. What, specifically, should they say about the recent change? This can be as simple as a list of bullet points or as detailed as a handout to share.

The talking points should cover what has changed, why it has changed and what it means for various groups of parents (depending on the age of their children, schedule or what part of the campus they use, etc.). They also need a feedback mechanism for the parents who are not happy or have questions.

As an example, consider how parents feel when they discover a new gate blocking a regularly used pathway to the school grounds. Ideally, the school has included information about the change in parent newsletters, social media and emails. Signs on the new gate would be a good idea, too. But the reality is that not everyone reads what you send them and people will want to know more and probably a few will complain.

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(Over)

The front office staff will be taking the calls and walk-in questions from parents. So they need to know the basics. Unless school staff share the real reason for the change, people will make up their own stories based on their own fears or past experience.

Say for instance, the gate is being installed because neighbors have complained for years about students cutting through their yards, leaving trash and running in front of cars. The talking points for office staff should be specific about the causes of the closure so they can provide consistent messages to patrons. Without specific reasons, office staff will be inconsistent, leading to parents come to their own conclusions about what must be going on.

This is where fears take over. Parents may suspect there are safety issues the school is not telling them about or that neighbors are intolerant or biased. Those fears can quickly become the narrative about the new gate and cause all kinds of community relations problems that will need to be resolved.

In addition to the reason for the change, office staff need specific instructions for parents — this is what it means for you if you live in the neighborhood served by the old pathway. And this is specifically what we need you to do if you used to drop your students off near the entryway that is now closed. We need you to drop them off at this spot from now on.

Ask for feedback as you develop your messages

The key to developing the talking points is to anticipate the key questions from parents. And the best way to determine what the FAQ will be is to ask a few parents what they would need to know if they were in the group affected by the change.

In terms of feedback channels, staff need to know where to channel feedback from customers. Many people will simply be curious. And a few will be happy with the change. But there will always be a few people who have concerns about anything new at school. Frontline staff will need to be prepared to pass along feedback and tell the customer how and when that will occur. They also need to be prepared to take contact information if the person giving the feedback expects a response.

Staff up, if necessary

For many changes, office staff will just need talking points and instructions for gathering feedback, but occasionally, they are going to need more bodies to help deal with customers. Administrators should think about the timing and the impact of the change when considering whether to shift staff to help in the office. Is the change major (new bell schedule) or relatively minor (a new visitor parking slot)? Is the timing immediate or next year?

Having the right number of people to answer questions and field concerns will help avoid much work in the future. For every person who is helped the first time, you reduce staff time in the future and you keep the customer happier. Schools are busy enough even when everyone has the information they need when they need it. The last thing a school needs are parents going away uninformed, confused and frustrated.