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ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Summer PR planning for the new school year

By the time school ends in June, most school PR folks are ready to let out a huge sigh and kick back for the summer. While it's good — actually critical — to take a breather to rest and regroup, don't lose the opportunity to plan for next year.

Summer is prime time for looking ahead and developing strategies and timelines to accomplish important goals. The pace is slower, and you are more likely to have uninterrupted time to really think through your communication objectives.

Summer provides an opportunity to connect with communicators in neighboring districts about their communication plans and the strategies that worked well for them. Spend a few hours online researching districts nearby to see how they approach communications with their staff, parents and community. Meet with your superintendent and other district leaders to better understand your district's communications challenges and the best way to address them.

Most of all, savor the luxury of a more relaxed pace and, hopefully, a plate that isn't as full as it is during the hectic school months.

The more planning and housekeeping you are able to do during the summer, the less harried you will be when the school starts. It will be a pleasure to start the new year organized and ready to go.

Here is a checklist of things to address during the summer:

Review and update your website. Is it ADA-compliant? If not, this should be a priority. Update your staff lists, school board members and other contacts. Add information about any new programs or district initiatives. Refresh photos. Add calendar dates, including parent conferences, concerts and plays and non-school days. Check links and make sure they are operational. Make it as easy as possible for parents to access information and navigate the various web pages.

Update publications. Summer is the perfect time to review and update your district publications (volunteer handbook, student-parent handbook, etc.). Post the updated documents to your website by early August, so they are ready when parents and students start accessing the website for back-to-school information. If there are any critical changes, post a notice on the school website outlining the changes and encouraging patrons to review the updated publications.

Analyze your communications tools. Review the analytics from your various communication tools and assess their effectiveness. Determine whether you are reaching the right audiences. Are parents and others engaging with your posts on Facebook? Are your voice

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and text notifications being heard or read? Who is visiting your website and what kinds of devices are they using to do that?

Plan your social media strategy. Social media is a wonderful tool for telling your school stories in your own words and photos. But schools often leave it up to parent groups to develop Facebook pages. Sometimes they even follow the lead of supportive students or parents who establish “unofficial” school accounts. Treat Facebook as a legitimate communications tool that receives the same branding and review that your other tools do. Facebook is especially effective at reaching parents and is a great way to share positive stories and photos about what students are doing and accomplishing in school. Map out an ‘editorial calendar’ listing dates for different events and topics that you want to include in your postings during the upcoming year.

Develop a communications plan. A communications plan is a road map to reaching your communication goals for the year. A thorough plan will outline various strategies for communicating effectively with different stakeholders, including parents, students, staff, community and media because each group of stakeholders has unique characteristics. An effective plan will also help you identify the purpose of your communications Are you trying to educate the public about a bond measure? Increase parent engagement? More actively engage families of color? Defining the purpose will help you choose the best tools.

Plan your welcome back messaging. The content and tone of your welcome back messaging to staff, students and parents shapes attitudes for the coming year. If the messaging is upbeat, inclusive and optimistic, those receiving it tend to feel good about the year ahead. If it’s dull and gloomy, don’t be surprised if there’s a lack of enthusiasm for getting back to work and learning.

Be inclusive as you communicate with staff. Welcome back all staff — including secretaries, food service, maintenance and transportation — and remind them all of the important role they play in their daily contact with students and parents. If you have a theme for the school year, roll it out for staff on their first day back and continue in your welcome back letter to staff, students and parents. Take a moment to celebrate the successes of the past year, so you can build on that success in the new one. Introduce and offer a warm welcome to new staff members. Review any new programs or initiatives and any big events coming up, like dedication of a new building. Make the new year feel exciting and fresh.

Post list of volunteer opportunities. Back to school is an ideal time to recruit volunteers. Post a list of school volunteer opportunities on your school and district web pages, along with short descriptions of the task and the time commitment. Plan a short volunteer orientation at your school to welcome and train new volunteers.