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# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Share your good news with your community

The way a community feels about its school district is based in large part on how well the district communicates. A district may have wonderful programs and may be making great strides in meeting challenges. However, if it doesn't have a purposeful way of communicating that information, the public may never know or appreciate it.

Often districts approach communications as a singular event, something they do when they need to pass a bond or mitigate a public relations calamity. Informed districts, however, know that communications is a continuous process. It needs to happen year-round, in good times and in bad. Former President Lyndon Johnson had it right when he said the time to make friends is before you need them. That's true of school districts as well as politicians.

Besides keeping your patrons well informed, regular communication helps districts build a bank of trust and goodwill. When patrons feel good about their schools and believe you are being upfront in sharing news, they are more apt to give you grace when things go wrong.

Individual schools tend to do a pretty good job of communicating with parents. Teachers often have webpages and newsletters to keep parents informed about what's happening in their classrooms. Parents come to back to school night and concerts and other school events and see first-hand what their children are learning and doing. So it's no surprise that parents generally feel good about their own child's school.

On the other hand, districts aren't always as consistent in sharing good news. And as a result, people who don't have school-age children don't get much information about the schools and don't always feel so favorable.

Each year the Phi Delta Kappan magazine conducts a poll of the public's attitudes toward public schools. The 2018 poll shows a stark contrast between how people view their local school versus schools in general. Seventy percent of the parents polled gave their own child's school an A or B grade. But only 43% of the general public gave their local schools A's or B's. The nation's schools as a whole received lower ratings still, with only 19% giving them A's or B's.

This disparity is always concerning but becomes especially critical when districts are trying to build public support for a bond or other money measure. Voters aren't likely to dig into their pocketbooks to support schools that they don't feel are effective or doing a good job managing their money.

Good, consistent communication is a key piece of building trust, confidence and strong relationships with your community. That means communicating well and often. While it's important to talk about budget and school board business, it's equally — and maybe more important — to talk about the things students are learning, and how they are using

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technology, and how the athletic teams are doing, and about the concerts and plays that are open to the public. These are the things that connect people to their schools.

It's important to develop a yearly communications plan and identify specific events and strategies for communicating with different stakeholders through different communications channels. Your communication plan should also identify who is responsible for the different communications, whether it's a designated communications specialist or a principal or other staff person. That way, you can track and evaluate the effectiveness of the communications.

While districts have a long "to-do" list, communications must be one of the priorities if you want your community in your corner.

Some things to consider:

**Tell your stories.** Our schools are full of good news, but teachers and other staff are often so busy doing their jobs that they don't take time to let others know about it. Remind them to post photos and short narratives on their school webpage and social media sites about the good things happening in their classrooms — whether it's a guest speaker or students at work. Don't expect local media coverage for this good news; share it on school media channels to engage school communities.

Some ideas for posts:

- How students are using new tools and technologies to learn.
- How classrooms look different these days, with more hands-on, collaborative learning activities.
- How schools are partnering with local employers to prepare the next generation of skilled workers.
- How students are earning college credits while still in high school, with some graduating high school with one to two years of college credit.
- How students and educators are giving back to their local communities.

**Engage senior citizens.** Seniors are a growing population, and in many districts, senior citizens are the largest block of voters. It's important to keep them informed about schools, so they have the information they need to be supportive, not only with their vote but also their time. Invite seniors to become volunteers, tutor students, eat lunch with students once a week, help supervise the playground at recess. Include a senior representative on important district committees, such as the budget committee.

**Educate your lawmakers.** It's important for elected representatives to recognize the good things your schools are doing and the challenges they are facing, so they can make informed decisions that support public education. Meet with them regularly for coffee or lunch. Send them copies of your newsletters and other communications. Invite them to school events or just to visit your schools and observe great teaching and learning in action.