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ONcall

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Make your communications count

Schools are different than normal because of coronavirus. This “new normal” is different than the “new normal” of last spring, and it is likely to be different again next year. Schools are doing as much as ever — with many unknowns and countless challenges.

With all these issues facing schools today, communication is even more important. School board members, superintendents, principals and teachers must communicate about all of the recent changes effectively and efficiently, to allow them to balance all of their new duties. Neglecting communications, especially when times are tough, is like leaving the pot over an open flame until it boils over or catches fire. You have to spend much more time cleaning up the mess.

Districts have been in reaction mode since spring. The goal now is to be proactive. Recognize challenges, assess limitations and zero in on the method of communication that will pay the biggest dividend for the time spent. Here are some suggestions for board members, superintendents, principals and teachers.

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School board school liaison program

Direct communication — face-to-face communication — has always been the most effective means of building trust and sharing messages. Now is clearly not the time for close contact, but board members can still have a presence among staff and in schools via remote channels. Regular school audiences still need to know who board members are and that they care about the schools they serve. Consider working with principals to attend virtual staff meetings. As long as an additional presence doesn't disrupt the agenda, the meeting could provide a helpful new perspective about operations and challenges.

If your district doesn't already have one, consider developing a school board liaison network to connect individual board members to specific schools. This works for large-, medium- or small-size districts. Divide schools and programs equally among board members. Board liaisons will schedule visits to schools/programs on a regular basis. Infrequent visits are fine until operations normalize.

When you can, get to know the principal, spend a lunch hour with students and staff, attend a faculty meeting, and attend school performances and special programs. Include monthly school reports on the board's agenda so that each board member can share what students are learning and how their schools/programs are dealing with the challenges they face.

Superintendents' key communicator networks

Superintendents can build a powerful tool to share information and inform opinions by building a key communicator network. This network of individuals represents influencers and

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the variety of diverse community members in the district. This is a helpful program during normal operations, and it can help expand the effectiveness of your communications during crises.

Making regular communication with key community leaders and opinion leaders your priority this year can pay off for any superintendent. Research shows, in most communities, approximately 10% of people influence the views of everyone else. Identify this influential 10%. Tell them facts about their schools or district, and ask them to tell others. Having these “key communicators” is a powerful tool for listening, learning what community members are saying, and providing accurate information about student learning and school operations.

If you don't have a key communicator network, start one. If you already have one, make sure your list and contact information is current and includes a range of community leaders. Make sure these key communicators come from all walks of life — elected officials, business leaders, ministers, senior citizens, parent leaders, long-time community residents, and the hairdresser who talks about schools all day as he/she cuts hair.

These opinion leaders also provide a valuable service to your district by acting as ears in the community and letting you know what they are hearing. These people are the living, breathing community grapevine. Identify who they are and get them on your team.

Tips for your key communicator network:

- Include representatives from all ethnic groups in your community.
- Provide opportunities for any interested community member to join.
- Give participants the choice of getting information by email or regular mail.
- Provide information and updates on a regular basis.
- Provide opportunities to listen to key communicator opinions and find out what they really want to know.

For more information about forming and maintaining key communicator networks, go to the National School Public Relations Association website: www.nspr.org/node/1250.

Note: All information sent to key communicators should be sent to staff as well. Make this information the basis for your primary internal and external communications. It will save time and assure that everyone is getting the same information.

Principal-to-neighborhood outreach

Principals generally have good systems in place for communicating with parents. Keeping websites current and newsletters on schedule is standard practice.

Neighborhood schools can greatly expand their reach by getting to know their neighbors, especially those neighbors with no children in school. Make a plan to build connections after in-person contact resumes.

A good way to identify likely interested neighbors is to get a list of registered voters from the county elections office for precincts in the school attendance area. Ask for voters who voted in the last four elections. Eliminate addresses outside the attendance boundary and note voters' ages. Almost all of them will be 60 years of age or older, and they likely have had no contact with the schools in years. Send each of them a personalized letter introducing yourself, telling them something about your school and inviting them to a school program or school tour. List ways they could volunteer, too. Neighbors in this group will often sign up to help a child with reading. Follow-up with mid-year and end-of-year reports.

This effort will help you build a cadre of enthusiastic volunteers, as well as strong support for school initiatives.

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Tech-savvy parents expect teachers to maintain websites with student assignments and classroom information. Parents also expect teachers to respond quickly to emails about their student's progress. All of this takes time and requires good organizational skills to maintain. However, take time to make personal phone calls to parents at the beginning of the school year to introduce yourself and let parents know you have high expectations for their student's learning. This can go a long way to getting the school year off to a good start and building solid, cooperative relationships with parents. It also gives you an opportunity to let parents know what your expectations are as partners for their student's success.

Contributed by Jeanne Magmer, communications consultant