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ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Meet your communications goals with an e-newsletter

External and internal newsletters can be a useful vehicle to provide key information about events, updates and action items — a platform to keep staff and families informed. But used in the right way, newsletters can be much more than simple news updates.

In Bend-La Pine Schools (www.bend.k12.or.us/district), we see newsletters as a way to not only share information, but to also share our core values. Over time, the featured stories, images and headlines create a powerful narrative about the district's culture and mission, while also keeping stakeholders informed.

Our goal for our e-newsletters is to provide relevant information that individuals need to know, while sharing a mix of light-hearted and heartfelt features that showcase who we are and what we value.

Our first staff newsletter began six years ago, and we consistently have an open rate between 70-80 percent for our more than 2,000 staff members. We began a family newsletter in January of 2019 and consistently have an open rate between 50-60 percent for our 18,000 families. We send our newsletters monthly. Our family newsletter is in English and Spanish.

We developed the following suggestions for best practices and examples of stories that we feel are most effective.

Internal tips:

Keeping staff members informed is key. So, too, is developing a district-wide culture. A regular newsletter can help on both of those fronts.

Develop sources: For us, our office managers are our best connection for items for our newsletter, so we keep them informed and make sure to show our appreciation.

Babies and weddings: We have a section called Milestone, and in it we share photos of babies, weddings, engagements and other life milestones. Tip: Accept all submissions! A step-grandbaby was born? Share it. A son is headed to the military? Share it. The goal is to celebrate all life milestones that staff want to honor.

Top-to-bottom planning: Most people will rightly tell you to put the most important news at the top, which is a guideline we follow. However, we also suggest that newsletter planners place their most popular item at the bottom of every issue. For us, that means running our staff milestones at the bottom of each issue. It is wildly popular, so we ensure most folks will at least scroll through all of our stories and read headlines before they can see the cute babies.

For subscription information, contact WSSDA at (800) 562-8927 or (360) 493-9231.

For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

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Fun factor: Staff members need to celebrate, and they need to be goofy. Every year, we share Halloween costumes, crazy hair days, lip sync competitions and all of the funny content our schools create.

Tone matters: Our tone for staff is friendly, open, caring and fun. We use bad puns for silly items and conversational language throughout. We find authentic ways to serve as cheerleaders for our staff.

External tips

News quick hits: Keep news items to the top and make them as short and direct as possible. No platitudes, just straight news.

Headlines and cutlines matter: Many readers will only look at the headlines and captions, so make them count. Put key information or takeaways in these spots.

Pictures with a purpose: Be thoughtful about who is featured in your photographs and videos. Make sure to represent the diversity of your student and family population. We try to showcase a range of age, gender, race, ethnicity and ability. We also try to highlight students with divergent interests: robotics, art, farming, athletics, volunteerism, activism, etc. Over time, these images and features create a narrative about who we are.

Our stories showcase our values: Just as with photos, the type of programs, students and staff members who are highlighted create a narrative. We think about our mission statement and how we can tell stories to showcase those values.

Make adjustments: This spring, when the pandemic first hit and our schools closed for in-person learning, our families wanted to hear more from us. We started sending a newsletter every week. After about a month, we heard that our families felt inundated with too much information, so we scaled back to once a month. We can be flexible to meet the needs of our families.

Ultimately, a good newsletter can help keep internal and external audiences informed and can showcase our values.

Contributed by Julianne Repman, Director of Communication and Safety, and Alandra Johnson, communications specialist, Bend-La Pine Schools

Bend-La Pine Schools received the award for the best electronic newsletter in the country at the National Association of Government Communicators awards show in 2020. The submission was recognized as a family spotlight:

In January 2019, we launched our first ever e-newsletter for Bend-La Pine Schools' more than 17,000 families (in English and Spanish). Our district was beginning several new initiatives, including a boundary change and new school start times, and we wanted to ensure as many families as possible received consistent information about these efforts. With 33 schools and two charters, our goal was also to provide a clear brand identity and cohesive messaging around values as well as key initiatives. Every month, our open rate is fairly consistent, within a range of 42 to 55 percent, which is well above the industry average of about 15%. <https://bit.ly/3rTkOv>