

February 2021

# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Your annual report is a report card for your community

Cutbacks in education funding and changes to communication methods and channels have pared back traditional communications. If it doesn't directly contribute to student learning, it probably isn't part of current practices. Additionally, communications have changed significantly in style, technology tools and substance.

What hasn't changed is the value of informing taxpayers — your stakeholders — about how their tax dollars are spent and the results you are achieving. The how has changed, but not the why. It is still incredibly important to share information about your progress, operations and programs in a transparent, consistent manner.

One way to do that is to publish and distribute an annual report. A well-written and designed annual report can help you demonstrate student and staff accomplishments, explain the district's financial situation, and assure taxpayers their tax dollars are being well spent.

A modern annual report doesn't have to be 20 pages of financial statements and lengthy school/department reports. A well-designed, well-written two- or four-page printed or electronic format with photos is all you need. Before you dismiss this classic but effective publication, consider the following things your communities and your taxpayers need to know:

**Focus on accomplishments.** The most important part of your district's annual report is the description of your accomplishments. Taxpayers want to know what you did and, more importantly, why you did it as well as the results you are getting that support your mission and student achievement. Don't assume that readers will automatically understand how your activities help you achieve your mission. Clearly connect the dots for them.

**Make the financial section clear and concise.** Clearly explain where revenue comes from and how funds are spent. Be sure to include district cost-saving measures. Use pie charts, bar graphs, and other visuals that let readers see the spending picture for taxpayer dollars. Using visuals helps readers understand the big picture and financial trends. A short narrative description is also essential, explaining in plain English what the numbers mean.

**Photos are essential.** Research shows that readers generally fall into three categories: the 30-second readers who will see your publication on its way to the recycling bin; the three-minute readers who will skim it, stopping primarily to read headlines and photo captions; and the 30-minute readers, those few who will read it all. Since most of the people reading your annual report are in the 30-second and three-minute categories, use photos to show them what you've been doing.

Use your phone for quick pictures and make sure the electronic photos have a high resolution

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for print quality. It's also fine to use stock photos if necessary. Search for free stock photos on sites such as [www.unsplash.com](http://www.unsplash.com) or [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com).

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**Write captions that tell your story.** Photos get readers' attention, so make sure you tell your stories with your captions. Don't just state what's in the photo. Connect the photo to an accomplishment. If people read or scan nothing but the captions in your annual report, they should still get a sense of the work you did last year and your results.

**Include personal profiles in the annual report.** Taxpayers will be more impressed with real stories about real people than general summaries or statistics. Explain what you have accomplished overall, and then humanize your statistics with some personal profiles. Highlight how a program or initiative helped a specific student, teacher, classroom or school. Share a story from a board member, principal, teacher, parent or student that shows how that individual made a positive difference or how a particular initiative enabled her to be more effective or learn more.

**Distribute the annual report at the most opportune time for your district.** An annual report is, by definition, a once-a-year report to your community about their investment in their schools. If publishing an annual report at the end of the school year in May or June is too difficult, pick another time of year. Consider publishing it in August or September as a way to start off the school year. Remind parents and taxpayers of your success in providing the best possible education for their children. Or publish it mid-year as a reminder of the strides the district is making in achieving its mission and goals.

**Use multiple media to distribute the annual report.** An annual report does not need to be mailed to every postal patron in your district. Consider using all the media at your disposal for distribution, making sure to reach as many people as possible.

- Send copies to staff electronically or printed and distributed through the district's internal mail system.
- Send copies to parents electronically or with students. Distribute it at any and all parent meetings.
- Post the annual report on the district's website with links to the report on all the school/department pages. Reach out to the city, chamber of commerce or other community partners for permission to post a link on their websites.
- Mail or email copies to your identified key community members.
- Get a mailing list from your local elections office for voters who are age 55 and older and voted in the last four elections in your district. Mail copies of the annual report to them. These patrons are likely your 30-minute readers, and they will vote on any school measures that appear on the ballot. They need to be informed.
- Put printed copies in all school offices, at all school reception desks, the public library, local banks or in other public places where community members are likely to pick it up.
- Develop a PowerPoint presentation or short speech and volunteer to speak at as many community groups as possible. Take printed copies of the annual report for handouts.

### **Examples of award-winning annual reports:**

Get ideas for effective annual reports from National School Public Relations Association award winners. The following earned awards of excellence in 2020 for annual report submissions:

#### **Capital Region BOCES, Albany, N.Y.**

2018-19 Annual Report

<https://bit.ly/3mOZRyt>

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Annual Reports

**Fort Worth (Texas) ISD**

Listen, Learn and Lead/Fort Worth ISD 2018-19 Annual Report

<https://bit.ly/37Gp9bR>

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**Texas Association of School Boards, Austin, Texas**

Measures of Success, TASB 2019 Annual Report

<https://bit.ly/3lSJYWC>

**See more examples on the NSPRA website:** [www.nspira.org/publications-digital-media-award-winners-2020#Annual\\_Report](http://www.nspira.org/publications-digital-media-award-winners-2020#Annual_Report)

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*Contributed by Jeanne Magner, communications consultant*