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Why be transparent?

Strong relationships between schools and their communities are built on trust, and transparency is the key to creating that trust.

It's not enough to just disseminate the information you want stakeholders to know. Schools need to open the curtains as they deliberate policies and decide important issues. This allows the public to see and understand what goes into the decisions they make.

Most districts do not deliberately hide or cover up information, but they may not share some things they don't think would be relevant or of interest. Sometimes they try to oversimplify or exclude materials because they believe they're just too complicated for the public to easily understand. The public, however, wants to decide for themselves.

You run a risk of misinformation by not being forthright in the first place. When community members hear about a decision and don't understand why it was made, they often start speculating and may even assume ill intentions when there were none. It's better to be transparent from the start.

What does transparency look like?

Remove the mystery. Be forthright with minutes and background materials from school board, budget committee and board-appointed committee meetings. Share materials that shed light on the discussions and planning that go into important decisions. Don't just tell people the decision was made. Tell them *why* it was made and make the background information accessible.

Simplify the information. Budgets and COVID metrics are just two examples of highly complicated topics, so make them as easy as possible for the layperson to understand. With budgets, provide a written summary with an overview of the budget and highlight significant changes and the reasons why. With things like COVID metrics, don't just summarize what's happening. Share the metrics and other data to allow your stakeholders to have a solid grasp of what's going on.

Make documents easy to find. Make your district website the place where all important district information is housed — your district goals, strategic plan, budget, calendars, curriculum standards, etc. Use the same design format for each section so followers know where to look to find important dates, meeting minutes, etc.

Provide facts and data. Don't expect people to take your word for it. Give them the data to support the positions you take. For example, don't just talk about your crowded classrooms. List the capacity of each school and the number of students actually enrolled. Don't just give an overall number of your budget shortfall. Post the entire budget, allowing

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those who want to take the time to review it to see that certain revenues are down, causing the deficit.

Give information in a way that people care about. Instead of presenting just the facts ma'am, like in Dragnet, offer stories that provide a look at the impact of district decisions. For example, if a school board authorizes a school-based health center, feature interviews with students who will benefit and how they feel about it. Create videos, and include stories in the district newsletter.

Have two-way discussions with community members. Invite parents and others to be part of advisory committees or take part in informal sessions where you ask for opinions about a topic. Describe the issue you're facing and how you propose to address it. Seek their ideas and really listen to what they have to say. You might hear perspectives you had not even considered. Whenever feasible, incorporate their ideas into your solution.

Transparency extends to dealing with the media. Often, districts try to avoid publicizing bad news and hope the media doesn't hear about it. But in this highly connected era, secrets don't remain secret for long. There are just too many outlets for sharing information, from email to social media to local gathering holes. The best policy is always to get in front of a situation, good or bad, and be the one to tell your own story.

You don't have to share some things

Of course, being transparent doesn't mean that you share absolutely everything. Obviously, there are personnel issues, medical situations and security issues that must remain confidential by law. Know what you legally can and cannot share.

Creating a culture of transparency starts at the top. Your superintendent and district leaders need to be open to new ideas and encourage dialogue with staff. They need to provide regular opportunities for stakeholder engagement, from serving on committees to volunteering to attend information meetings. They need to be open and straightforward in sharing information. They need to truly listen to what people have to say. When leaders exhibit this kind of transparency, it encourages other staff to do the same.

Trust isn't built overnight, but it's worth the effort to gain it. When stakeholders feel good about their district and believe you are being upfront in sharing news (both good and bad), they are more apt to give you grace when things go wrong. They will also applaud you when things are good.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant