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inside

PR is an invaluable management function

A public relations role should be an important part of the management team. PR and communications services help build and maintain trust among internal and external audiences. Is your district using your PR staff effectively? Read the basics of this essential position to understand how to benefit from having a PR staff member on the team.

Refreshing your safety practices

Schools may need a refresher to get back into the daily routine of in-person school. This includes safety drills, which were likely disrupted during the pandemic shut-down. It's important to practice these essential procedures, and in many states, it is required. This tip sheet will help schools plan to reinstate these procedures.

Share information about your nutrition program

Nutrition impacts academic achievement, which is one of the reasons for free- and reduced-meal programs. Kids can't learn if they are hungry. In addition to ensuring that all students are properly fed at school, schools work hard to plan nutritious meals. Does your community know about this effort and the benefits to students? Make a plan to tell them about this important operational function.

Supporting the health and well-being of teachers

This is a stressful time for workers, and teachers have expressed significant job-related stress due to the pandemic. Managers and supervisors must take responsibility for the health and well-being of their employees. Read more about the source of teachers' stress and the remedies they are seeking to alleviate it.

Tips for schools: A pandemic twist on the teacher-feature.

Stories about school operations and staff are effective trust-building tactics. Audiences appreciate learning more about the human side of school functions. Teacher features have been covered here before, but this source of content is useful and bears repeating. Additional tips include a special pandemic-related focus and ways to use student yearbook writers to expand your content.

INSIGHTS FOR PARENTS: Cell phone use among kids and teens

Many kids have a cell phone by age 11, and most teens have a mobile device. While helpful tools, these devices should have limitations around their use to ensure that they aren't disruptive in school or other parts of life. A focus on balance will also help reduce the risk of phone-related mental health issues or disruptions in school.

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PR is an invaluable management function

Public relations professionals should be a valued addition to management.

Many districts and administrators know that this is an important role on the team, but they may not know how to support the position to be most effective. This is an overview of the public relations role to help improve understanding of what your PR staff member should be doing and what is not within their area of responsibility.

Public relations builds relationships of trust between an organization and the people it serves. In turn, the organization relies on the feedback of its audience. This helps to determine organizational successes and failures.

I'll draw an example from my current role. I help build relationships with diverse groups of people our organization serves in alignment with common values by monitoring our communication successes and needs. My main focus last school year was employee relations and external relations. I framed stories around common interests of the school employees and families. Sometimes this included a subtle explanation of how our district fits into the region. Our school district had created messages to align with the statewide effort to showcase school employees and families working together to serve students during the pandemic. It was my job to find, produce and package these stories. I was tasked to ensure message alignment with the statewide initiative all districts were asked to emulate.

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Public relations essentials

Most people think of press releases (a tactic) and publicity (a function) when they think of public relations. Press releases and publicity are aspects of public relations work. However, there are many other functions within the scope of public relations as a management function. As a high-level leadership team, you can rely on your PR pro to provide ethically-driven, highly researched counsel about your internal and external publics.

Additionally, the strategic planning process is the bedrock of PR work. It will align communications with the core values of the business, organization or agency. All while providing a public service to its stakeholders who may not otherwise have a platform to express opinions. Those opinions are rich in feedback for the organization to access for return on expectation.

Informing and inspiring leadership

Your public relations professional will be able to provide central aid to leadership. They will advise on how to prevent and solve problems. They can offer strategic advice based on research. They can reveal systems gaps and present strategies to close them. PR pros will evaluate messaging and programming impact on stakeholders. Additionally, PR pros will align all communications to organizational values.



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All planning and decision-making begins and ends with research and evaluation. Identifying a public relations problem or opportunity? You'll need to check the research before planning and implementation. Research is programmatic and a continuous process of assessing and reassessing the position of the organization's communications and programs. This is done in relation to outcome measures that its publics help determine.

Strategic feedback loop

There are different types of data to help inform policy change, communication and programming goals, strategies and objectives in PR. Primary or formal research can be qualitative or quantitative, so long as you collect the data yourself. Informal or secondary research is info already published in articles, books, data reports, databases and the web. Informal research can be used to prevent a potential issue or threat, help with situational analysis, and to determine general opinions. Public relations heavily relies on qualitative research because so much of PR is centered on engagement with audiences, determining their perceptions and gaining their trust.

An example of primary research I worked on was when I assisted in producing data reports for school districts, so they could apply for statewide funds via the Student Success Act. School districts connected with culturally-specific partners and conducted listening sessions to learn the needs, concerns and opinions of students, families and staff. A survey with scaled ranking, multiple choice and open-ended questions were also sent to the audiences in their preferred language. My coworker and I analyzed the quantitative data: demographics, what respondents valued, what needed improvement, et al. We also grouped all the qualitative data according to emerging themes. Once we aggregated the data, we co-wrote a data report for the school districts to include in their funding applications. The funding source therein is based on passed legislation, which ties in another PR function: government affairs.

Knowing your audiences and their cultural diversity

Public relations involves a two-way flow of communication between the organization and its audiences. Examples of audiences are clients, employees, shareholders, partners, government officials.

It helps research, strategies and programming to know your audiences and their common interests. You can use a variety of characteristics to determine your audience depending on your purpose: demographics, themes, shared opinions, reputation, decision-making roles. In order to build and maintain relationships with your audiences, you first have to know more about who they are. What do they think and feel? What do they value? This is one reason why building and maintaining relationships is such an important aspect of the PR pro's responsibilities.

Knowing the cultural diversity of your audiences is a sound equitable practice that should influence your policies, research, programming and evaluation methods. Why? Because different cultures communicate in different ways and in different languages. If you don't have an understanding of the cultural backgrounds and lives of your audience, your messaging and programming may unintentionally cause harm, insult or offend your audiences. And you may not know until you make a mistake. Why make a mistake that can be avoided with some research and analysis?

Ask yourself these questions:

- What steps have you taken to learn more about the cultures of your audiences?
- Do you track demographics?

- Do you have communications that reflect your workforce and stakeholder diversity?
- Do you provide multiple language resources?
- Have you adopted an equity lens?

Public relations advocates for public interest and provides a platform for fair representation of perspectives, which is one of the key ethical values of public relations.

Ethics and law

All public relations decisions are ethically driven. According to the PR Society of America, some key values of PR are advocacy of public interest, honesty, transparency, expertise, independence and objectivity, loyalty and fairness.

PR pros are dedicated to the highest ethical standards. Whether it's in regards to offering culturally specific platforms for feedback, accountability for objective advising, or being respectful for the variety of opinions coming from the organization, media or audience. It can sometimes be as complex as reporting fraud. Or as simple as adjusting diction to show respect and care for public interest. An example of the latter is when we had a death at one of our education sites. I overheard an agency representative refer to it as "an overdose." Our agency includes healthcare and mental health advocacy and care. I was fresh out of a behavioral health lecture about stigma in addiction treatment. The power of language was cited as a tool to undo deeply embedded stigmas around addiction struggles. I gently informed the director that there is contention around the term "overdose" in the mental health community. The preferred term is "drug-related death." The director thanked me profusely then, and later, for advocating for our publics. Families, staff and partners were all impacted by the incident, plus it was in the media. My counsel may have prevented a potential PR issue.

Preventing and managing disaster

Living and working in communications during 2020, in the face of a pandemic, social unrest and natural disasters, such as fires and floods, many PR pros have become experts in crisis communications overnight by necessity. Crisis comms requires having a team to assess and respond to the crisis. Some of the best training in this area is offered for free online via FEMA. It's worth having not only PR pros trained in this area, but also directors in risk management, business or management services, human resources and facilities — as well as select support staff.

So, what can you expect from your PR advisor? Trusted counsel to inform and inspire leadership. All program and communications advising stems from a feedback loop of research and evaluation. Relationships are foundational to all programming and messages. All decisions are ethically aligned. Ability to identify, prevent and manage crises with responsible and effective strategies.

Resources

- *Public Relations Strategies and Tactics*, Eleventh Editions by Dennis L. Wilcox, Glen T. Cameron and Bryan H. Reber
- *Primer of Public Relations Research*, Third Edition by Don W. Stacks
- *Effective Public Relations*, Eleventh Edition by Glen M. Broom and Bey-Ling Sha
- **Mastering Public Relations:** https://saylordotorg.github.io/text_mastering-public-relations/
- **PRSA:** www.prsa.org/about/prsa-code-of-ethics

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Refreshing your safety practices

After getting back into the routine of in-person learning, schools may need to dust the cobwebs off some important regular procedures.

Safety drills are a critical step in making sure students and staff respond appropriately when there is an emergency. But with most classrooms sitting empty last year because of COVID-19 shutdowns, most schools have gone more than a year without any kind of safety drill.

Now that students have returned to class, there is a lot of catching up to do in all areas. It might be tempting to put safety drills on the back burner, but a better approach — and a requirement in some states — is to make them a priority.

Review your safety plan

Your first task is to review your school's safety plan and make sure it is up to date. Emergency plans must cover everything from fires and earthquakes to active shooters and environmental hazards. After so many months away from the building, it's important to review your safety procedures with all staff. You likely have new staff members since the pandemic began, and even your returning staff members will need a refresher on steps to take during different emergency situations. Your district very likely has updated your plan with new protocols and procedures regarding COVID-19. Take time in a staff meeting to review where people can ask questions and offer insights.

Share your safety procedures with parents

Parents need to feel confident that their child is safe at school, and it's reassuring to them to know school staff members are prepared for various emergency situations. Keep parents well informed about your safety procedures and the steps the district will take — and parents need to follow — if reunification is required. Send parent notifications and post alerts on your website when there is a lockdown or other emergency. Parents appreciate hearing such news directly from the school, rather than on the television or radio.

Schedule regular safety drills

Drills are important for a lot of reasons. One, they are required by law. Most importantly, they help people know what to do in emergencies so they can react quickly and appropriately. That's critical for students as well as staff. Think about this: this year's 10th graders haven't been in school since eighth grade, so the high school is new to them. They don't know what they're supposed to do or where they're supposed to go during emergency drills. Also be aware that emergencies are stressful, and people don't always respond the way you might predict. A good practice is to hold cross train drill assignments, so that more than one

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staff member is prepared to handle different roles. That way, if someone is out sick or gets injured during a crisis, others will be able to step in and do their job.

By making teachers and students familiar with your emergency plan, you reduce anxiety and confusion, so they remain calm when an emergency actually happens.

Add table-top exercises with community stakeholders

While drills are essential, it's smart to also conduct occasional table-top exercises, and invite local first responders and other stakeholders. This offers an effective way to stage different scenarios and learn from each other. It also creates stronger relationships with your community partners.

How to Make the Most of Your Drills

As you prepare to conduct school safety drills this year, a good resource is a free publication from Campus Safety Magazine titled, "18 Months Without A Fire Drill: How Your Emergency Exercises Can Make A Come Back." You can download it at this link: www.campussafetymagazine.com/download/18-months-without-a-fire-drill-how-your-emergency-exercises-can-make-a-come-back

- Get everyone involved. Emphasize cooperation between your school, police and first responders. Each party is critical to your school's success in responding to critical incidents.
- Keep the age and cognitive abilities of students in mind when developing drills. Drills at a grade school need to look different than those at a high school.
- Treat the drill like a real emergency. Demand and expect full and serious participation from all involved — administrators, teachers, students and first responders.
- Practice frequently and realistically. Local mandates may dictate how frequently to hold drills, but you can mix up when you schedule the drills — don't let convenience dictate timing. And hold some when the principal is out of the building to allow others to get comfortable being in charge.
- Practice different types of drills. It's common to focus on fire and bad weather drills. But make sure your drills reflect issues that are specific to your geographic area (earthquakes, wild animals) or school population (a large percentage of students with special cognitive or physical needs). Consider planning for and practicing other situations: a child who's not breathing or who's had an allergic reaction, or an aggressive dog on the playground.
- Hold post-drill debriefings to understand what went right — and wrong. Gather input from a variety of participants and learn from mistakes. Create an environment where missteps are seen as opportunities to improve, or participants will be reluctant to speak up when they see a problem.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant

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Share information about your nutrition program

Nutrition impacts academic performance as well as child wellbeing and health. School meal programs provide the majority of food for some children who rely on schools as a source of breakfast, lunch and snacks during the school day and, for many, during breaks with federally-funded breakfast and lunch programs and nonprofit programs that send backpack meals home on weekends.

Kids can't learn if they are hungry, and food insecurity is a persistent problem in our country. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, about 15% of children experienced food insecurity in 2020, which is defined by the USDA as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active and healthy life. (<https://bit.ly/3B2JYM6>)

Communicating about school meal programs

The public often does not know about school nutrition programs. They may hear news stories about efforts to change nutritional requirements for "free lunch" programs, but they likely don't know what the requirements are or the efforts in their own districts to ensure that children are not hungry.

This information is helpful to share. Confidentiality laws do not allow districts to put a face to the programs, but the reasons behind the programs are easy to share. Districts should also inform parents and the community about the efforts to provide high-quality, nutritious food to all students. For some, school lunch may bring back unpleasant memories, but programs have changed, and school nutrition staff work hard to make high-quality, palatable school meals.

Information to help you get started communicating about nutrition

These efforts are a daily challenge, and we should tell people about the hard work behind these programs. In 2019, almost 30 million children in the United States ate lunches each school day as part of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). During remote or hybrid learning, the number was reduced, but schools continued to try to serve students by offering a variety of meal options, including using school buses to drive food to students who were eligible for nutrition assistance in the form of free or reduced-price meals.

The NSLP is administered at the federal level by the Food and Nutrition Services department, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Schools participating in the federally-sponsored program get cash subsidies and donated food from the U. S. Department of Agriculture for each meal they serve. However, districts must comply with federal guidelines in order to qualify.

The federal government requires that school lunches must meet nutrition requirements to receive federal funds. These requirements provide guidelines for sodium, fat, calories, fruits

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and vegetables, grains and meats. This doesn't mean that all meals meet these requirements. The government requires compliance for meal patterns for both daily and weekly nutritional value. Every meal does not have to comply, but the weekly cumulative meal value must. See the government policy memo for more information: <https://bit.ly/39YIneu>.

Who needs to know about nutrition and its effect on learning?

Parents, students, staff and community should understand the importance of good nutrition and the services of school meal programs. Determine how to communicate about your nutrition program after considering a few basic questions:

What do your parents, staff and students already know about it? Do they have more information than the upcoming monthly lunch menu?

Have you explained why the food appearing on the menus is being served as part of your breakfast, lunch and/or after-school snack programs?

How many of your students eat at school? Do you know how many of the students who qualify for and eat free- and reduced-priced-meals at school depend on those meals for their primary source of food each day? Does your community generally know about and support your efforts to feed students?

How have you changed your nutrition program in recent years to provide a more healthy meal plan?

What are you doing about nutrition outside the cafeteria? Have you integrated nutrition lessons into the curriculum? Are you educating parents about the importance of nutrition? Do families know where to access nutrition resources for their children when school is not in session?

Have you shared information about eligibility for free and reduced lunch with all families? Do you make efforts to destigmatize this program to ensure that recipients are not bullied or marginalized? Students who are ashamed, especially older students, will often skip meals rather than participate in the free meal program.

Tips for sharing nutrition requirements for your meal program

Be sure to include your school nutrition program in your list of possible news features. Recognize food service staff on your website or in publications, introduce parents to individuals in the district who create the menus, and explain their educational training and experience. Interview those employees about how they develop the menus.

Describe the federal program, and the quantities of food commodities you receive in the district. Give examples of how those are used in meal planning. Use a monthly menu and highlight those menu items created from NSLP commodities. Include the financial value of this federal assistance.

Explain the financial side of food preparation — how federal subsidies are used, how meal costs are determined and the federal guidelines used to determine who qualifies for free and reduced-price meals. Make sure parents know how to apply for free- and reduced-price meals.

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Supporting the health and well-being of teachers

According to a recent survey of K-12 educators by EdWeek Research Center, 91% of educators experienced job-related stress. While this is not breaking news, school leaders are responsible for the health and well-being of everyone in the school. Teachers are adjusting to socially distanced classrooms, attending to students’ emotional and educational needs and dealing with staff shortages and virus exposures.

Teachers’ emotions matter for five primary reasons:

1. **Attention, memory and learning.** Emotions like anxiety and fear, especially when prolonged, disrupt concentration and interfere with thinking.
2. **Decision-making.** When we’re overwhelmed and stressed, our ability to make good decisions is affected.
3. **Relationships.** Teachers who express anxiety or frustration (for example, in their facial expressions, body language, vocal tone or behavior) affect students’ learning experience.
4. **Health and well-being.** Stress is associated with increased levels of cortisol, which has been shown to lead to both physical and mental health challenges.
5. **Performance.** Chronic stress among teachers is linked to decreases in teacher motivation and engagement, which impacts student learning.

<https://bit.ly/3hEVR1P>

Survey staff to learn what they need

Often, what a leader assumes would help teachers is different than what they actually need or want. It is a good idea to ask your staff what they need to feel supported. Offering a self-care program like yoga or meditation sounds helpful, but according to a survey by EdWeek, only 11% of teachers believe this would alleviate their stress. Instead, the survey shows that 59% of teachers would like more time to plan or catch up. (See table below)

<https://bit.ly/3lHKRo1>

	Percentage of administrators who will implement task	Percentage of teachers who think this will help
Provide more support to students’ home-related challenges and mental health needs	55%	31%
Provide additional planning time	28%	59%
Have supervisors check in on staff	55%	19%
Provide more coaching	41%	6%
Offer self-care programs	31%	11%

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What teachers really want

Give teachers more time and more flexibility.

Some school districts have designated a weekly teacher and student workday with no classes. Schools are closed for deep cleaning, so teachers can collaborate and plan lessons. Other schools have shortened block-schedule classes and reduced their frequency.

Give them a break.

Encourage teachers to text an administrator to cover their class when they're feeling overwhelmed. Even a ten-minute break conveys that you care and could give them the boost needed to get through a tough day.

Reduce the number of required meetings.

Pre-pandemic, a weekly staff meeting might have been the norm. Now, an unnecessary meeting causes more stress. Cancel a meeting if the information could be sent in an email. If you do need to meet, follow these tips to make your staff meetings more engaging and supportive:

1. **Provide numerous opportunities for staff engagement.** Staff collaboration and meaningful discussions about their teaching practice are essential to student performance.
2. **Ask for feedback.** Providing opportunities to offer feedback about work issues creates a more effective, engaged staff. Ask staff members to fill out an anonymous feedback form at the end of each meeting. Ask them to rate their level of engagement and the usefulness of the meeting, and share feedback for future meetings. If feasible, make adjustments to the next meeting.
3. **Take time to showcase best practices.** Always include time to share successes with lesson design, instruction and assessment. Reserving a few minutes for this professional learning is a great way to share best practices.
4. **Elevate social and emotional learning.** Staff, just like students, need additional consideration for mental health support during this challenging time. Keep this in mind when planning staff meeting to ensure time for mindfulness, reflection and connection.

www.edutopia.org/article/designing-better-staff-meeting

Lighten their load.

Remove some expectations or required tasks during periods of particularly high stress (parent-teacher conferences).

Encourage teachers to set work boundaries.

Establish "office hours" so they don't have to respond to emails and calls 24/7. Don't email staff on the weekends unless absolutely necessary.

Be transparent and accessible.

Teachers need to know they can ask questions, even about tough topics. Keep them in the loop about federal and state mandates and ensure they have your support when they are tasked with enforcing health and safety guidelines.

Manage your own stress

Don't forget to take care of yourself as well. The school community is counting on you to lead them through this tumultuous time. Connect with colleagues and find time to disconnect from work to alleviate your stress and fill up your energy tank.

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Tips for schools: A pandemic twist on the teacher-feature

The pandemic has created new challenges to connecting with perhaps the most influential person your child has outside of the home — their teacher. Even if you have been communicating online more with teachers, it builds trust to get to know them personally. Learning starts with good relationships, which require trust and communication.

The About Us page is one of the most visited areas of most websites. Visitors like to know who people are. This is also true for schools. Teacher profiles are an important part of your school websites and make nice posts on social media. In addition to a staff directory, consider adding individual profiles to your page. They can do double duty by adding them to individual teacher class pages and as special features on school newsletters.

Sharing appropriate details about staff keeps the personal outreach fresh. The idea can also spark creativity — Embed links to fun photos or videos in the questions. The nice thing about the “teacher feature” is you do it once and, unless something major happens, you can leave it be, or push it out since these features are general enough to be relevant any time.

The following list of questions have been published before in this publication — they are standard prompts that work. Or, you can “seasonalize” them with questions pertaining to seasons, celebrations or top issues. Customize if you have the time. This is an investment in creating a comfortable, welcoming climate, which should yield better trust among your school community.

Below is a mock example, so you can see how simple the answers can be. Have fun — you don’t have to answer them all; the point is to share your inspiration. Everyone has a story locked inside.

Name: Michael Sean Garcia

Years I’ve been teaching: 15, and I hope many more!

Where I grew up: New Mexico, on a horse ranch, but we moved into town later when we had to sell and mom needed to find work.

Have your hobbies changed during the pandemic: Just a little, but I’m actually hiking more! And reading even more books with my kids; -- and raising a puppy.

Career background (college, degrees, specialty, where I’ve taught): Master’s in Teaching, Willamette University, 1986. Started with Gervais SD in 1988.

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Favorite foods during the pandemic: I experiment with stews and soups, so we can all cut vegetables together. Oh, and pancakes of course.

Something funny I may have done as a child: I buried my little sister's Barbie doll in the back yard, but at the time that wasn't funny, so I dug it up and gave it back as a birthday present.

My favorite saying or quote these days: Wash your hands, wear your mask, I love you.

Book(s) on my nightstand: "CHASER: Unlocking the Genius of a dog who knows 1,000 words"

Why I love teaching, even now: I am truly inspired, and in awe, of the kids I get to teach every day, because they're early adopters! Masks are no problem, but when they are, we just deal with it. So, while it's hard ... very very hard ... my commitment is to keep them safe now, not just to teach. I want them to be resilient because this is their world now.

Something people would be surprised to know about me: I dropped out of high school because I needed a job to support my mom and little sisters when dad died. But I came back and graduated. Oh, and my mom grew up in Ireland.

One special moment I saw, participated in, or helped create, that "made it all worthwhile" during the pandemic (Hint: Doesn't have to be a big thing....maybe the fact that one of your students got into the college they wanted)

I caught one of my students helping another student wash his hands and adjust his mask. I overheard another child say, "I hope we can get the vaccine soon."

Something I've learned in the pandemic: I have to admit, I get very angry, so I've learned how to share my feelings in a positive way with my kids at home, and at school. I talk through what made me mad, aloud, and then tell myself how I plan to fix it. This works even with forgetting to pick up the milk! Don't just blow up. Children learn from how you express and resolve frustration — and they never forget. It becomes embedded in their experience, whether they know it or not.

Maximizing yearbook interviews

At the secondary level, many yearbook staff also include teacher interviews, which can be published in newsletters and on social media as well. It is a great way to get more mileage from your repurposed content. Using this content is an efficient way to access already-approved teacher details for other purposes, and it is an excellent way to showcase student work.

Talk to your yearbook teachers about accessing this information — or suggesting this content if they don't already include it. There are a number of great resources online that provide additional suggested questions.

Yearbook vendor TreeRing is a helpful resource for student-produce content. A good list of sample questions is from their blog post, 48 Questions Guaranteed to Get Teachers to Open Up During Yearbook Interviews: <https://blog.treering.com/48-yearbook-questions-guaranteed-to-get-teachers-to-open-up-during-interviews>

Sample questions fall within the following topics:

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- About life outside of school
- About school life
- About the students
- Along the lines of a specific article or theme
- About Nothing—Just for Kicks (or Mods)

This project is a great way to showcase great staff, be visible on your sites and provide a reintroduction to students, parents and colleagues.

Contributed by Shannon Priem, APR, former communications director for Oregon School Boards Association; internal communications specialist for Salem Health and board chair for EAGLE Charter School in Salem, Ore.



Cell Phone Use Among Kids and Teens



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INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

“Just over half of children in the United States — 53 percent — now own a smartphone by the age of 11. And 84 percent of teenagers now have their own phones, immersing themselves in a rich and complex world of experiences that adults sometimes need a lot of decoding to understand.”

—NPR.org, <https://n.pr/3B5usz8>

Mobile devices are an important part of modern life. Today's students never knew a time before smartphones were commonplace. The rest of us remember that era but don't necessarily want to go back to when maps, phones, social connections and streaming entertainment were not at our fingertips.

Still, most agree that these powerful devices should be regulated for the youngest users.

Focus on balance

A majority of kids and teens have a smartphone. It's hard for parents to say no when phones are so pervasive among kids. And they are convenient. Mobile phones provide parental piece-of-mind when kids need to walk home alone, call for a ride or check in during social gatherings. They offer homework help in the form of easy internet research and access to a calculator.

Mobile devices are useful tools, and all tools are most effective when users understand limitations, safety rules and best practices.

According to Anya Kamenetz, author of “The Art of Screen Time; Digital Parenting Without Fear,” the answer for parents is to balance the amount of time kids use screens with other activities, share screen activities with kids, model technology use for creation, discovery and connection, and help kids understand the media they access. Experts agree that this last point is the most important one. “The best thing you can do generally is talk to your kids about media,” said researcher Eric Rasmussen. “Kids need to know what you think about the media they're consuming.

The mental health impact of screens on kids

Knowing what to think about how online content affects our kids isn't easy, but it is a question that is currently in the national spotlight. Recent news about congressional hearings involving Facebook and Instagram revealed Facebook's strategies to increase membership among minors despite knowing that its platforms could be harmful to young users' mental health.

The company released internal research that indicated possible harmful effects on girl's mental health related to body image and self esteem

(Over)

through Instagram use (<https://bit.ly/2YidI9u>). According to an investigation by the Wall Street Journal, Facebook leaders were aware of the research showing addictive and harmful risks to kids from the social media platform. Read more: The Facebook Files, A Wall Street Journal Investigation, www.wsj.com/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039

Smartphones and mobile devices have come a long way, and we are all learning about them as they evolve. Now that they have been widely adopted, it is important to look carefully at the side effects of regular use.

Restricting phone use in schools

Some parents have organized policy changes in their schools and districts to restrict phone use during the school day. The Away for the Day (www.awayfortheday.org/) campaign promotes parent advocacy activities to support policies limiting access to phones during class. The website states:

“Research shows that kids and teens do better with phones away during school hours... When students do not have the freedom of accessing their phones during school hours, they are more engaged socially and academically.”

Phone-free school policies may not be right for every community, but the information can help parents think critically about the way kids use their phones. The site includes research, sample policies, common pushbacks and tools for action. If a policy change isn't the right approach, there are several items in the materials that could prompt a conversation with schools, other parents or even within families.

Guidance for responsible phone use

Common Sense Media helps parents navigate the challenges of the modern media environment. Their website has a section on cellphone parenting that provides tips by age, a question and answer section and articles and videos on topics on more than 100 phone-related topics.

Even if you haven't faced these sticky issues (yet), reading through some of the issues they list can help parents plan ahead. Popular questions are about privacy settings, whether parents should demand passwords to social websites and apps, the right ages for phone ownership, and how to limit the amount of time kids spend texting and interacting on social media.

Resources

Away for the Day

www.awayfortheday.org/

Common Sense Media

www.commonsensemedia.org/cellphone-parenting

Screenagers: The time for less phones in schools is now

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