

CASE STUDY: HOW TO GET STARTED WITH A SCHOOL COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS PROGRAM



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CASE STUDY: How does a school district get started with an effective communication program?

The situation

“Improve communication” or “improve public relations” frequently shows up on strategic plans because communication is a fundamental function of organizations. In my view, public relations is a subset of a communication effort. Small and medium sized districts have the same need for internal and external organizational communication as do larger districts. Many districts often don’t have a person on staff to lead a communication effort. A question I am asked often is, “How do we get started?” Two suburban districts, both located in different yet competitive school regions, provide examples of two approaches.

The solutions

4000-student district

The superintendent, just a year on the job, stated, “We need a public relations plan, but we don’t know where to start.” Research is the best place to start. A community-wide survey, coupled with an open enrollment survey, and a communication audit revealed key priorities of the district’s various stakeholders: staff, parents, and community members with no connections to the school. Information about what was important to the different stakeholders allowed the district to think strategically about how to communicate about school initiatives that were already in place but were not showcased through existing communication efforts. A plan was created.

In the first two years of communication improvement, foundational items such as updating the website, developing school profiles, initiating school print and e-communication strategies including social media, all supported by a content strategy, were laid in place. In the third year, seeing that the communication improvement called for by the district’s overall strategic plan were starting to materialize, the Board of Education and administrative team accepted that communication *IS* important. The district hired a part-time communication professional to sustain and enhance the program.



“A communication plan based on research and analysis, plus training, are some of the ingredients to a sustainable and effective communication program.” – DD

OVER

3300-student district

New to the district, this superintendent had used the services of a communication professional in his previous district. He wanted to bring that same attention to detail to the new district. Faced with budget concerns and some misunderstandings about the value that communication brings to the table, a planned and strategic approach was desired.

The solution here was to deliver several workshops and one-on-one meetings with key leaders and the Board of Education to better inform the leadership team and then to develop a communication plan for the district. The district has a multi-year, phased communication plan with designated in-house staff gaining in skills to help deliver the daily, weekly and monthly tactics. There is a growing acceptance by the leadership team to engage outside resources for professionally developed videos, print materials, and social media. Collaboration with an outside consultant keeps the district's plan on track while designated in-house staff help implement some of the plan. It's a win-win!

Outcomes

- Each district operates with a time-bound communication plan, with metrics aligned to goals and budgets. They report on their strategic communication improvement, just like they report on other initiatives for improvement.
- E-newsletters, print newsletters, the web site, and growing use of social media are key communication tools. In-house staff are gaining in skills through training and consultation.
- Open enrollment is addressed strategically by both districts, as part of the communication plan.
- Social media engagement is up.
- A successful referendum was achieved in one district. The other district expects one in the future.
- The leadership team has a growing acceptance of the key role of effective communication.

COMMUNICATION. Building bridges.

About Dorreen Dembski Communication Services, LLC:

Whether you have identified an area of communication concern or simply want to improve your organization's current communication efforts, we consult with you to identify priorities and recommend ways to move forward. Rooted in expertise, I will provide a deep level of commitment to understand your organization's goals and needs. Then, like an extra set of hands, or a guide on the side, I can work with you to deliver the right amount of service, communication products, processes, training, and information you need to move your organization to a new level of communication effectiveness, according to your budget. Please contact me if I can help you with your next communication project!

- Dorreen Dembski, owner