

# RIGHT NOW: School Communication is for ALL



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## **RIGHT NOW. A growing amount of data tells us why right now is the time to get started with School PR and Communication for *all districts, big and small.***

There is a growing amount of inquiry – especially surveys – about school choice and what parents expect from schools. Within these surveys, findings emerge that indicate all schools need strategic communication at an organizational level, *right now*. Yet some educational leaders and school board members, especially in public school sector that I serve, may find it difficult to financially support communication and public relations and want to know more. This paper draws together research results that indicate clear reasons why school districts need effective school public relations and communication programs.

### **1. ATTRACT NEW ENROLLMENT**

I believe that the competition for enrollment will continue to grow. If schools don't tell their stories effectively they could be on the wrong side of the equation. Not only do I think this, but data tells us that right now:

Only 1 in 3 parents, or 31% of the surveyed parents, said that they would pick a traditional public school if cost and location were not issues (PDK 2017 Poll).

#### **Parents want information to help them decide on what schools to choose.**

80% of parents surveyed said a lack of information about a school would influence their choice about selecting that school (Tatz, 2013). The parents in this survey were already participating in a choice or voucher program. I infer, they *did seek* information to make their choices.

#### **Some of the information families cares about is clear.**

Parents say they care about:

- Curriculum, educational programs and updates (NSPRA Counselor 2011);
- Career, technology, advanced programming, and interpersonal skills (PDK Poll 2017)
- Student-teacher ratios (Tatz, 2013)

(There is much more in the PDK Poll 2017 results.)

Parents support:

- After-school enrichment programs (PDK Poll, 2017)
- Mental health services (PDK Poll, 2017)

Ask yourself: If your district is operating with or without a strategic communication strategy, does your school leadership know:

- IF families want to find out more about your schools, where would they find it?

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- In the information families find about your school district, does it really tell the story about your curriculum and educational programs and the other topics families care about?

A strategic and well-thought through communication and public relations plan can impact enrollment by helping schools and districts deliver the right information in the right place at the right time.

## **2. RETAIN CURRENT FAMILIES (ENROLLMENT)**

Do you know the communication factors that are important to the families in your school district? In regards to communication, we do know a few things, again from research.

1. Parents want to know about their child’s progress in school. Teacher/parent communication is very important. (NSPRA CAP Program).
2. Only 49% of parents whose children are assigned to a school by the district\* are very satisfied with staff-parent interactions, and 37% are satisfied, for a total of 86%. (\*Yes, that would be parents of traditional public school.) Here’s the thing: Compare that to the 75% very satisfied and 21% satisfied parents whose children attend private schools, or 96%. (Cheng and Peterson, 2016). While the gap is smaller when the rating of satisfied is added together with very satisfied, clearly, there is work to be done to help parents feel very satisfied with staff-parent interactions and communication is a key.
3. With increasing diversity, including language barriers, research shows a greater need to help parents know with accuracy – how their child is performing in school (String, 2017).

Plus, parents want to help their kids in school. I believe schools should position themselves as the educational experts in their communities.

Here is information that families say they would find useful:

Timely, accurate access to “high priority information such as important information about their child, upcoming events or activities, and news” (Stansbury, 2017).

Detail and accurate information about grade-level learning expectations (String, 2017).

Activities to improve learning, especially reading and math, and English skills (String, 2017).

Summer and enrichment activities so children don’t fall behind (String, 2017).

A communication plan well designed and implemented could help your district attract and retain enrollment by helping impact how and what you communicate to parents. It could position you within the community as the educational leader. Let’s not over sell here – progress reporting still comes down to great teachers – a communication strategy can help attract and retain great staff, too.

## **3. ATTRACT AND RETAIN EMPLOYEES**

What do we know about communication and employee satisfaction?

- Millennials, say that more than ever, they want the opportunity to grow in an organization. Internal communication and a healthy internal communication culture is critical to millennials and help them learn about opportunities.
- The information age we live in has established an expectation of information accessibility. When information isn’t available, it causes distrust and dissatisfaction.

- Communication is the foundation of relationships. Relationships build trust and engagement in an organization.
- Communication indicates respect. *“If you communicate with me, you are including me.”*
- People’s creativity is activated when they are involved in teams and problem-solving.

Building a culture of communication takes time and deliberate effort. A communication strategy can help develop a culture for success.

#### **4. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT BUILDS TRUST AND TRUST IS ESSENTIAL TO SCHOOL DISTRICT PROGRESS**

*“Trust is the glue of life. It’s the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It’s the foundational principle that holds all relationships together.”- Stephen Covey*

In addition, in a survey of 405 educational chief academic officers, when the community trusts the district, there is tangible evidence, such as business investment in schools and community support of public funding (DeSieghardt, 2015).

According to Calderon and Dvorak (2017) there are three ways schools build trust, and based on professional experience I agree with their premises.

“Invite, encourage and share feedback.

Develop a district identity and communicate it.

Share successes that inspire confidence.”

An effective school-community engagement process is an essential ingredient to a strategic school-community communication plan.

#### **Conclusion**

Would you build a new house without a blueprint? Do you improve student reading or math scores without a plan? No. I contend that the same is true for school and district organizational communication efforts. School leaders need a blueprint, they need help. It is the time for every school district to initiate a strategic school communication and public relations effort with highly qualified assistance.

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