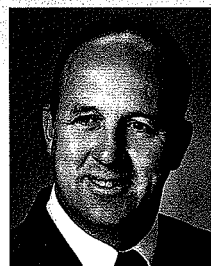


JIM FITZPATRICK
& MABEL SCHUMACHER



Communicating During Change

In schools and communities, change is always on the horizon. In becoming superintendent, I expected challenges. However, after I assumed my duties in Fort Atkinson in the summer of 1999, there were several issues brought about by change that I had rarely considered.

Effect of No Child Left Behind legislation. In 2003, superintendents in this state were scrambling to figure out how they could keep their districts and schools off the “failure to attain yearly progress list” and how to communicate the implications of this legislation to the community.

Increased diversity in our community. English Language Learner (ELL) instruction was needed only for a handful of students in 1999. Now we have two full-time teachers and two part-time aides. We have 141 Latino students today, compared with approximately 25 in 1999-2000.

Budget Concerns. School districts across the state are struggling to decide on the correct budget assumptions as the Legislature proposes a radical ratcheting down of the revenue caps that will financially strap school districts already mired in deep financial trouble. All this could result in cuts in staff, services and activities.

Qualified economic offer (QEO). It is difficult to explain to the public the revenue cap and the qualified economic offer (QEO) laws, which are contradictory in that they are established at almost a one-percent spread. This results in a one-percent annual shortfall every year with no relief in sight.

Crisis planning. Developing emergency plans and communicating about safety issues in the post-Columbine and post-9/11 era has become critical.

Day-to-day operation. School personnel everywhere recognize that simply dealing with day-to-day events often alters our daily calendars.

How do we explain to parents, staff and students the changes brought about by these issues over which we have little control?

Recognize where people go for their news

You have to look at your own district to determine the most popular news sources. In our town, people rely a lot on the media — the daily newspaper and the local radio station. The following are some communication strategies I have used to get the message out:

- Write a column in the local newspaper on a regular basis. If you have a daily or weekly newspaper, editors are often looking for copy. In Fort Atkinson, amid the high-tech world we live in, citizens still look for local news in the daily paper. I write a column twice a month about topics that are critical to the district and community.
- Be a guest on morning talk shows. An appearance between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m. reaches a lot of citizens. Ask to be invited when you think you have something to share with citizens. Utilize your staff and board members on these shows, as well.

Develop written communications

- In addition to dates and events coming up, newsletters should include explanation or comments sent home regarding changes and developments. If you start to write your newsletters in this manner, parents will read them with much more interest. Don't forget to include home-school parents; you might get some of them to enroll their children in public school!
- Include the business community in your communication. Send your newsletter and annual report to the local chamber of commerce. This information comes in handy when families are shopping for communities to raise their children. Excellent schools are top on their list.

Don't forget about your staff

- Develop staff newsletters once a month. Most of us can utilize an all-staff e-mail newsletter. I send it hard copy as well. Remember all the people in your district who do not utilize e-mail as frequently — custodians, cooks, bus drivers, para-professionals and aides. Communicating changes to staff first gives you the “ambassadors” you need to help get your message out to the community.

Make use of technology

- Use your Web page. It is critical to keep your Web page current with newsletters, developments and news that will make a person want to return to your Web site.

Taking Care of Today Does Not Mean Neglecting The Future

"No one will thank you for taking care of the present if you have neglected the future," asserts Joel Barker, the widely acclaimed author and futurist, who will be featured on Friday morning during the 2006 State Education Convention, planned for Jan. 18-20. After Barker's keynote address, a workshop will provide school leaders the tools they need for thinking about the long-range implications of today's decisions.

Each of the general session speakers for the 2006 State Education Convention will follow up their thought-provoking messages with

workshops that will help school officials put the information to use in their districts.

Jamie Vollmer, a champion of public education who is a former attorney and well-known businessman, will employ logic, statistics and humor in laying out a case for school change during the opening general session on Wednesday morning. He insists that public education must be broadly and aggressively supported if America is to remain great. In an afternoon workshop, he will share the mechanics of increasing community support for local schools.

Randy Quinn and Linda Dawson, cofounders of the Aspen Group International Inc., have consulted with boards across the United States. On Thursday morning, Quinn will speak about the board's responsibility to safeguard the public's trust in education and address the board's responsibility to evaluate the performance of the organization and the superintendent. In an afternoon workshop, Dawson will work with local officials who are interested in learning more about policy governance, while Quinn will hold a "wisdom-sharing" session with those who are already engaged in policy governance. ■

PRACTICAL PR

continued from previous page

- Utilize local cable networks for programming. More people will click on your local station as you increase programming.

Meet with people

- Remember that face-to-face communication is best. Have a superintendent advisory session that meets once a month. Explain changes, programs, referendum plans or controversies.
- Rather than relying on open forums, find your audiences where they are. If you have new programs or new building plans — or just new ideas — service clubs like to hear about them.
- Never underestimate the power of a lunch or breakfast meeting to build alliances. This can be effective with labor unions, business people, clergy and staff members.

Recognize people

- Acknowledge the accomplishment of individuals. Cut out

clippings and send "You are in the News" notes congratulating people on their accomplishments. For a superintendent, this is a great way to stay in touch with kids and community business people. Their activities are often covered in the paper.

Be visible

- Attend as many functions as your schedule allows. If people see you often, they will feel you are approachable.

Other points to consider

A couple of other points regarding communicating in changing times:

- Key message points are critical to communication and have to be repeated consistently and often.
- Some issues take a lot of patience to communicate. Sometimes it is better to give the message in a couple of parts rather than all at once. A newspaper series is often a good strategy to explain a strategic plan, a referendum or a building renovation plan.

- Some people will not like your message. Respect their opinions but don't be dissuaded. Most readers or listeners, even if they disagree with you, will appreciate your keeping them informed.

As we face change in our schools and our communities, I believe we have to be "on the offense" when it comes to communication. I would rather be "informing than defending" when it comes to telling the story about our schools. Right now we have a lot of stories to tell to our stakeholders. Who better to tell that story than us? ■

Fitzpatrick is superintendent for the School District of Fort Atkinson and a member of the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA). Schumacher, who is retired, was formerly the director of curriculum for Fort Atkinson. She remains an active member of WSPRA. WSPRA, specializing in school community relations, provides visionary leadership and services to Wisconsin schools by equipping its members with effective communication management skills. (www.wspra.org).