



Effective Communication

How to move your district's improvement plan into action

Job Opening: “Qualified candidates must possess excellent communication skills ...” Read your local employment ads, and you will find that “is an effective communicator” is a requirement that appears consistently. Just as individual communication skills are essential to the effectiveness of any leader, excellent organizational communication is essential to the effectiveness of any successful organization. Recently, a colleague of mine attended a conference and learned the success strategies of this year’s Baldrige Award winners. From the smallest to the largest company, each corporation cited communication as a key ingredient to success.

School districts recognize the critical importance of communication at all levels. Almost every improvement plan addresses communication in some shape or form. However, a plan is nothing more than a piece of paper if you don’t give legs to the idea. “RACE” is a process that can help you start or improve your district’s communication efforts. The acronym RACE

stands for Research, Analyze, Communicate and Evaluate.

Don’t get me wrong: Please don’t avoid taking steps toward improvement while you work on RACE. Go ahead; take those steps. Write the weekly news column; communicate regularly to your internal audiences; launch your first e-letter; build relationships. We know these are effective. As you work to improve your district’s communication, you will be doing the research, analysis and evaluation behind the scenes to ensure you are heading in the right direction. The RACE formula is a cyclical process, which means that no matter where you find yourself along the path communication, RACE will help you improve. Now, what exactly does the RACE process involve?

Research and Analysis

Whether your district is just getting started or is deeply involved in communication planning, research is critical. If you are just beginning, you might research the definition for a good public relations program. Take advantage of work by the National School Public Relations

Association (NSPRA) at nspra.org. Click on “Starting a PR Program” and then on *Raising the Bar for School PR — New Standards for the School Public Relations Profession*. Assess your strengths and weaknesses by comparing your district’s current communication strategies to the NSPRA standards. You can complete the analysis yourself or as a district team. If, however, you want external assistance, a professional communication audit is an in-depth review of formal and informal communication activities.

If you aren’t ready for a full audit, compile a binder of all the activities currently done in your district to communicate — stretch — and find them all. Then ask a local business partner or educational agency to “loan” you a communication specialist. Ask for an expert review of your efforts. The key is to self-assess so you understand how to improve.

If you are already engaged in strategic communication planning, how effective are your efforts? Where do people get their information and how well do they understand the district’s messages?



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• Surely if those of us at the U.S. Department of Education pushed hard enough we could get districts to inform parents of their school choice options under the law, and ensure that kids trapped in failing schools have better places to go, right? Yet, hard experience has shown that “stronger implementation” would only make a difference at the margin. It cannot solve the fundamental problem: In most of our big cities, there are too few good schools to go around. Uncle Sam can’t snap his fingers and make it otherwise. Furthermore, while it’s hard enough to force recalcitrant states and districts to do things they don’t want to do, it’s impossible to force them to do those things well. And when it comes to informing parents, creating new schools, or implementing almost any of NCLB’s many pieces, it’s not enough for states or dis-

tricts to go through the motions. They have to want to make it succeed. If they don’t, Washington is out of luck. It has no tools or levers to alter the situation. That’s why I’ve called much of the law “un-implementable.”

So I shouldn’t have been surprised when Michele McLaughlin, of the American Federation of Teachers, wrote in her NCLB blog, “Petrilli and Checker Finn [president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation] ... seem to be arguing for a more limited role for the feds in education because the U.S. Department of Education doesn’t have the ability to get states and districts to implement the law well. Unless I am missing something, this seems to be a shift in position for the Fordham Foundation, which has been a major supporter of NCLB.”

Guilty as charged. I can’t pretend any longer that the law is “working,” or that a tweak and a tuck would

make it “work.” Yet I still like its zeitgeist. As Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust, argued, NCLB has “changed the conversation” in education. Results are now the coin of the realm; the “soft bigotry of low expectations” is taboo; closing the achievement gap is at the top of everyone’s to-do list. All for the good. More than good. But let’s face it: It doesn’t help the dedicated principal who is pulling her hair out because of the law’s nonsensical provisions — the specifics that keep NCLB from achieving its own aims. ■

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