

Not an Option

Research shows clear link between effective communication and student success

Over the years, I have had many opportunities to work with school board members, superintendents and other school leaders in districts across the nation. In most of these districts, there has been recognition that communication is a critical part of making strong connections between a school district and its community residents.

While this still remains true, a recent review of educational research has clarified a more significant role for an effective communication program. According to a white paper recently released by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), communication to boost parental involvement and develop better understanding of what schools do is critical to student achievement.

The white paper, *How Strong Communication Contributes to Student and School Success: Parent and Family Involvement*, compiled and reviewed research investigating the links between effective school communication and parental and community involvement. It is part of the Communication Accountability Project (CAP) that NSPRA has initi-

ated to demonstrate that an effective communication program is essential for every school district to be more effective.

“The research leaves no doubt that well-planned and effective ongoing communication from schools makes a significant impact on student achievement and parent and community involvement,” said Rich Bagin, executive director of NSPRA. “Parents and family can make a huge difference in student achievement when schools and homes are working together through collaborative and competent communication.”

In addition, the white paper reports a number of performance issues that are linked to school communication and involvement. These performance issues include:

- Higher grade-point averages and scores on standardized tests
- More classes passed by students
- Higher enrollment in more challenging academic classes
- Better attendance by students
- Improved behavior at home and at school

Because of these links, we can no longer view communication by schools and school districts as an

option or a luxury. It needs to be seen as a critical function of every district — large and small — and an organized plan to develop strong and positive relationships between the district and parents and community residents needs to become a common document for every district.

One of the other major findings in the white paper is a call to action for every district to train its employees to be more effective communicators. According to the research, schools where teachers reported high levels of outreach to parents, test scores grew at a rate 40 percent higher than in schools where teachers reported low levels of outreach.

Here are a few ideas to improve connection between teachers and parents:

- **Start with training.** Many teachers and other school employees may not understand how to most effectively and efficiently communicate with parents. Providing basic communication training to these employees is a great first step.
- **Establish expectations for communication.** If communication is going to be seen as important by teachers, it needs to be an

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expectation of every teacher. Working with a group of teachers, establish an expectation of how often teachers need to communicate with parents and hold employees accountable to this expectation.

- **Communicate in small pieces, not big chunks.** Long, complicated newsletters and other materials are not usually widely read by parents. Provide information in smaller pieces so it is easier to understand, and make your communication to parents more regular.
- **Take advantage of technology.** More and more parents have access to e-mail, either at home or work. Sending a short e-mail once a week or once every other week is a cost-effective way to share information. Give them a two-three sentence summary of what you want them to know and then provide a link to your Web site that includes more information.

- **Focus on key messages.** Determine three or four key messages or ideas that you want to communicate to parents and community members and repeat them on a regular basis. It is easier for us to remember information if it is focused on specific messages.

In case you are not yet convinced of the power of communication, the research indicated that community support contributed to the following positive changes in schools:

- Upgraded school facilities
- Improved school leadership and staffing
- Higher quality learning programs for students
- New resources and programs for students
- New resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum
- New funding for after-school programs and family support services

These issues reinforce the value of investing time and other resources in connecting with parents and community residents, and building strong relationships results in a greater sense of ownership of what happens in a school district.

The issue of time is one that is often heard as an obstacle to implementing more comprehensive communication strategies. It is true that placing a greater emphasis on communication at the school and district level will take more time than doing nothing. However, when we examine the impact of an ongoing communication effort on a district, it is clear that investing more time and other resources will yield tremendous value.

While most school districts have some communication activities in place, what is often missing is a sustained communication program. Effective communication cannot happen once or twice a year, or just be connected to a referendum.

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It needs to be regular and use a variety of communication strategies to reach all parents and residents. Here are a few ideas to improve your district's communication program:

- **Assess your district's communication program.** Conduct an audit of your communication effort and find out what's working, what isn't working and what needs to be done to make your effort more effective.
- **Develop a communication plan.** If you don't have a plan, effective communication will never happen. Lay out your communication objectives and then develop strategies to meet each objective.
- **Identify and seek out opinion leaders.** There are people in every community who are able to influence others. Identify these

people and regularly communicate with them so they can share information with others in the community.

- **Explain reasons behind decisions.** It is not enough to communicate the decision or issue. It is necessary to help people understand the reasons behind a decision and process taken to arrive at the decision.
- **Communicate from the inside out.** We need to communicate with both internal and external audiences, but all communication should start with internal audiences. Your own staff can help you communicate with parents and community members.
- **Make communication and building relationships part of everyone's job.** No one person

can do this alone. Everyone needs to know that they are a critical part of the district's communication effort.

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