



by Linda Kons

Do a Good Job and Tell People About It

“Do a good job. Do a good job. Do a good job. Tell about it,” advised a speaker at a recent Wisconsin School Public Relations Association conference.

Often, those of us most involved with carrying out the mission of a school district are so focused on long-range goals that we forget to acknowledge—and sometimes don’t see—the great milestones we reach every day. Indeed, we get so bogged down in the “work” of education that we often don’t take the time to educate our communities about the struggles we face and the triumphs we achieve.

We often make the mistake of believing that because we’ve spent months laboring over a budget, choosing a new curriculum or devising a facilities plan (to the point where we can recite the research in our sleep), we assume the families of our students and our communities—our “stakeholders”—know it, too, and therefore will wholeheartedly support us. But how can they know what we know unless we bring them along in the process? Likewise, we may look at our exceptional graduation rates and above average ACT scores and know that behind those statistics are exceptional teachers who go above and beyond the confines of their teaching day to bring about those successes. Yet, we don’t pause to acknowledge that effort and

those accomplishments.

The media is focused so heavily on the “negative” in public schools that those of us on the frontlines are often put on the defensive. Our energy is expelled on correcting misinformation instead of promoting our successes. When we fail to do this, we create a dangerous disconnect between us and our families and our community.

In these days of open enrollment, virtual schools and other choices, families have many options to consider when deciding how and where their children will be educated. Given that choice, parents are likely to choose schools and districts where they feel they have a say in and are part of the education process.

The challenge to school boards and administrators is to make our districts the district of choice in our area.

Never has it been so critical for school districts to communicate effectively with families and community members than it is today. In order to attract and retain families, school districts must be able to effectively communicate to families, and the community at large, its successes as well as its struggles. That’s why more and more districts are recognizing the importance of investing in a solid communications and public relations program—in some cases employing communications professionals who understand the

issues we, as board members, administrators and educators deal with daily—to tell the stories of our successes.

Communicating the vision of a school district is important to convey the values and stance of a district. This gives the chance to show what a district is striving toward, what it values and where it succeeds.

In Menomonee Falls, as in many districts across the state, effective community relations has been a priority for us for many years. In fact, our new strategic plan, currently in the development stages, has a strong communications/marketing component. Members of the strategic planning team—a group of more than 45 residents, parents, staff and administrators—identified it as one of four key strategies of the plan.

By publicizing the achievements of our students and staff and openly discussing issues facing the district, we, as board members and administrators, invite the community “in.” When members of the community feel they are involved in the process, districts begin to achieve “buy in” from stakeholders. A good communications plan builds and maintains that important relationship between schools and the community.

A communication plan is a necessity when an unfortunate

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incident takes place. We all know that even in the best of schools, sometimes the unfortunate or even the unspeakable happens. It is important during these times of crisis to maintain a clear perspective and to keep the incident from becoming the "image" of your district.

A good communications program is also essential to building and maintaining strong internal relationships. Keeping channels of communications open between administrators and staff creates an atmosphere of trust and maintains employee morale. It reiterates to all employees: "We are part of something

great." "This is a great place to work." This is vital to attracting and maintaining quality staff in an era of competition.

We cannot rely on the media to tell the full story of our districts and all the good things that happen in our schools every day. The media will always pick and choose what they want to write and what they choose is often the "sensational."

A strong public relations program can help combat that. It provides a vehicle for districts to communicate the whole story of education, and it provides that vital link between the schools and the community. It is the only way to prevent the

spread of rumors and increase the circulation of the good news of the district. ■

Kons is the president of the Menomonee Falls School Board. She has served as a board member for nine years. Kons is a member of the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA), which contributed this column. WSPRA, specializing in school community relations, provides visionary leadership and service to Wisconsin schools by equipping its members with effective communication management skills..