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Doyle's Educational Task Force (continued from page 3)

School Board member Michael Spector, has divided itself into four subcommittees: special education, early childhood education, teacher supply and quality, and student achievement.

The Governor has alluded to the State Supreme Court decision in *Vincent v. Voight*, 2000 in his remarks to the task force members. The court ruled that if there were insufficient resources for disadvantaged students — students in poverty, students in special education programs and students who are English Language Learners — then the state's school finance laws might not pass constitutional muster. Doyle and Superintendent of Public Instruction Elizabeth Burmaster have both indicated that the task force must examine issues surrounding the students identified by the court.

Other issues that the task force will examine include: the qualified economic offer, revenue limits, four-year old kindergarten, the right combination of property, sales and incomes taxes to pay for K-12 education, looking at ways to reduce placement into special education programs — especially in learning disabled and emotionally disabled categories, and a lengthy list of other education programs.

The task force has held public hearings in Wausau and Milwaukee, and plan another day of meetings and an afternoon/evening hearing in southwestern Wisconsin in late-January (at print time an exact location had not been identified — see link below for updated information). The Governor asked the task force to provide a status report by early 2004 and then provide a final report by mid-year. The Governor's budget office will begin work on the 2005-07 state budget next summer. Speculation is that many of the recommendations will be part of the budget the Governor proposes to the Legislature early in 2005.

More information on the task force is available through this link: <http://edexcellence.wisconsin.gov/index.asp>. The site provides a meeting schedule, an opportunity to write



WISCONSIN SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION

Strong Internal Communications Build Collaborative Teams

■ Dorreen Dembski, West Bend School District

Internal communication strategies are an essential part of your public relations "tool kit." When these communications break down, morale suffers, productivity is hampered and some of your most important ambassadors to the community — your staff — do not feel as if they "are in the know." However, done well, internal communication builds trust, boosts employee morale, and enhances your school district's reputation in the community. Here are some simple steps and practical ideas to improve internal communication in your work situation.

First, commit to internal communication on a regular basis. You must be willing to think about feedback that says, "You never told me." This may reflect an issue with how information is communicated and received, or what staff may need to know to better support your efforts. Second, identify your audiences. Typically, internal communication refers to employees of your school district. Initially, many people think of teachers, administrators and instructional support staff as the internal audience. However, internal audiences may also include secretaries, coaches, volunteers, and School Board members. While you are making your list, please don't forget to include the possibly overlooked groups of janitors and custodians, bus drivers, food service employees, crossing guards, substitute teachers and any other employee group that has student/parent or community contact. Many times, these employee groups have more customer contact than high-profile district staff and play an important role in building and maintaining your school district's good reputation. Once you've made the commitment, and sorted through your audiences, evaluate what is important to communicate, plan your efforts, and measure your progress and accomplishments.

To plan effective internal communication strategies, think of a pyramid. At the base of the pyramid is the most broad-based communication about your department, school, or district goals and progress. As you climb the pyramid, your communication becomes more frequent, more specific and

more targeted at specific audiences. When you reach the peak, your strategies may be as specific as "weekly department meetings to provide staff with an update on specific activities." Here are examples of internal communication strategies. Select those that best fit your situation. (*However, proceed with caution and purpose. Whatever strategies you select, do so based on your capacity to sustain the effort, and at a minimum, select two-way communication strategies and build your capacity from there.*)

In our school district, we use a multi-tiered approach to internal communication. At its base are four very widespread employee communications. *The Bridge* is an employee newsletter published four times each year. It is widely distributed to reach a wide-range of employees with "the big picture" of district news and activities. A second all-district publication is *Board Briefs*. This is a summary of the actions, decisions and discussions at each School Board meeting, published as soon after each meeting as possible. Both are posted to our district's Web site. *Board Briefs* was created in direct response to district survey results that indicated many staff did not feel well-informed about School Board decisions and actions. Another communication tool is on our district's internal computer network. We carry a shared folder for all staff to access that has district forms, general announcements, and other general information. (Remember, if you create a central location, publicize where people can go to find it!) In addition, "blast" e-mails are used to disseminate specific information to large groups on an immediate basis. The best, broad scale strategy for you will match your intended audiences, as well as the timing and topic of the messages you send.

Along with these print communications, PowerPoints are developed to communicate on specific topics, usually related to large changes that affect broad audiences. The presentations are centrally developed and then delivered by the principals and other district leaders at site or department meetings, within a

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Mark Your Calendar!

2004 WSPRA Annual Fall Conference • November 11-12, 2004
Heidel House Resort & Conference Center • Green Lake

2005 WSPRA Annual Fall Conference • November 10-11, 2005
Regency Suites • Green Bay

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From the President-Elect...



Jackie
Olson Kold, APR

Answering the Call

As PR professionals, we've all received calls asking for assistance with pressing issues. As a WSPRA member, you have the assurance that when an issue arises, you are not alone. Board members are always just a phone call away with savvy advice. Your membership provides you with resources including a Crisis Communication Team for the insight and on-site support you need to deal with media relations and more.

WSPRA.org provides access to a wealth of on-line information on topics such as No Child Left Behind. Whether you joined us for an excellent fall conference or have scheduled a district presentation of *Image Builders or Breakers* this spring, your membership brings top-notch training and expertise. And, of course, there's *WSPRAGram*.

This issue focuses on the importance of internal communications. As they say, "If you don't take care of the in-house, you'll be in the outhouse!" Board member Dorreen Dembski's cover story details some of her strategies based on a multi-tiered approach. Board member Linda Wickstrom's article follows in our new "Member Spotlight" to showcase how to communicate key messages and strengthen unity through all-district staff meetings.

At WSPRA, we're all about responding. When our Board President, Janay Wittek-Balke, asked me to step in as Acting President last month, of course the answer was "Yes." Because at WSPRA, answering the call is what we do. ❖

Strong Internal Communications (continued from page 1)

specific time frame (i.e. during a single week, or within 14 days, etc.). For example, last school year, the Department of Curriculum and Instruction introduced a new student assessment process; a PowerPoint was developed for all principals to share with their teaching and instructional support staffs. In this way, all staff received the same message, at relatively the same time, and the message was delivered in-person, allowing for questions and answers. This communication strategy adds two-way communication to the overall mix of strategies — two-way communication is an essential ingredient in every effective communication plan. Additionally, a copy of the PowerPoint may be stored in the centrally shared file so that people may review the information at a later time or access it if they are absent. The next layer of internal communication is direct communication from department leaders, administrators, or principals to their direct staffs and co-workers.

It is critical that each principal or administrator has her/his own way of communicating with staff. For example, our high school principals publish weekly *Staff Notes*. It is a weekly, one-page summary, highlighting the week's events and recognizes staff and student accomplishments. The content is directly related to the day-to-day events affecting staff at the buildings, keeping school staff (as well as other district staff who receive the e-mail version) "in the know" about the schools. *Staff Notes* serve as an important public relations tool for both the principals and the staffs. (I personally look forward to reading it each week.) Another good strategy is to schedule regular, cross-department or all-department information-sharing meetings. These meetings may be held once a week or once a month, but they should have an agenda connected to student achievement. Regularly scheduling people to come together to share relevant, work-related information can generate new ideas and foster a better understanding between employee groups. Communication and collaboration build more efficient teams who respect each other and their respective roles in the organization. As people understand the organization more deeply, they are better able to promote the good things happening within their departments and in the schools.

As the layers of communication come to a pinnacle, you will naturally find yourself communicating more frequently and more in-depth with co-workers in your department. Yet, here too, it is easy to forget to include all of your department members into your communications. Whether intentionally or not, we sometimes disregard that all people need to be informed, at some level, of our actions and decisions. People are people — and we like to know the details. (That's how newspapers were born!) Granted, sensitive or confidential issues, space and time prevent you from sharing all the details. However, on a routine basis, share as much information as widely as possible, and limit only what must be limited. E-mail is a terrific way to send a few lines that update people regularly. Working relationships, like personal relationships, are built on communication that is forthright, factual, honest, open and two-way. When people begin to feel as if only a few can know, or that there is an over abundance of "privileged" information, or that it is pre-determined that certain people regularly do not need to know certain details, it causes distrust and breeds discontent. On the other hand, when you communicate with people on a regular basis, in addition to your primary message, you are also telling them, "I need you. You are important to the success of this organization." You may build a two-way communication stream that you may have never had before.

A final word...perhaps you've been reading this article thinking about the many positive things you will share with your internal audiences. Rest assured that these strategies are equally as important when you have negative news to share. If you develop a strong internal communication process, you'll find that when faced with the bad news, you will have an audience who trusts you and your message and who will help you as you communicate with your community.

Doyle's Educational Excellence Task Force Begins Work

29-member Group to Broadly Examine Education Financing

■ Joe Quick, Madison Metropolitan School District

When Governor Jim Doyle's Educational Excellence Task Force began its work, the Governor reminded the group, "We must recognize that we are living in very difficult times financially. We have just come through the worst fiscal crisis in our history, and our taxpayers are already overburdened. The first question we have to ask ourselves is: are we getting the most out of every dollar? What more can we do to ensure that the money we spend on education actually gets to the classroom?"

The 29-member task force is comprised of parents, teachers, community leaders, school administrators, school board members, business leaders, and organized labor representatives, with members coming from urban, rural, and suburban districts, property-rich districts and property-poor districts.

The executive order creating the task force identifies six specific areas for the group to examine:

- ◆ Recommend ways to provide "a great education to every child in Wisconsin and determine the level at which Wisconsin citizens are prepared to fund that education;"
- ◆ Examine the state and local contributions to pay for education and determine what "proportion of these two taxes is fair and reasonable to fund public education;"
- ◆ Study and make recommendations on "how to improve the state's ability to attract, recruit, train and retain high quality teachers;"
- ◆ "Consider and recommend ways to adequately fund special education;"
- ◆ Review existing barriers to student achievement, "regardless of location, disability, language barriers, or their economic situation;"
- ◆ Examine current early childhood programs and "recommend ways to deepen our commitment to early education."

The task force, chaired by attorney and former Shorewood

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Member Spotlight

Even Larger School Districts Can Successfully Conduct All-District Staff Meetings

■ Linda Wickstrom, Elmbrook School District

Communication and touch-level are important regardless of the size of the district. Elmbrook School District, a suburban Milwaukee school district with a 7,500 student enrollment and a 1,200 member staff, discussed how to conduct an all-district staff meeting to communicate the same messages to all employees and have them connect with each other — but the size of the staff was a barrier. Elmbrook Schools' meetings are conducted by building, with little interaction from central office administrators. The district had a vision to bring all employees together to acknowledge its identity as a district of schools and in February 2002, the first all-district staff meeting was conducted. Now, two years later, Elmbrook held its second all-district staff meeting at the end of January.

Elmbrook presented the first all-staff meeting to help people connect with the superintendent of schools and with each other. Elementary staff wanted to know about the high school staff, middle school staff wanted to learn more about the elementary staff. The staff members wanted to know that what they do on a daily basis makes a difference across the whole district. They affirmed that students are individually impacted in the classroom, across levels, and across the

district. They found they collectively support children and each other. Staff members acknowledged their identity as a district, rather than solely an employee from one of 11 Elmbrook schools or the administrative offices.

The superintendent was the sole presenter during the 1-1/2 hour meeting, with the exception of several outstanding student instrumental music performances. Due to the large number of staff, all employees were split into a morning group and an afternoon group by eastside and westside feeder schools. The superintendent presented similar information to both audiences in the community fine arts auditorium. A text-based PowerPoint presentation took the audience through district successes, staff and school recognition, current status, and what the next two years could be. A concurrent photos-only PowerPoint presentation of staff and students dissolved every 1-1/2 minutes on an adjacent screen throughout the meeting.

This year, the meeting focused on Elmbrook's products, processes, and people; on inspiring staff to support the district mission and vision, on making progress together as a district, and on what's in store for the next two years. If you are interested in learning more about the Elmbrook School District's all-district staff meetings, contact Linda Wickstrom, public relations & marketing manager, wickstrl@elmbrook.k12.wi.us. ❖

[WSPRA Members — do you have a school PR initiative to tout? Mail or fax articles of approximately 500 words to: WSPRA, 122 W. Washington Avenue, Suite 400, Madison, WI 53719, Fax 608-257-8386]