

School board's role in communications

Successful communication doesn't just happen. It takes well-planned communications strategies based on research and implemented effectively.

Whether a school board develops a communication plan or not, board members are communicating to their community through:

- Conduct at school board meetings;
- Involvement in school, civic activities;
- Availability to constituents; and
- Interaction with administrators, students, and staff.

Don't leave the board's or the school district's communication to chance. A well-designed, on-going communication plan is the key to developing community trust and support. School board members need to encourage and support the development of a district-wide communication plan and do their part in its implementation.

Following are some steps a school board can take as part of a district's communication strategy.

➔ **Commit to earning and keeping the community's trust.**

Earning that trust is how a school board goes about connecting to its community. Find out what the residents want, and open clear channels of communication between the community and the school board. Make this effort a two-way street that allows the board and the community a chance to really talk to each other.

Use a variety of communications tools to reach all segments of your community.

➔ **Serve as a conduit between the schools and the community.**

The school board represents two publics – the schools and the community. As insiders in both groups, board members need to act as a go-between through which information flows from one group to another and then back again.

➔ **Keep public opinion in perspective.**

A school board needs to find ways to take the pulse of the community. Public opinion can make or break a school board's effectiveness. Be aware of the headline-grabbing issues locally and nationally. Both can impact board decisions. Good community outreach techniques will help a school board maintain a focus on what local issues are of most concern to the community. Don't forget the need to weigh the importance of public input and keep it in proper perspective. There may be times when the board needs to make unpopular decisions that go against public opinion. That's when the board's ability to communicate effectively will be most severely tested.

➔ **Develop relationships which are the key to effective communications.**

In good times and especially in bad times, there's nothing that will help the school board and district more than strong relationships with key members of the community. Reach out to key communicators in the business community, ministerial association, senior citizen groups, civic organizations, city

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government and parent groups. Communicate frequently with these groups. Remember to build two-way communication channels with these groups. Listening can be every bit as important as telling.

Effective personal communications

- Listen actively.
- Be attentive. Concentrate on what is being said.
- Be impartial. Don't form an opinion, just listen.
- Reflect back. Restating what has been said helps the speaker know that you understand.
- Summarize. Pull together the important messages so that you and the speaker recognize what was important during the conversation.
- Use nonverbal listening skills.
- Be quiet. Allowing several seconds to pass before you begin to talk gives the speaker time to catch his or her breath and gather thoughts.
- Maintain eye contact. Look at the other person while he or she speaks. Doing so demonstrates your attentiveness and helps keep your mind from wandering.
- Posture. Let your body show that you are interested by sitting up and leaning toward the speaker.
- Equal positioning. If the speaker is standing, you stand. If the speaker is sitting, you sit as well.
- Facial expression. Remember that feelings are reflected in facial expressions.
- Gestures. Your body language reveals a lot about how you interpret a message, so be aware of when you send signals that might cause the speaker to believe that you are angry, in a hurry, bored, etc.

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