

# A Practical Guide to Promoting America's Public Schools



Learning First Alliance

July 2004

## Values, Vision and Performance

This *Practical Guide to Promoting America's Public Schools* has been prepared by the Learning First Alliance, a permanent partnership of 12 leading national education associations. It is intended to help educators and others interested in education promote the value of public education to our nation.

### Using This Guide

Educators are accustomed to talking about academics, student achievement, test scores, and other issues that are the core of their work and the basis on which their schools are judged. These issues remain crucial. But research suggests that educators should broaden their message by linking those issues to the vision and values the public holds for public schools.

The following messages and ideas for action can be used to complement a focus on academic programs and results. Use them when communicating with your community, parents and the media. Include them in talks, newsletters, website features, press releases, articles, etc. Modify them to suit your individual circumstances by:

- Linking commonly held values to the mission and activities of your schools.
- Using specific examples, figures, and stories from your state, district, or school to illustrate points.
- Stressing the concrete benefits of public schools to individual students, to the community, and to the nation.

Enlist other supporters of public education in communicating these messages. Many members of the public get their information about public education from other people – parents, students, teachers, neighbors, and employers – as well as from the media. These people are credible and effective messengers about what is working well in your schools.

### A Shared Message of Values, Vision, and Performance

Research and polling suggests that Americans share deeply held beliefs and values about public schools. Americans believe that one of the strengths of public schools is that they provide concrete benefits for children. Reflecting a deep belief in America as “the land of opportunity” for those who work hard and persist, Americans see public schools as the engine of individual

opportunity. Public schools ensure that every child has equal access to a good education and thereby give every child the opportunity to succeed.

Americans also believe that public schools provide concrete benefits for our nation. They believe that good public schools help develop productive citizens who contribute to a strong American economy. They say that strong public schools are an essential component of healthy communities. And, because all kinds of students attend public schools, young people can learn to respect others and “get along in the real world.”

Yet, Americans also want reassurance about their public schools. They want to ensure that schools champion certain important values. They want schools to set clear expectations for parents and for responsible student behavior. They want to see greater financial accountability and transparency. And they want to know that employers find students well prepared for work.

America’s schools do, in fact, reflect and practice commonly held values in both their mission and their activities. Public schools are, in fact, accountable for the wise use of taxpayer dollars. And, public schools work hard to direct funds to effective programs for student success. Nevertheless, educators can serve the public better if they more clearly and publicly discuss what schools do in these areas. Educators should consider additional ways to demonstrate how the values, vision and performance of schools respect and reflect the aspirations of the public.

## **Key Messages**

### **1. Connect the values most important to Americans – hard work, persistence, personal responsibility, and respectful behavior – to your public schools.**

#### ***What to Say***

- For children to become productive members of society, we need to teach students the value of hard work and persistence, and to cultivate respectful and responsible behavior.
- Our goal is to give students the skills and knowledge they need for their individual success and well-being. This includes teaching them to work hard and behave responsibly and respectfully towards others.

#### ***What to Do***

- Talk about your schools’ successes in terms of values. For example, when talking about specific programs, emphasize that, in addition to teaching students specific academic skills, your programs instill the values of hard work, persistence, and responsible and respectful behavior.
- If you have a code of conduct, talk about it throughout the year. Publicize it widely in and outside the school building. Have teachers discuss it with students in class. Send it home for parents to read, sign, and return. Condense the main points into a one-page document that can easily be duplicated and distributed at meetings. Publish “rules reminders” in your newsletter occasionally.
- If you don’t have a code of conduct, develop one with the involvement of parents, students, teachers, and other school staff.

- Explain your schools' specific approaches for promoting positive behavior, good study skills, self-discipline, school safety and respectful and supportive relationships among students and staff. If you have policies and programs to combat bullying, violent behavior or illegal drug use, talk about these in terms of teaching students the importance of personal responsibility and respectful behavior.

## **2. Describe public schools in terms of the concrete benefits they provide for individual children and society.**

### ***What to Say***

#### *Benefits to children:*

- Quality public schools are the engine of opportunity for all Americans. They give every child from every family the chance to learn the skills they need to be successful in life. Public schools are open to all and enable our children to go as far as their talent and hard work can take them.
- Free public schools give every child the opportunity to succeed.
- Most Americans who have worked their way out of poverty have been educated in public schools.

#### *Benefits to the country:*

- If kids get a good education, they are more likely to become productive members of society.
- Healthy communities need to have strong public schools.
- A strong national economy requires good public schools.
- America needs the best efforts and accomplishments of all our people. That's why we need to come together to support every public school.
- Without free public schools, problems like crime and welfare dependency would get worse.

### ***What to Do***

- Demonstrate success with individuals. Schools at all levels give awards to recognize student achievement and outstanding efforts in a variety of areas. Tell stories about students who have won awards or scholarships, who have excelled in music, the arts or sports, and who have made a contribution to the community. Consider including brief feature articles on such students in the newsletter, on your website, or in other communications.

- Encourage business leaders who support your schools and are familiar with your students to speak up. Employers can highlight that students they hire for summer jobs and at graduation are well-prepared, hard working, respectful and responsible.
- Ask students to tell their stories. Students can give compelling examples of how their schools are giving them an opportunity to succeed. Showcase graduates who have gone on to success. Ask former students to speak at a PTA meeting about how they benefited from their school experiences and then publicize this in your newsletter.
- Demonstrate your school's commitment to educate every student who comes through its doors. For instance, describe academic programs that assist ELL students, students with disabilities, students with particular talents in specific subjects, and high achieving students.
- Highlight efforts that boost student academic achievement. If your district has adopted a new reading or math program, provided tutors or extended day programs for students needing extra help, or developed new programs to help boost student achievement, mention these specifically.
- Demonstrate student success with numbers. Improved test scores, lowered drop out rates, higher graduation rates, and more students continuing with higher education all serve as evidence of your school's ability to foster success for students.
- Highlight how schools foster healthy communities. If you have partnerships with community agencies, businesses, or volunteers, talk about these to illustrate that your schools are an integral part of the community. If your students do community service or volunteer work, talk about their efforts and how they contribute to a healthy community. Gather and use quotations from those who benefited from the services.
- Invite the community to see what your schools are doing. Hold events or activities that bring community members into schools so they can learn about school programs and performance, as well as how they can help support your schools. Issue invitations to community leaders and the media.

### **3. Demonstrate fiscal accountability and transparency by showing how school funds are spent.**

#### ***What to Say***

- As parents and taxpayers, as well as educators, we work to ensure that school funds are used as efficiently and effectively as possible.
- It is part of our core mission to be responsible stewards of public funds and to be fully accountable for what we spend and how we spend it.

### **What to Do**

- Talk about fiscal responsibility in addition to test scores, academic issues, etc. Make clear that schools' financial information is available to the community.
- Help parents understand where school dollars go by breaking down costs into concrete items. Show how money is spent to support specific goals and objectives that benefit children. Parents want to see money going to support their children's education in the classroom.
- Post your annual budget and audit on your website – and let people know they are available there.
- If you have figures that can document a "return on investment," such as improved reading scores as a result of a new reading or early-childhood program, improved behavior from school run anti-bullying programs, or other such measurable results, use these to illustrate how school expenditures are contributing directly to student success.
- List the qualifications of your teaching staff (years of experience, advanced degrees, special training, teaching awards, etc.) in the school directory, on your website, or the newsletter, so that parents see that money is going to support high-quality teaching in your district. Consider profiling outstanding teachers regularly in your newsletter or on your website. If you are required by NCLB to notify parents that students are taught by a teacher who does not meet the law's highly qualified teacher requirement, use the opportunity to profile your entire school staff, their accomplishments, and programs in place for ongoing professional development.

#### **4. Invite parents to be partners with schools to ensure that children succeed. Offer clear expectations for how parents can support their children's education.**

### **What to Say**

- We need parents as our partners to ensure that every child can succeed in our schools. Parents play a vital role in their children's educational success.
- Schools can't do their jobs without the involvement and support of parents. Children need to know that their parents think education is important, are interested in it day-by-day, and will help them do their best.

### **What to Do**

- Download *Tips for Parents: 35 Things You Can Do to Help Your Child Succeed in School* from the *No Child Left Behind* section of Learning First Alliance website ([www.learningfirst.org](http://www.learningfirst.org)). Turn this list into a flyer or booklet that can be distributed to parents at the beginning of the school year and at meetings and events during the year. Publish several tips in each edition of your newsletter.

- Create “parent-school compacts” that spell out how you expect parents to support their children’s education and what parents should expect from the school. Send these home for parents to sign and return.
- Publish a list of events for parents on your website, on hall bulletin boards, and in the newsletter at the beginning of and throughout the school year.
- Work with parents to develop a list of volunteer activities, by school levels. Create a clear “job description” for each activity and give the expected time commitment (i.e., 2 hours per month, on an as-needed basis, etc.). Post this on your website site and publish it in the newsletter twice a year. Provide the name and phone number of someone in the district or at the local school for parents to contact.
- Highlight parent volunteers at meetings, in the newsletter or on your website. Invite parents to share tips with you about how they support their children’s education; publish these on your website and in your newsletter. Aim to show the many ways in which parents and families serve as teaching partners in children’s education.
- Highlight how you support parents’ efforts to help their children succeed. Assist parents in understanding the curriculum and homework assignments. See that messages are returned promptly, teachers are available to talk with parents, and school meetings and events are scheduled at times to permit parents to attend. Then publicize these efforts with parents and the community.



The Learning First Alliance is a permanent partnership of 12 leading education associations with more than 10 million members dedicated to improving student learning in America’s public schools. We share examples of success, encourage collaboration at every level, and work toward the continual and long-term improvement of public education based on solid research.

The goals of the Learning First Alliance are to:

- Ensure that high academic standards are held for all students
- Ensure a safe and supportive place of learning for all students
- Engage parents and other community members in helping students achieve high expectations

Member organizations:

- American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education
- American Association of School Administrators
- American Federation of Teachers
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- Council of Chief State School Officers
- Education Commission of the States
- National Association of Elementary School Principals
- National Association of Secondary School Principals
- National Association of State Boards of Education
- National Education Association
- National PTA
- National School Boards Association