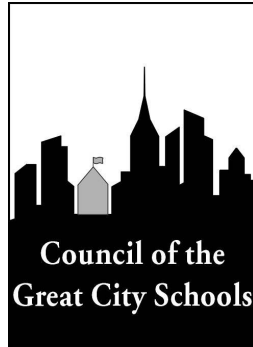


Building Public Confidence in Urban Schools: It Begins Inside the District



**A Guide for Administrators
and Board Members**

**A Public Relations Executives Network
Project of the Council of the Great City Schools**



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The Council of the Great City Schools is the only national organization exclusively representing the needs of urban public schools. Composed of 66 large city school districts, its mission is to promote the cause of urban schools and to advocate for inner-city students through legislation, research and media relations. The organization also provides a network for school districts sharing common problems to exchange information, and to collectively address new challenges as they emerge in order to deliver the best possible education for urban youth.

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2009 - 2010

Academic and Fiscal Urgency

Urgent:

Student enrollment is falling ... the school district budget is not being supported ... hardly anyone knows about the district's academic reform plan and student achievement ... employee morale and performance are dwindling ... schools don't like central administration

What's the problem?

An essential function that is often overlooked by school districts influences this urgent matter. Effective and efficient communication, which begins inside the district, is needed to support the vision, mission and goals of the superintendent and school board members.

One Urban Superintendent's Solution:

A pyramid – communicating to staff, the board and the community. If all three are moving in the same direction, success follows.

Communicating for Success



The Success of the district's educational reform initiative depends on the success of how the plan is communicated

Introduction

Effective organizational communication begins with your employees, who should be communications ambassadors for your district. From administrators to teachers to school bus drivers to custodians, your employees set the tone for your district. The informal conversations they have at church, the bowling alley, the barbershop and other venues can make or break the image of your district.

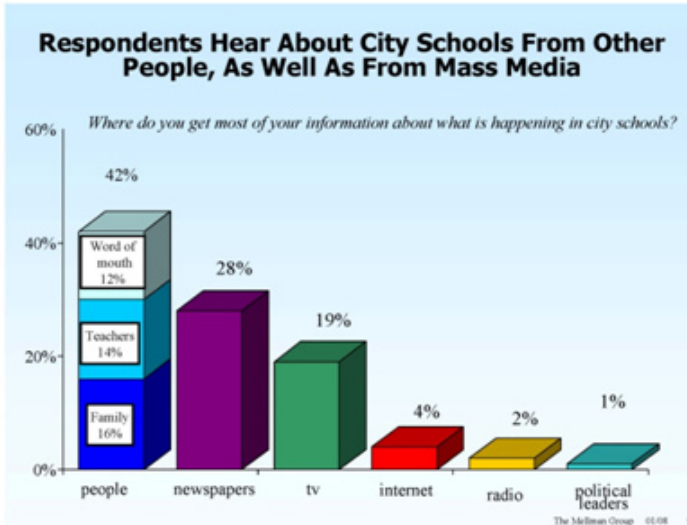
Armed with information, they can dispel misinformation. Without information, they can contribute to the grapevine of discontent.

With the most credible sources of information about schools coming from teachers, parents, students and other school staff members, it is CRITICAL that school districts develop, fund, implement and evaluate their internal communications programs.

Source of School Information

Where do most people get information about America's city public schools? According to national public opinion research by the Council of the Great City Schools,

- 42 percent get information from other people -- 12 percent through word of mouth, 14 percent from teachers and 16 percent from family;
- 28 percent from newspapers;
- 19 percent from television;
- 4 percent from the Internet;
- 2 percent from radio; and
- 1 percent from political leaders.



Building Trust

School district employees are the front-line individuals in the community in word-of-mouth communication, and should be informed, influenced and motivated through an ongoing internal communications operation. These efforts encourage buy-in of the school district's mission and purpose.

If employees don't buy into the school system, how do you expect the public to embrace it?

Unfortunately, the focus in many organizations, including school districts, is often on community outreach and media relations to the detriment of what should come first: internal communications.

Building Public Confidence in Urban Schools: It Begins Inside the District is a guide for administrators and board members in the Council of the Great City Schools to develop an internal communications operation that contributes to audiences beyond the school system.

The payoff: strengthened relationships among employees, parents, stakeholders and the community in building public confidence and trust in your school system.

ALL SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERS are responsible for communicating with employees, and the communications team should provide the awareness, access and tools to ensure that communication can happen easily and timely throughout the district.

Building trust includes promoting and encouraging courteous interpersonal communications among district employees at all levels in central administration and schools. Any disputes should be handled and resolved quickly, so as not to fester and spill over into the community at large or in the press. A friendly and productive districtwide environment creates a cohesive climate and culture that contributes to a positive image of the organization within and outside the school district.

District leadership should do everything possible to reduce public perception of discord or disorganization at board meetings. The district should establish, communicate and enforce a disciplined process for board agendas. Board members should agree to hold each other accountable for his or her protocol, and to express positive recognition of district operations and high performance achievement as it is warranted. The image of the school board is intertwined with the image of the school system.

What are the major elements that make for an effective and efficient internal communications operation?

Building Leadership

One of the most important aspects of good internal communications is recognizing the need for it in the first place. Treating this vital communications function as an afterthought is a mistake. Considerations:

- Understanding by top management and the school board of the critical role internal communications plays in building support for public education and reform initiatives

- Having the district’s chief communications officer (or director) be a part of the Superintendent’s Cabinet, allowing the senior communications professional to have a sense of the district’s “big picture” and know how the district is moving to meet its goals, mission and vision
- Keeping managers, supervisors and principals informed so that they can disseminate information to their employees and teachers, respectively
- Conducting scheduled meetings with employees by the superintendent, senior and middle management
- Establishing and encouraging two-way communications by obtaining constructive feedback from employees and school communities
- Reaching out to employees with limited English skills and those who don’t have access to computers
- Inviting employees to be ambassadors for the school district to carry out the mission

Building Capacity

When district leadership embraces the need for effective internal communications, the next step is providing resources to implement the vital communication function. Considerations:

- Having an experienced professional communicator lead the district’s internal and external communications operation
- Establishing a communications department that can develop communications channels to various audiences, craft messages linked to the district’s goals, mission and vision, and convey information to the various publics
- Employing professional communicators who can work directly on or contribute to internal communications

- Giving the communications staff the resources to maximize internal and external communications
- Developing a customer service program to train employees, especially central office switchboard operators and school secretaries, to respond to inquiries from parents and the public in a courteous, professional manner even when dealing with difficult people/behavior
- Making sure district and school employees who have contact with parents and the public are informed of key district messages

Building Bridges

With district leadership and capacity in place to reach out to employees, the next step is developing strategies and tactics to build bridges to all segments of your organization. Considerations:

- Developing employee opinion surveys to gauge what communication tools they desire to be informed and buy in to the system
- Refining and improving communication vehicles used to disseminate information to employees
- Providing information through print and electronic media to employees
- Providing a summary of board meetings to employees and stakeholders by posting on the district web site and in other communications vehicles
- Creating a “communications toolkit” for principals/managers that includes key messages to be shared when describing a major initiative, memo templates for use in communicating with staff, and talking points for staff meetings

- Developing a crisis communications plan that keeps staff informed during and immediately after an emergency
- Coordinating internal and external communications, such as informing district staff of major issues before the news media
- Strategically planning messages and tools to convey information
- Fine-tuning messages that should be repeated relentlessly and often
- Recognizing and rewarding employees for their achievements
- Convening a standing internal communications advisory group
- Assisting schools with developing communication vehicles that reach out to homes and communities of limited-English employees
- Working with principals/managers to ensure all written materials can be easily understood, making sure communication is jargon-free



Building A Framework

A plan of action needs to be developed, taking into consideration the communications personnel who will be tasked to keep employees up to speed on school district activities, developments, advancements and,

yes, controversial issues. Here is a sample internal communications plan from North Carolinian's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools:

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Internal Communications Plan

Internal Communications Supervisor should plan to accomplish the following five goals:

1. Improve district-wide communication.
2. Improve administrative communication with staff.
3. Improve district communication with educators.
4. Improve employee morale and views of CMS.
5. Promote CMS employees and their accomplishments.

GOAL 1: IMPROVE DISTRICT-WIDE COMMUNICATION

- Improve DirectLine (employee e-mail newsletter) content
 - Take more than one day a week to complete DL.
 - Have multiple sources giving feedback on DL, good and bad.
 - Have multiple sources edit DL.
- Work with Board of Education members on what they would like to communicate with staff/employees. Set up meetings between Board members and staff/professional organizations. (This may be a board office function in some districts.)
- Introduce employees to their coworkers through DL so staff can know who does what in the district. (This may be a human resources function in some districts)
- Improve intranet content
 - Take one day a week (could be a half day and another half day) dedicated to visiting schools and offices for employee interviews, meetings and stories. (Two or three days a week would also be appropriate depending on resources)
 - Encourage Key Communicators to submit employee experts and to find stories about their schools and coworkers that are noteworthy.

- Have regular meetings on district-wide efforts or involvement in efforts such as Team CMS and other internal plans.
 - Work with staff in developing plans for internal efforts, including toolkits and timelines for plans.

GOAL 2: IMPROVE ADMINISTRATIVE COMMUNICATION WITH STAFF

- Have direct and immediate knowledge of any internal communications needing to reach staff with expectations for dissemination (DL, intranet, internet and dates).
- Have an ongoing timeline with expected district publications or communications and publicizing these so they can be properly promoted and recognized.
- Have immediate knowledge of changes/additions to the intranet to promote these postings and communications as needed.
- Meet one or 2 times a year (or quarterly) as marketing staff (internal and external) with senior staff/administration about how they communicate with their staff, how they would like to communicate with employees and the community and their expectations/desires of the staff.

GOAL 3: IMPROVE DISTRICT COMMUNICATION WITH EDUCATORS/TEACHERS

- Meet with professional education organizations regarding their communication efforts, their expectations and desires for communication.
- Make sure the message board for educator is set up and runs effectively.
- Set up listservs for teachers. They could be by grade for elementary and by subject for middle and high school. These would be used to share information and improve collaboration. Posting responsibilities would be mine, as would content control.
- Meet with and talk to more teachers and principals about their perceptions of CMS and what would need to happen to improve these views.

GOAL 4: IMPROVE EMPLOYEE MORALE AND VIEWS OF CMS

- Monitor employee message board and make sure it's updated regularly.
- Work with Key Communicators for feedback on staff views.
- Work with Key Communicators to promote staff experts.
- Help Key Communicators with finding and sending in staff accomplishments.
- Develop internal awards and recognitions (Kudos to you, etc.) for staff.
- Improve school newsletters, disseminating ideas about content that would allow employees to brag about their school, such as a brag board.

GOAL 5: PROMOTE EMPLOYEES AND THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Invite employees to submit stories on topics on which they have expertise.
 - Develop and maintain an expert list for internal stories and external news pitches.
 - Use intranet stories and ideas as part of employee recognition.
 - Compile profiles of staff as MEET YOUR COWORKER builds.
-

Building A Step-by-Step Process

To begin building an effective internal communications program or system, the steps below were taken by California's Fresno Unified School District:

Fresno Unified School District Steps to Developing and Implementing an Effective Internal Communications Program/System

An integrated approach to communications is crucial to the success of the program implementation and requires that communications efforts are:

- Supported and modeled by all levels of district leadership;
- Embedded in the role of district leaders, including school administrators and central office leaders;
- Considered an integral component of every major district initiative. This requires a communications representative to be part of initiative planning teams and/or that a communications plan be developed for key initiatives; and,
- Not solely the responsibility of the communications department; communications must occur at the level closest to the employee audience.

The role of the communications department in the implementation of an internal communications plan is to:

- Build a districtwide communications infrastructure providing timely and accurate information to employees;
- Provide guidance and support to district leaders, departments and school sites regarding communications-related issues; and,
- Create a variety of materials and tools that facilitate effective and uniform communications of district initiatives to employees.

Steps to Developing an Effective Internal Communications Program

- Conduct a communications audit to determine what tools are available for internal communications.
 - Consider surveying employees to determine how they get information and what methods would be most effective for relaying information.
 - Identify existing mechanisms to reach employees including meetings of groups of employees (e.g., principal meetings, professional development sessions, etc.);
 - Conduct a review of existing publications for employees to determine if they are effective in reaching the intended audiences with key messages;
 - Review existing district policies, procedures and administrative regulations to determine if there is support or deterrents to effective internal communications and revise as appropriate;
- Develop a strategic internal communications plan that outlines objectives/outcomes, strategies, tactics, assignment of responsibility and timelines.
 - Identify groups of employees that may require a targeted and specific plan (e.g., food service and transportation workers who may not have access to district email);
 - Identify all potential distribution methods within the district including electronic, print, video, audio, Intranet, telephone voice messages, meetings, pay checks, employee recognition activities, etc.;
 - Develop an editorial calendar with key dates for distribution of information and themes to be highlighted;
- Issue district branding and publication standards (if they do not already exist) to ensure that employees can visually identify communications efforts and to create a visible standard for all district communications. Include template materials such as PowerPoint templates, letterhead, fact sheets etc. to provide clear guidance;
- Ensure that district leaders provide information on a regular basis to all employees for whom they are responsible. Provide talking points, ready-made materials, ensure that employee newsletters are printed and posted, etc.;
 - Include effective communications as a leadership standard for all district leaders.
 - Provide training, support and evaluation of their performance in this area. (For example, Fresno Unified School District has implemented five leadership standards; #5 is Effective Communications);

- Create template materials for employees to receive in an effort to assist them to become ambassadors for the district. These could include talking points, fact sheets, PowerPoint presentations, etc.;
 - Provide professional development opportunities for employees (or by groups of employees) so that they can be effective communicators;
- Create an effective Intranet for employees to access information of value to them and resources to assist them with their communications efforts;
 - Ensure that email distribution lists are created and maintained for rapid dissemination of information to groups of district employees;
- Identify methods to enhance communications with employee groups/unions (if appropriate);
 - Identify opportunities to co-communicate with employee groups if this is an effective method to share information with employees;
- Create a mechanism to respond immediately to inaccurate information and rumors that is circulating among employees. A Rapid Response Team comprised of key district department representatives who can provide information immediately is critical to ensuring that the district's credibility and commitment to accurate information sharing is maintained; and
- Provide updates to the Governing Board (and potentially other stakeholder groups) about the district's efforts to communicate effectively with employees.

Building a Recognition Program

It is so important to recognize and reward employees for their achievements, which makes them feel good about themselves, their work and their school district. It also contributes to quality work performance and output.

Boston Public Schools has what it calls staff recognition days. Here's the district's employee recognition schedule.

Celebrate your school staff!

Pay special tribute to members of your school staff by celebrating these national recognition days in your school communities.

Tell these employees how much you appreciate them through school-wide announcements, greeting cards, banners, awards ceremonies, newsletter tributes, small gifts and other acknowledgements.

October 2, 2009

National Custodial Workers Day

November 18, 2009

National Education Support Professionals Day

November 20, 2009

Substitute Educators Day

February 1 – 5, 2010

National School Counseling Week

April 21, 2010

Administrative Professionals Day

May 1, 2010

School Principals Day

May 4, 2010

National Teacher Day

May 12, 2010

National School Nurses Day

Do you know of other national school employee recognition days not included in this list?

Send them to communications@boston.k12.ma.us.



Conclusion

Building Public Confidence in Urban Schools: It Begins Inside the District is a guide for administrators and board members to not only understand and appreciate the need for quality internal communications, but to begin developing an internal communications system to complement effective community outreach and media relations programs.

The guide is a project of the Public Relations Executives Network of the Council of the Great City Schools based on annual meetings of the district communications directors. Concerns have been expressed for a need to strengthen internal communications as a continuing effort to build public confidence in urban schools.

An advisory committee was developed to aid the Council's communications staff in producing the guide.

Public Relations Executives Network Project Of the Council of the Great City Schools

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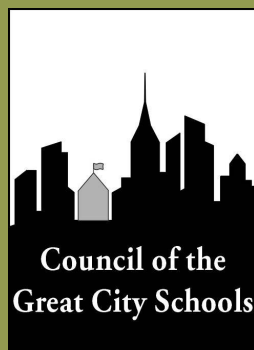
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