

The application guidelines indicated this section should address how the superintendent and public relations/communications professional work together to ensure an effective communication program that supports the school system's efforts to respond to a specific issue and the overall, year-round communication and relationship-building efforts.

The Twin Rivers story of successfully bringing together four educational systems and multiple communities to vote to become a new unified school district and the launch of the ongoing communication program to support the new district are excellent examples of both. In addressing the important areas of assessment, planning, communication strategies and vehicles, and evaluation, examples from the vote and launch phases of this enormous undertaking will be included.

Assessment of the Environment, Challenges and Goals

Vote

While most of the country's students receive a fully articulated and unified educational experience in preschool through 12th grade systems, students in the North Sacramento area attended a variety of schools in one of two districts depending on their neighborhood and grade level. Many educational leaders saw the need for more consistency, financial stability, and realignment of resources, but others worried that a larger system would take away a family-friendly culture the smaller districts enjoyed. The challenge facing leaders and communicators from each of the merging districts was to obtain public approval of the merger of the four north area districts as indicated by a majority community vote on November 6, 2007.

Launch

Shortly after the election, Twin Rivers leadership recognized the need to build trust among the employees and communities of the emerging district, to move quickly to prepare for a successful launch just eight months later, and to continue engaging stakeholders to set the foundation of the new district. A committee of communications professionals and representatives from each of the merging districts contributed to the first communication plan, including the following initial goals:

1. Establish a clear identity for our district and begin building on that image and reputation.
2. Establish a clear voice and consistent messaging based on the goals of Twin Rivers USD.
3. Create and support positive relationships with all stakeholders.
4. Develop and implement policies and strategies for coordination of communications activities throughout Twin Rivers USD and school sites.
5. Maintain board of trustees commitment to making communications and community involvement a top priority for our district.

Description of the Planning Activities

Vote

Our key audiences included area families, classified staff, certificated staff, principals, and community leaders. Starting with these audiences, we developed strategies and materials for each group. The communications teams at each of the merging districts shared the materials developed by each organization and met regularly to discuss area strategies and communication vehicles to limit the costs of individual development.

Launch

Our key audiences did not change after the election, but our challenges and goals shifted towards the building of a new district. We selected strategies which would strengthen relationships with all stakeholders—our students, families, classified staff, teachers, board of trustees, associations, public officials, news media, and community leaders. We worked together to develop a clear Communications Work Plan that we shared openly with our audiences. The plan can be accessed at http://www.twinriversusd.org/depts/files/192/TRUSD_COMMS_Plan.pdf In addition, we created a visual one-page summary of our activities and how they serve school sites (http://www.twinriversusd.org/depts/files/192/comm_support_model.pdf) that was shared at various staff communication trainings.

As new communication tools were created, we quickly identified key staff members and shared a summary of communication options with all employees. The list of options is always listed on our web site at http://www.twinriversusd.org/depts/files/192/Communication_Options.pdf

One challenge we faced in the initial days of the launch was the lack of staff and funding, which would not be fully allocated until the new district was formally launched. However, the need for communication was overwhelming, especially within the employee groups. An initial low-cost solution was quickly implemented- an interim web site and electronic newsletter that could be subscribed to, forwarded, and archived automatically. The archive of past issues reveals the variety of communication challenges faced in the first months after the election: <http://www.twinriversusd.org/newsroom/enews/>

Communication Strategies and Vehicles

Vote

A series of evening community forums were offered at geographically diverse school sites between March and October 2007 to provide an opportunity for families and area residents to participate in the election discussion. These forums were advertised in local community papers and through automated calls to families.

For employees, district leadership representatives visited every school site for discussions about the implication of the election, talking points were provided to school principals to provide straightforward information and dispel rumors. Flyers with accurate legal information about the employment rules around unification were posted at each site and updated between March and October 2007.

Families received multiple language versions of this brochure on the election:

<http://www.nsba.org/SecondaryMenu/NationalAffiliates/TwinRivers/CommunityRelations/Brochures/MeasureBQA.aspx>

In addition, an election information booth was provided for each open house event in the spring of 2007 and regular updates were provided to principals for inclusion in their site newsletters.

Launch

In support of the initial goals, a number of engagement strategies were executed from the communications plan, including:

- Community contest to determine name and logo for new district
- Series of community planning summits that created the basis for a 300 page implementation plan (http://www.twinriversusd.org/misc/files/ImplementationPlan_08-09.pdf)
- District Student Leadership Council
- Superintendent's Student Cabinet
- District Advisory Council (families)
- English Learners Advisory Council (EL families)
- Event participation and booths at more than 50 community activities
- District Community and Business Partner Meetings (2)
- Online and Phone Surveys – budget ideas, service learning participation, schedule change preferences, professional development focus, event evaluations, and early retirement interest.
- Phone messaging for families and staff
- Weekly electronic news and calendar http://www.twinriversusd.org/depts/com/staff_webpage/ewag/
- District web site and de-centralized content management access enabling posting of slideshows <http://www.twinriversusd.org/newsroom/slideshows/> and videos <http://www.twinriversusd.org/newsroom/videos/> as well as an Online Newsroom <http://www.twinriversusd.org/newsroom/news/> and Student Spotlight articles <http://www.twinriversusd.org/newsroom/spotlight/>
- *Connections* print newsletter <http://www.twinriversusd.org/newsroom/connections/>
- Press Releases and advisories for larger media outlets http://www.twinriversusd.org/newsroom/media_advisories/
- Complete articles and photos for local community papers
- Large banners at schools sites for exceptional employees and academic growth
- Robust employee recognition activities including annual welcome events, an open nomination process for Employees of the Year, Neighborhood Celebrations of employees, board meeting recognition for top employees.

Evaluation

Vote

On November 6, 2007, more than 11,000 members of the Northern Sacramento community voted overwhelmingly to create a new district of the four unifying districts by a 60% to 39% margin.

Launch

Revisiting the goals of our plan, we have had a great deal of success in some areas, and still have work to do in others. A clear identity has been established for our district, and we have been building a positive reputation with a variety of stakeholders. We have established a clear voice and consistent messaging based on the goals of Twin Rivers USD. We are creating and supporting positive relationships with all stakeholders through our extensive engagement efforts. We have developed and implemented policies and strategies for coordination of communications activities throughout Twin Rivers USD and school sites. We are also striving to maintain our board of trustees commitment to making communication and community involvement a top priority for our district. Based on a recent online survey, some of our strategies are preferred over others by our employees. They recently provided the following data about how they were informed of a district-wide event:

Electronic newsletter/web site 49%

Paycheck stub 6%

Supervisor 23%

Flier at site 37%

One of our key strategies, that of launching a Communications Corps or liaisons at each site to facilitate two-way communication has not yet launched. We plan to launch this portion of our program this winter. For this reason, we have accomplished just 74% of strategies and actions identified in our plan. Our recent budget crunch has also impacted our plans, with urgent communication issues around fiscal and staffing issues. However, a couple big wins for us this year is the result of a recent free and reduced lunch application drive which increased the rate of return from 40-80% in just one year. In addition, our communications office accepted an NSPRA Award of Excellence and presented at the 2009 conference in San Francisco. (http://www.twinriversusd.org/depts/com/nspra_2009/)

Thinking past the initial process goals, our long term goal includes improved perception of and engagement with our schools as measured in media reports and annual district and school site climate surveys or multiple stakeholders, hopefully resulting in improved enrollment throughout our district schools.