



# **GETTING IT RIGHT**

## **Why Good School Communication Matters**

### **Foreword**

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As a superintendent for thirty-two years, I have learned that there are many ingredients for success but one stands out above the rest - great communication skills. You can have the most innovative reform plan around, but if you are not effective in communicating about that plan, it will fail. I have seen good superintendents who do not put a priority on communications forced from their jobs while less deserving superintendents who are better at the art of communications keep theirs. The simple reality of public education today is that superintendents must be outstanding educators and they must also be outstanding communicators.

Kitty Porterfield and Meg Carnes articulate this idea very clearly in making the case why exceptional communication skills are so critical for school administrators today. We see example after example of what poor communication practice yields and we see how great communication practices ultimately improve student achievement, which is our common goal. As a group, educators historically have not placed a premium on the importance of good communications. We typically focus on those things we know best - curriculum, professional development, and operations - to name just a few. It is not as if well-intentioned administrators and superintendents have set out to practice ineffective communications. Rather, it happens because communication has not been made a priority, and is often approached only as an add-on or afterthought.

Communications must be approached creatively and strategically. It must be an integral part of the planning of any initiative or effort from the earliest days, not at the end of the process after all of the important decisions are made. Ms. Porterfield and Ms. Carnes provide a great deal of useful advice for practitioners throughout this book to help school districts improve their communications strategy. The old adage that "if you fail to plan, you plan to fail" rings true in every chapter. Ultimately, they drive home the point that if done well, good communications make administrators more effective and stakeholders more satisfied, and increases student achievement.

Like so many other things in life, excellent communications starts with relationships - strong, trusting relationships. You must create and nurture these relationships with your key stakeholder groups, both internal and external. Such relationships are truly the lifeblood for building support for educational reforms or making changes that

otherwise might cause significant upset. Doing the right thing for students isn't always the popular thing, and administrators know this better than anyone. Having healthy relationships built on trust can lessen the negative impact of those decisions that may make some of your stakeholders unhappy. A cache of good will makes it possible to create buy in on difficult decisions and assuage those who might otherwise start a way of protest.

Involve your stakeholders - both internal and external. One of the surest ways to build trust is to open the doors and invite everyone in. Nothing builds trust like transparency. Our stakeholders want to be involved and I believe we all benefit when our stakeholders are part of the process. When we work together and we see that we all want what is best for the children, good things happen. We can use that collective energy to drive student achievement and create a superior learning environment for our students.

The good news is that now there are more communications tools at our disposal than ever before to get the word out. That means we as educators must be nimble and adroit at using new media to effectively communicate with our stakeholders. Whether it is at the school or district level, administrators and superintendents need to recognize the power of the new methods of communication and harness it for positive results. The immediacy of much of the new media world poses difficult challenges for us as well. Good news travels fast, but bad news travels at warp speed. That's why it is critical to build a communications infrastructure to communicate your message and to be prepared to handle other issues that arise.

The bottom line is that creating a healthy environment for positive communications and outstanding student achievement must be part of our daily work. As much as administrators plan and work to ensure that a school is operating smoothly, the busses running on time, the teachers and students have what they need in the classroom, they must also integrate the work of communications in their daily life. In public education today, we need all the support we can get from parents, community and business leaders, elected officials, and others. We build that support through strong communications, by involving everyone in the process and keeping our eyes on the mission at hand - preparing our students for the world ahead. Ms. Porterfield and Ms. Carnes provide many excellent ideas throughout this book about how to make good school communication a reality so that public education continues to work for everyone.

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