The Communication Factor in Superintendent Success

Keep a Focus on Communication

Most superintendents and school boards have clear but considerable visions of what they want for their schools. A recent study by Farkas, Foley, and Duffet found that 41% of schools boards listed higher student achievement as their primary mission. More than half of the superintendents in that study also said raising student achievement is their greatest challenge.

Although the destination is clear to them, most school leaders spend too much time grappling with local political agendas and competing community interests, leaving too little time to devote to their primary objective: improving student achievement.

In this publication you’ll find advice from studies as well as lifetime experiences of savvy superintendents and communication leaders from the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) who have devoted their careers to helping superintendents and schools succeed. Communication strategists share the highest regard for the hard work involved in school leadership. They sincerely want to help superintendents succeed. They understand that great schools require strong, consistent leadership that offers a clear, compelling vision for student success.

You’ll also find observations and research into why good superintendents depart all too soon. And communication often plays as much of a factor in their departure as it does in their success.

NSPRA’s hope is that these 11 tips will help more great school leaders stay in their positions for many years to come.

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Sign up for Communication Matters for Leading Superintendents, a free e-newsletter written for superintendents six times a year at www.nspra.org.
1. Know Where You Are and Where You Want to Go

The primary purpose of the school leader is to bind the district and the community together in support of a powerful vision for student learning. The only effective tool for meeting this challenge is a comprehensive communication plan.

— Dr. Max Riley, Superintendent
Randolph, (NJ) Public Schools, 5,500 students

Maintaining an effective working relationship with your stakeholders is key to superintendent survival. Just as raising student achievement requires baseline data, making continual progress in community support requires hard baseline data. Superintendents must know their district culture, the thinking of various school groups, and how specific groups will react to district initiatives and decisions. Savvy superintendents know who pulls the strings to make the community move one direction or the other and how to get the community solidly behind a united school vision.

The mantra of Dr. Margaret Nichols, a respected superintendent who enjoyed a long tenure through crisis-ridden, turbulent times, was, “You only see your own district clearly the first 6 months you are in your position. After that, you had better ask someone else and it had better be the right person.”

During her long tenure in the Eugene (Ore.) School District, Nichols tracked community attitudes as diligently as she researched student achievement scores. Her communication office regularly conducted community research and built targeted, strategic communication plans based on that research. She knew she had to have the community solidly behind her to reach her goal of providing the best possible education for each of the 18,000 students attending the Eugene schools.

Study after study validates what Nichols knew and practiced. One study of Texas superintendents in 2001 by J. K Byrd found increased student achievement depends on a superintendent increasing the lines of communication among stakeholders.

2. Take the Wheel and Keep the Course — Success Rests on Your Shoulders

Superintendents’ tenures in their districts have a profound effect on student achievement. A 2007 study by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) as well as a 2006 study by Mid-Continent Research for Education Learning show a positive correlation between superintendent tenure and increased student achievement. Those studies show that the future success of students may ride on the superintendent’s tenure. Other studies show a superintendent’s level of expertise in communication will probably determine the length of his or her stay.

A 2005 NSPRA survey of 31 superintendent search consultants, How Strong Communication Helps Superintendents Get and Keep Their Jobs, clearly identified lack of communication expertise as the main reason superintendents lose their jobs. That study also found that the key skills school boards want in new superintendents are the ability to effectively communicate both vision and leadership and the ability to motivate others. Many of these search consultants, who collectively conducted more than 300 searches, recognized that a comprehensive communication program is essential to superintendents’ survival.
Depending on whose survey you believe — the National School Boards Association (NSBA) Council of Urban Boards of Education survey of the 50 largest school districts, an AASA survey, or the Council of Great City Schools data — the average tenure of a superintendent is between 2.75 and 5.5 years. Experience and studies show us that is not long enough for superintendents to get and keep a school district on the right track.

Good communication does not just happen: it is planned and then executed. The effectiveness of this planning and execution depends on the expectations of the superintendent. Getting the right message to the right people requires a strategic communication plan. This plan requires targets for reaching community groups whose support is critical to both superintendent success and advances in student achievement. A plan that gets results is based on the research cited in Tip 1. It includes feedback from a wide range of community groups and identifies specific goals for getting the desired action from these targeted groups. The plan also spells out specific strategies for obtaining the desired result and has specific, data-driven ways to measure the results.

The superintendent with a sound communication plan has the advantage.

Having a plan allows me to focus my energies on the most effective communication strategies to use with our whole community.

— Dr. Jean Shumate, Superintendent
Stanwood-Camano (WA) Public Schools, 5,000 students

3. Recognize Who’s Really in Charge

Superintendents might as well face the fact that reaching their goals ultimately depends on their communities. Without the support of community members, superintendents cannot succeed. Every community has a wide variety of stakeholders who share attitudes, talk with one another about ideas and concerns, and ultimately determine the fate of schools. Effective communication that engages groups and sub-groups of staff, parents, and the community is essential to turning a vision of student achievement into reality.

Research shows that family participation in education is twice as predictive of students’ academic success as family socioeconomic status. It’s no surprise that the right kind of communication and parental involvement are critical to student success.

The power of parent communication is demonstrated in a study by Steven Constantino cited in the NSPRA article Supporting Students: Supporting Communication. Constantino tracked achievement metrics over four years at a very high achieving school. Through increased communication with parents, the school raised the average SAT score 61 points and had an 18% reduction in disparity between minority and non-minority scores. The drop-out rate at that school fell from 11 to 3%.

But even effective communication with parents and staff is less than half of the story. In most communities, 75 to 80% of households have no school-age children. These community members have vital interests in their schools and may, through their voting power, determine the level of resources that superintendents have available to meet their goals.

Within these stakeholder groups, all communities have opinion-makers who have a significant influence over people’s opinions and attitudes toward their schools. This complex network of individuals and groups, often with competing interests, can make it difficult to build a positive, trusting relationship with each group. To connect with the important audiences, superintendents need at least one person on their leadership team who knows how to reach the right people with key messages that stick.

Even in a small district, figuring this piece out can be overwhelming. It is not a job for the weak or inexperienced, nor is it just one person’s job. Student achievement must be a shared vision led by superintendents and their communication officers.
4. Never Forget Who Pays the Bill

The greatest problem superintendents face is lack of resources, according to a study by the Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE—2003). Similarly, a survey of school leaders conducted by AASA showed that the effort to get enough fiscal resources is a never-ending struggle, and, all too often, lack of resources is the primary reason superintendents choose to leave their jobs.

As cited earlier, a majority of households in nearly every community have no school-age children. Additionally, those who vote most consistently on school finance issues are over 45 years old. In many communities, more than 50% of the people who are most apt to cast their ballot in a school election are over 60.

School election results collected from seven states several years ago by an NSPRA member showed school districts with formal, intentional communication programs in place at least a year before their election dates were much more likely to be successful in passing funding measures.

A communication program that builds strong support with community groups will give the direction and information stakeholders need and want to pass bonds and support public education. The result will be not only a community culture that supports children and learning, but also one that provides the essential resources superintendents need to ensure student achievement.

5. Start Small and Build on Your Success

A formal, comprehensive communication program may seem overwhelming, especially if you don’t have a communication plan in place. Our advice is to think small, but mighty. Start with tactics that will get you the biggest return for the resources you spend.

The beauty of a strategic communication program is that reaching every single person is not required. A well-planned program may actually help you regain some time you are now spending on communication. Depending on the size and complexity of your school district, as few as 100 key community members can have a huge influence throughout the district.

NSPRA experiences show that sending the right, consistent message to staff members will filter down to parents and other community members in a way that makes your vision for kids grow by leaps and bounds.

Concentrate on a few good communication tactics that reap targeted results. Then evaluate those programs for their positive return on your investment. Over time, gradually expand programs or initiate others that meet specific communication needs.

If you already have a formal, comprehensive communication program in place, take the time to assess each element of the program and how it influences community attitudes and perceptions. Focusing on evaluation saves time and resources as you decide to eliminate or alter tactics that are not working. Just as valuable classroom time cannot be wasted on ineffective teaching techniques, superintendents cannot afford to spend valuable time and resources on communication programs that do not work. NSPRA experiences show that many districts may spend good money on projects that often do not make a significant difference in their districts. Sometimes less can be more.
6. Make Sure the Road Is Paved with the Right Stuff

School leaders know that it is important to be accountable to stakeholders. Sixty-seven percent of superintendents surveyed by AASA said that public perception of a school district significantly affects its success or failure. Unplanned communication can be more destructive than no communication.

Every community is different. The communication technique that builds support in one community can be disastrous in another community: the circumstance must determine the tactic. Although printed communication may contain valuable information, it is very difficult to change attitudes with the written word. Positive perceptions are best built though face-to-face communication that builds mutual trust and understanding.

Putting out newsletters and other printed publications may be effective, but the wrong words mailed to angry people may only add fuel to their fire. Talking to a group without knowing them or their interests can backfire and cause an endless chain of misunderstanding and controversy. Productive communication is much more sophisticated and complicated than talking to people or quickly putting something in writing. Engaging stakeholders and building partnerships with community members and groups requires genuine, intentional, two-way communication that builds trust and understanding.

Reaching audiences in today’s over-communicated world is a science that requires communication and research skills as well as the ability to use that information in ways that produce results. Veteran teachers understand the value of pre- and post-tests for learning and how to use that data to enhance learning. They know that the most effective teaching is one-to-one or small groups and that it involves a lot of listening. Savvy superintendents know this model works just as well for communicating with their key internal and external audiences. They just make the time to do it on key critical issues for their systems.

7. Don’t Waste Time on the Wrong People

School leaders consistently report that they don’t have enough time to do their jobs. They just do not have time to waste in conversations and communication that don’t produce results.

Superintendents in an AASA study listed as one of their greatest problems, “Too many insignificant demands from various stakeholders hinder superintendent effectiveness.”

NSPRA member Katherine Collins, APR, confirmed the high demand on superintendents’ time. Collins surveyed 63 school administrators from 45 states and 87% said they spend 75% or more of their time communicating.

School administrators cannot fulfill the role of instructional leader if they spend vast amounts of time dealing with isolated complaints or agendas. One way to protect your time is to first identify who has community influence and just what the scope of the influence really is. Then put processes in place that give every stakeholder a voice rather than giving every stakeholder your ear.

It is important to get a good return for time spent communicating. A properly designed communication program will minimize demands placed on school leaders. More important, it will spell out the specific communication techniques and content that specific groups need so all constituencies have the information and relationship bridges they need. The plan will empower other staff members who are responsible for specific strategies and will include built-in timelines and ways to measure results. But it won’t happen without the right leadership from the top.
Superintendents are greatly concerned about what a crisis can do to a school’s image. A 2005 NSPRA project to identify skills that superintendents most need in their communication staff identified the top priority for superintendents as a communication person who could handle a crisis and communicate a positive image for the school district. These superintendents also wanted staff members who communicate fully and honestly, even if the information is unflattering to the school district. A second NSPRA study of highly involved superintendents honored as state or national superintendents of the year revealed the same needs. As one of these honored superintendents noted,

Being strategic also means seeing the broader picture, anticipating issues, connecting the dots, and focusing on preventing problems rather than solving them. Toward this end, a leader must be able to rely on the advice of a trusted professional who understands effective communication strategies; who knows well the organization, its people, its history, and the community it serves, and who is passionate about advancing its vision, mission, and goals.

Savvy superintendents take steps to prevent crises or mitigate their impact to protect their districts’ reputation. The crisis a superintendent keeps from happening is the most effective form of crisis management. A first step to preventing a crisis is providing first-class programs and services because many controversies are caused by unhappy customers. To head off a crisis, communication strategists practice issues management. They identify issues that may become “hot” in the community and carefully plan and carry out communication to mitigate or eliminate that problem. What might have become their school district’s worst nightmare dwindles to a minor concern.

The basic element in averting crises is listening and then interpreting correctly what you hear. Many superintendents use a cadre of key communicators for this purpose — people with connections in various groups who will report rumors and then work to dispel them. Issues management also involves getting ahead of the curve when you share information in certain situations. Savvy superintendents know to get the right messages to the right people at the right time — and they know to deliver it with lightening speed. Savvy superintendents create an infrastructure for communication that enables their districts to reach key constituents within a 30- to 60-minute timeframe. Some examples offered by NSPRA member Nora Carr, APR, include:

- Do you have a database with complete contact information for community opinion leaders that includes business, politics, government, faith community, cultural institutions, advocacy groups, philanthropic groups, and nonprofit organizations? Do you have an e-delivery system to reach these leaders?
- Do you have a system for notifying all employees and all parents by multiple methods simultaneously and within minutes?
- When news breaks, can you post information on the district web site and broadcast it on cable access television within minutes?
- Can your district quickly provide talking points and develop key messages for the leadership team, principals, and board?
- Do you have a bank of crisis messages and letters posted on a secure Intranet or shared-file that principals can access any time and adapt to communicate more effectively with parents?
- Can parents, employees, and other key constituents subscribe online to receive district news releases, emergency notifications, breaking news alerts, and other communications?

A sound communication plan has built-in contingencies for crisis situations. A superintendent search consultant cited earlier in this publication said it well:

I encourage all districts to get a formalized communication program, not only for daily communication but also for crisis, which is so necessary. It’s one of the keys to a successful school district.
9. Learn to Speak English Again

Most school leaders have advanced degrees. Earning those degrees required speaking and writing in academic language. If you want to be successful, place the academic rhetoric on the shelf, roll up your sleeves, and become a respected communicator who actually connects with parents, business leaders, and staff. Think about how hard you have to work at listening when someone else gives a jargon-laden speech. Most people give up. They already put in eight hours of work, why should they work to listen to you? They won’t.

To build a trusting relationship with community members, speak and write on the level of those for whom the message is intended. Complicated terms and acronyms confuse community members, making them feel belittled and unappreciated. Rather than building respect for our knowledge, academic jargon breeds resentment and contempt. To build positive relationships with community members, educators, like many other groups, must remember to speak in familiar and everyday English.

In the book *Words that Work*, Frank Luntz talks about many commercial enterprises and organizations that have prospered through using plain language and the right words. He cites compelling results in gaining overwhelming support for a cause or product by using simple words that resonate with a specific group of potential supporters.

We must use everyday language to tell people what we need from them. We need them to feel comfortable approaching us with their needs and concerns. A study by the National PTA of more than 25,000 parent leaders found that 89% listed the second-highest reason for a lack of parent involvement was that parents did not understand how to become involved. A similar study cited in the NSPRA publication, *How Strong Communication Contributes to Student and School Success*, shows that a top desire of parents is for schools to communicate with them in simple, understandable terms.

The bottom line is that we must use clear, easily understood language whenever we communicate with all groups. Otherwise, it is a waste of time and resources. We shoot ourselves in the feet when it comes time to funding communication efforts.

10. Find a Good Traveling Companion

Most educators have little or no training in how communication really works. Very little curricula in teacher or administrator certification programs focuses on human relations or interpersonal communication. The just-released 10-year study of the American School Superintendent by AASA noted that one-third of today’s superintendents say they need more professional development and counsel in public relations and communication, while 25% seek help in interpersonal relations and group dynamics.

More than half of the superintendents surveyed by Farkas (mentioned earlier) said their education was not aligned with what the job actually requires. Among items they cited were the need to secure adequate funding and how to analyze school community data.

The June 2005 National MetLife Survey of the American Teacher found that 31% of new teachers said that involving parents and communicating with them is their top challenge.

Most superintendents need someone they can turn to who understands this complex communication jungle. They need someone who has expertise to apply communication knowledge in supporting the district’s primary mission. Your entire leadership
team needs guidance on just what is effective and what is feasible with the staff and resources you have.

NSPRA interviews in 2006 with 13 nationally recognized superintendents found that all of them said they need a good communication person to handle crises and communicate a positive image for the school district.

Dr. Rudy Crew, currently superintendent of Miami Public Schools, once described the communication staff role as someone to “go out there and run interference for us so we can focus on our primary job.” Like Crew, 16 of 17 superintendents who have been honored as superintendent of the year nationally or in their state said it is very important for them to have strategic communication advice. One of them said, “Without it, the vision goes nowhere.”

Two other honored superintendents noted:

I believe it is essential in any dynamic, high-performing organization that the leader have a strategic communication advisor working alongside him or her. I often say that we do not need more communication, just more effective communication. To be more effective, you have to be strategic in communicating information to your internal and external audiences. That means understanding there is equal importance in both what is communicated and the manner in which it is communicated. Information, news, data, facts, policy decisions — all must be shared with target audiences at the appropriate time and within the proper context.

I will quote my mentor; his comment about being a superintendent was, “Communication is a contact sport.” If you’re really willing to mix it up in terms of communication and get close to people, face-to-face human contact, then you’ll be successful. His other adage that I really like is, “Real estate agents say location, location, location. When it comes to school administration, its communication, communication, communication.”

11. Commit to Make it Happen

The successful superintendent is the gatekeeper when it comes to communication. Decisions on how big or small the effort should be, what it should accomplish, and who actually implements elements of the program rest with the superintendent.

Some superintendents are committed to developing a make-us-look-good program whose major objective is image-building for the leaders and the district. Others focus on how communication fits into the long-range plan and yearly goals and objectives of their systems. And some have begun developing programs that center on student achievement, home-school communication with parents, two-way internal and operational communication, and building a climate of support for instructional initiatives in their communities.

Savvy superintendents know that fitting the communication effort with their goals and objectives and focusing on student achievement are the best ways to build a positive reputation for their districts. That is where the commitment must be made. It has more staying power for ongoing communication efforts as well as extending the tenure of your superintendency.

And finally, some superintendents tell us that their personality does not lend itself to being a great communicator. Not everyone has the charm and wit of Ronald Reagan — that’s a given. But every superintendent who wants to be successful must commit to the elements of a comprehensive communication program. We see superintendents’ commitment measured by doing the right things — research, planning, and seeing that many affordable elements of a plan are implemented and evaluated. In smaller districts, current staff can be taught and empowered to become better communicators for your schools. In larger systems, professional communication assistance will make all the difference if time is spent on all the right things.

Your commitment sets the communication culture for your district. Make it a priority and you will join our list of savvy superintendents who succeed because they understand the importance of the communication factor to their district and to personal success.

A Final Note: Much of what is distilled in this publication is a product of NSPRA’s Communication Accountability Project (CAP), started four years ago to measure the impact and value of effective communication on our schools. To see the body of knowledge reported to date, as well as the references for this publication, go to www.nspra.org.
References for *Eleven Tips for Savvy Superintendents*


Additional Sources