

Leading Superintendents Place Highest Value on Communication



**Rich Bagin,
APR**

Leading superintendents, those who have earned titles of State and National Superintendent of the Year, agree that communication is the integral catalyst to help them improve their districts, increase student achievement, and create a positive culture in their schools.

For three years, NSPRA has been collecting data and responses from superintendents and search firm consultants on the characteristics of leading superintendents. This work is all part of the Communication Accountability Project (CAP) and most of the studies now can be found on the NSPRA web site at www.nspira.org. But as any experienced PR pro knows, sometimes data can easily be “trumped” by a powerful sound bite or great story. In July, NSPRA received a CAP sub task committee report chaired by David Joplin, APR, marketing communications director, Moore Norman Technology Center, Norman, Okla., containing great quotes and a few stories about effective communication.

So if you are looking for ways to build support for communication, your journey starts here:

For some leaders we have encountered over the years, communication was seen just as a “make-you-look-good” function. But for others, as noted here, they see the link between communication and student achievement. No wonder they are called superintendents of the year!

The Relationship of Student Achievement and Communication

“Yes, communications does play a role in improving student achievement for many reasons. The teachers must understand the need and urgency to make changes in order to improve the district. Setting expectations for teachers as to the quality of work is critical. Teachers must feel valued as leaders, and their work must be acknowledged. If this happens, students will in turn feel valued, and they will achieve.”

“Yes – strong communication is critical to improving student achievement. Raising achievement requires the community to work together to support student success. The community includes parents, teachers, support staff, administrators, business leaders and the residents at large. Each of these groups needs to align their work to support student learning. Communication is the key to that alignment.”

“Yes, you need to inform parents, staff, and the public how you are doing in a timely manner and in data that they can comprehend. Immediate and long-term feedback on our program is absolutely crucial for staff, parent, and student planning. In addition, it raises the confidence of the community when they see you provide accurate, timely, and honest data on student achievement.”

“In the district where I was superintendent, decision-making by data was a crucial part of our educational planning. The next step then was to provide an annual report to the staff and community of measures of success of about 70 categories. This report is widely circulated in our community and is the focus of communication to our media and community. By highlighting achievement and its goals, it motivates parents to help students get better, it highlights to staff areas that are successful and those where additional work is needed, and it provides the Board a measuring stick to present to the community on their impact.”

“In the late 1990s we developed an assessment program that counted for student promotion and graduation beginning in 2000, well ahead of the national accountability movement and No Child Left Behind. We experienced opposition from a relatively small but vocal contingent in our community and among our teaching force. Without the effective communication program that undergirded this effort, which involved a great deal of listening as well as explaining, we would not have been able to stay the course with an improvement initiative that has had a tremendous impact in raising student achievement in our schools, and continues to do so today.”

On Strategic Issue-oriented Public Relations

“On our outreach to our community leadership, we have a leadership program and it’s bringing in community leaders to take in a variety of different experiences in our school district and these opinion leaders then go back and I know they share their experiences with other people that they see regularly. And I like that proactive idea of not just pushing the mission, but also letting people get a glimpse of the operational excellence that we are very proud of, and what goes into making a school system function every single day on behalf of children. For example, 4.6 million lunches a year that are served, and how we go about doing that, and how important it is to so many kids to have a good meal at school. For individuals to understand the big picture as well as the nuances of the school system I think is great. That’s on the proactive side.

On the reactive side, we had a very controversial issue involving a teacher who said some things that wound up being broadcast over the media after a student had recorded what the teacher said in class, and the assistance of a public information officer who knew how to handle the media was invaluable. We would not have exited that experience in as good of a condition as we did without that valuable input, handling of questions, e-mails, interviews.”



Once again, practicing issue-oriented public relations on both a proactive and reactive basis will make a big difference for school districts by building supportive networks and protecting the reputation of your staff and schools.

Defining the Need and Substance of Great Communication

Boards and superintendents who understand the true mission of effective communication clearly grasp why you can't be totally successful without it. They know they must connect the communication effort to the system's goals and objectives of improving teaching and learning for their staff and students. Leading superintendents who "get it" give endorsements like these:

“Since people will get information about the district somehow, it is very important that the district be the source. Communications is what makes the wheels of achievement turn. I am always thinking, how many ways can I communicate to my stakeholders?”

“Timely, honest and pertinent communication is absolutely the key to the success of the superintendent and the district. You need to tell people what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how you will judge the success of what you are doing. Community members and staff want to know what the district is accomplishing and what the issues may be that will have an effect on them.”

“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.’”

“If you cannot communicate your vision in a clear, compelling, and passionate manner, you will not get the necessary buy-in from people, or their followership. The same importance applies to all skill areas.”

“Communications is more important than ever because there is an unprecedented demand for tax dollars. If the schools’ needs are communicated, public education will benefit, and student achievement will increase.”

“...it is important to gain the trust of the community. The only way to gain this trust is to be brutally honest, but in a way that honors what the system is doing for students. The community, collectively, needs to be aware of what is happening in the district, (the good, the bad and the ugly). ...people from my former district still thank me for helping them to see what was happening to their graduation rates. ...the goal is to help them to feel some level of responsibility for what takes place within the school system.”

I wish there were a way of making these comments stick a bit more with all school board members, superintendents, and Canadian directors in school districts throughout North America. If we could bottle them and offer them as an elixir for members in need, we would. In the meantime,

go to our CAP section at www.nspr.org where there is more information than ever before – including this newly released study.

– Rich Bagin, APR