The Communication Factor in Board Effectiveness

Responsible Communication Builds Strong Relationships

There’s no denying that one of the most challenging roles in public education today is that of the local school board. The current era of accountability — with NCLB at the federal level and various high-stakes performance mandates at the state level — has significantly ramped up demands not just on teachers and administrators to raise student achievement, but also on school boards to set a clear vision and high standards for success. Today’s board members must communicate the district’s progress toward goals as well as the outcomes of their efforts to provide quality education for all students.

Board members also provide a direct connection to district stakeholders and play a critical role in building supportive relationships between the schools and community. Research conducted by National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) leaders as well as other education researchers clearly demonstrates how accountability, transparency, and involvement are fostered by strong communication between schools and communities.

This publication offers tips and research to help school boards redefine their work from a community perspective, build strong relationships between their schools and communities, and become more effective through strategic, responsible communication.

Thanks to NSPRA Vice President at Large – School Boards Focus Tom Gentzel, executive director, Pennsylvania School Boards Association; NSPRA Associate Director Karen H. Kleinz, APR; and the pro-bono assistance of the Center for Clear Communication, Inc., for contributing to this publication.

To learn more about NSPRA’s Communication Accountability Program, membership benefits, communication audits, and other products and services, go to www.nspra.org or call us at (301) 519-0496.
1. Hold Yourselves Responsible for Communicating with and Engaging Your Community

Establishing and maintaining meaningful, direct, two-way communication among schools, parents, and the community is one of the key characteristics of effective parent and community involvement. Research NSPRA gathered for the Communication Accountability Program (CAP) — designed to build understanding and support for the ways good communication creates success for students and schools — clearly demonstrates that effective communication boosts student achievement and leads to student and school success.

Effective school boards adopt written policies to guide their communication and public relations efforts and demonstrate their commitment to building strong relationships with parents and the community.

Communication policies include:

- A commitment to providing comprehensive communication and public relations in an open, honest way that meets the needs, interests, and desires of all internal and external publics.
- Formal and informal procedures for disseminating information to internal and external publics.
- A commitment to and steps for actively engaging the public in decisionmaking about the district and schools.
- Guidelines for releasing information about individual staff members, students, or clients.
- Procedures for employees, parents, and others to appeal policy or administrative decisions.
- Communication responsibilities and procedures for managing crises.
- Procedures for responsibly interacting with the news media, including clarifying staff roles and responsibilities.

Good communication and public relations policies help ensure that strategic communication is integrated into board governance and is evaluated for effectiveness.

2. Recognize Communication as an Important Management Function and Hold Your Administration Accountable

Even if you don’t have a formal, planned communication and public relations program in your school system, communication — both good and bad — still takes place every day at all levels. To be effective, communication efforts must be strategic and designed to support your district’s overall mission, vision, goals, and objectives. At all levels, communication must occur consistently and information must be presented clearly. To accomplish this with efficiency, you must establish processes and procedures to incorporate a communication component into planning for all district initiatives, programs, and activities.

Good communication doesn’t just happen. It takes thought, planning, and skill to implement strategies and processes that inform and engage your publics. Ideally, your district has a communication director to manage this critical function. If you don’t have a dedicated position now, assign another administrator responsibility for communication. In any case, train
and empower all staff to become better communicators for your schools.

In today’s 24/7, instant-access-to-information environment, a solid communication program is no longer an “extra” for school systems of any size.

Smart school boards:
- Recognize communication as a critical management component;
- Seek to hire superintendents with strong communication skills;
- Hold high expectations of their superintendents for internal and external communication; and
- Evaluate their superintendents on communication efforts.

For more information on how to plan your communication efforts, go to [www.nspra.org](http://www.nspra.org) and click on [Starting a School PR Program](http://www.nspra.org).

### 3. Develop a Strategic Communication Plan Tied to Your District’s Mission, Goals, and Objectives

A strategic communication plan can dramatically increase the efficiency and effectiveness of your district’s communication efforts when all projects, publications, and activities are considered in the context of how they support the board’s set goals. An effective communication plan builds understanding and staff involvement in communication efforts by providing clear direction and measurable outcomes.

A well-designed plan will keep your communication effort on track and maximize the value of your district’s communication dollar, demonstrating accountability to stakeholders in the process. It also gives staff a clear direction so that they understand their roles as communicators and ambassadors for the schools.

Research shows that:
- Reactive communication always costs more than planned efforts that support the district’s mission, goals, and objectives.
- Support is greater for districts that have ongoing, planned communication programs that keep taxpayers informed.
- Communication is critical to reputation management.
- Effective communication is key to building parent involvement and support, which leads to improved student achievement.
- Communication campaigns that encourage family and community involvement can increase student performance and attendance.

Once developed, your communication plan should remain dynamic. Revise and adapt it as goals and objectives are accomplished and new communication challenges arise.

If your district has never had a strategic communication plan, or your current communication efforts have never been evaluated for effectiveness, one excellent way to start and ensure that your communication efforts hit the target is to undergo an NSPRA Communication Audit. A communication audit not only gives you a comprehensive assessment of your current communication efforts, but it also delivers proven strategies to enhance and improve communication, public relations, and reputation management that are the framework for your communication plan.

For more information about NSPRA Communication Audits, see the last page of this publication.
4. Speak with One Clear Voice on Behalf of Your Students and Schools

A strategic communication plan not only gives staff direction on communicating the board’s goals, it also gives your board a structure to focus key messages and advocacy efforts so that you speak in one clear voice on major initiatives and decisions. Part of each board member’s responsibility is to question and seek answers to issues brought before the board; no one expects boards to make unanimous decisions all the time. But once the board has made a decision, you must present a collective front in supporting the decision and explaining the rationale behind it.

Few things are as divisive to a district’s trust and credibility as school board members who disagree with a decision and actively work against it rather than supporting the majority viewpoint. Responsible leadership involves respecting the process and one another, recognizing that the board only has authority as a collective body, and understanding that the priority must always be what is in the best interests of all students and the community.

Clear, consistent messages are also critical in times of crisis. Board members as well as staff must know and understand their roles and who the designated spokespeople are for any given situation. Having a communication plan in place helps ensure that correct information is delivered in a timely manner to quickly resolve the problem.

5. Establish a Culture of Effective, Two-Way Communication and Engagement with All Stakeholders

Smart school boards recognize that student achievement and school success depend on collaborating with and actively involving families and the community. Part of being accountable to your public is taking responsibility for creating opportunities for all stakeholders to engage with your district in meaningful ways that allow them to have a voice in important decisions affecting students.

An analysis of communication audits NSPRA has conducted in school systems across North America in the past decade found that despite school boards’ well-intentioned efforts, when asked if they feel their districts offer them opportunities to have input into decisionmaking, focus group participants consistently said, “They provide opportunities, but nobody listens.”

In many cases, we found that the public was invited into the process too late to have an authentic voice, causing them to question if their input was valued. In some cases, participants felt the district did not fully embrace parents and staff as partners in the education process.

To build strong relationships with stakeholders and instill a sense of shared responsibility for student success, smart school boards:
- Make a commitment to their relationship with the public;
- Determine expectations and create opportunities for shared decisionmaking;
- Explore community values and beliefs; and
- Find common ground for taking action that leads to student achievement.

To create a true culture of engagement, boards must bring stakeholders together not just to give their input on issues, but rather to expand the conversation by delving deeper to identify the core beliefs and values that drive accountability for student achievement in the community. You can use a variety of strategies to initiate dialogue — from town halls, forums, and study circles to board “listening” sessions and informal coffee meetings around town. The key to success is making the commitment to “listening,” taking action based on all the information at your disposal, and “closing the loop” by keeping the public informed each step along the way.

Key Components of Effective Engagement
- Active listening
- Dialogue and deliberation
- Collaboration
- Shared responsibility for outcomes
6. Demonstrate Accountability Through Effective School Governance Standards Supported by Effective Communication

Research on the characteristics of high-performing schools shows a clear relationship between effective school governance standards and communication. Research conducted by the Pennsylvania School Boards Association also demonstrates the importance of a balanced governance structure. (See the box on the right.)

Smart school boards understand that to govern effectively they need clearly articulated standards, identified indicators of success, benchmarks for credible evaluation, self-assessment instruments to measure progress, and a comprehensive and efficient process to communicate effectively with stakeholders. They also understand that they are accountable to their communities for timely and relevant communication, just as they are accountable for student achievement.

As district and community leaders, school boards shoulder a huge responsibility for educating our children. Making communication a priority does more than simply keep your community informed. It creates connections, builds relationships, and invites everyone to share in the rewarding work of helping each student succeed.

Characteristics of High-Performing Schools

- Clear, shared focus
- High standards and expectations for all students
- Effective school leadership
- High levels of collaboration and communication
- Curriculum, instruction, and assessment aligned with standards

Effective School Governance Standards

To promote student growth and achievement, effective school boards:

- Govern through policy
- Ensure effective planning
- Communicate and engage the community
- Monitor results

Source: PA School Boards Association
About NSPRA Communication Audits

Nothing is more important to building trust and support and enhancing the relationship between your district and community than the quality of your communication.

But how do you know if your communication effort is having an impact?

Tight budgets, pressure to demonstrate accountability to taxpayers, and successfully reaching stakeholders who are overwhelmed with communication in their work and personal lives all make it challenging to get your message out and engage your parents and community members.

Getting the most from your communication dollar is important. NSPRA’s Communication Audit can help you reach your communication objectives and close the gaps. We will evaluate your program and recommend proven, cost-effective strategies that will work in your school system with the resources you have available.

An NSPRA Communication Audit is a rigorous review of your overall communication effort, including district and building-level publications, web sites, communication and marketing plans, policies, budget and staffing, and other important aspects of your district. In addition, our auditors meet with focus groups that represent your key internal and external audiences to gain a true understanding of people’s current perceptions about your schools and to gather input about where your stakeholders get their information, what information they want to receive, and what the best methods are to reach them.

An NSPRA Communication Audit gives your district meaningful benchmarks for tracking communication efforts as well as proven recommendations that will form the framework of your strategic communication plan.

You won’t make a better investment in your communication program than an NSPRA Communication Audit.

For more information about how to evaluate your communication effort, contact:

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