The School Superintendent as Lead Communicator – Part III
Current Effective Communication Practices Used by Leading Superintendents

By Larry Ascough, NSPRA correspondent

As your school system’s lead communicator, you are responsible for creating a culture of effective communication that supports your district’s mission of providing quality education to the students you serve. In Part I and Part II of this article, we examined the importance of the superintendent’s communication role and addressed how to create a communication infrastructure and begin developing your communication plan.

Once that infrastructure and strategic communication plan are in place, the implementation step can begin. The scope of your plan will, of course, be dependent on available resources, and you also will need to determine your own tactical communications role based on your personal skills, program needs, and emerging or unexpected issues and events. The following examples from a recent informal scan of school PR activities around the country represent the most prevalent current communications practices of successful superintendents.

- **Written Word from the Top.** Most superintendents find time to prepare and send messages on a regular basis to staff members, parents and other stakeholders in the community. The topics vary from back-to-school logistics and district plans and programs, to school finance challenges, construction updates, and the latest local issues. The primary purpose is to inform, motivate, and reinforce key institutional messages. Some leaders still include a ‘Superintendent’s Message’ in print newsletters, annual reports, and other district publications. A favorite method for reaching the broader community is to get the local newspaper outlet to allow the superintendent to contribute a regular column. This can also be copied and used for spreading key district messages in numerous ways. A few superintendents have columns that appear in local business or community magazines.

Of course, many districts have now eliminated traditional print publications and publish e-newsletters and magazines or post news on their websites. A number of superintendents are distributing their messages by e-mail or by posting articles on
their own page on the district website. Obviously, anything that appears in print can also be repurposed online to expand its use and reach other audiences.

- **Cyberspace.** And speaking of the Internet, this technology has changed, and continues to change, the face of school communication efforts. While it isn’t the end all and be all of one’s communication efforts, it certainly has opened the door to many new and creative tactics as well as to new audiences. Most superintendents have their own page on the district website with links to numerous information sources and other communication efforts (podcasts, videos, speeches, columns, etc.). Some have started blogs which allow them to expand on their efforts to get the message out, while also creating an opportunity to interact with readers. Others are using the mini-blogging approach made possible by Twitter accounts to promote, inform, recognize, and basically stay in touch with anyone interested. Although few superintendents have set up their own Facebook pages, some are using the social networking sites created by their districts to post a variety of messages and school information.

- **Video/Podcasts.** Many superintendents prefer methods other than the written word for getting the message out. Those with access to cable television channels or schools that teach video production frequently utilize the medium in a variety of ways. Some chiefs host their own regular TV programs, many produce special videos that can be broadcast, streamed on the Internet, shown at meetings and distributed to interested stakeholders. More and more district websites feature informative videos ranging from the superintendent’s welcome to productions on educational programs and current issues. In addition, many include speeches and presentations as well as clips of local television news interviews. Lesser used, but still popular with some, are audio podcasts made available via websites. Topics range from weekly talk programs that feature student and staff interviews to regular reports on school board meetings, all hosted by superintendents.

- **Listening.** Realizing that communication is indeed a two-way process, many superintendents are making special efforts to include the most underutilized communication tool in their overall efforts – listening. Most district leaders use websites and other communication vehicles to inform stakeholders about how they can be contacted. Many also encourage feedback from stakeholders by inviting questions and comments, and by publishing their responses to the inquiries. Surveys are also popular for gathering the thoughts and opinions of stakeholders. Another favorite strategy practiced by superintendents is regular visits to schools and other sites where the boss can personally talk with staff in their work settings. Busy superintendents also set up opportunities for face to face exchanges – breakfast or lunch meetings with parents, employee rap sessions, community forums, and other similar events. And the old reliable "key communicators network" – built around an informal group of influential stakeholders – is still valid and used in a variety of forms by district leaders.
• **Engagement.** Most school leaders recognize the multiple benefits of engaging stakeholders in the enterprise of education. From community forums and discussion sessions to informal brown-bag lunches and in-home meetings, the process of engaging constituents facilitates communication by making it easier to inform as well as listen to key audiences while building commitment and support for the schools. While engagement must take place at all levels of the school system, some superintendents are personally taking the lead in working with key district publics on long-range plans and other important initiatives through standing advisory groups and special project task forces.

• **Recognition.** Expressing appreciation and praise for a job well done is a powerful communication tool that effective leaders use in their overall program efforts. The prestige of recognition from the superintendent’s office is often tied to community awards such as the volunteer or business partner of the year. But most recognition is aimed at the internal audience of staff and students. In many cases stakeholders nominate teachers and support staff for work above and beyond the call of duty and the superintendent or award committee selects the honorees. The rewards come in various forms, from cash and merchandise provided by the community to a mention in the superintendent’s column or an appearance on the district’s television program. Whether your recognition program is formal or informal, it still holds true that a simple "thank you" or pat on the back has a powerful impact.

• **Leading by Example.** There are school leaders who recognize that some of the most powerful communication occurs through symbolism. As a result, they have taken steps to send strong messages by doing the right thing and making sure folks know about it. For example, the superintendent and trustees in Northside ISD in San Antonio, Texas, annually hold a public signing of a code of ethics reaffirming their commitment to adhere to educational and ethical standards. During the recent tough financial times, a number of superintendents have asked for their pay to be frozen or even reduced. Some have taken steps to ensure transparency in executive pay and posted their contracts on the Internet. Many superintendents have made it easy for stakeholders to monitor their district’s finances by posting all transactions online and in a timely fashion. In Prosper (Texas) ISD, Superintendent Drew Watkins has made customer service a top priority for all employees and sets an example by serving as an active member of the customer care team at the central office.

• **More Good Ideas.** A growing number of superintendents are presenting "State of the Schools" reports at annual gatherings of parents and community leaders. The event usually attracts positive news coverage and is used by some districts as a fundraiser. Many prepare video and printed reports that can be used at other meetings and featured on the district website. Some superintendents are using school board meetings as a regular venue for featuring effectiveness reports on various aspects of the educational program. With the approval and input of the board, key topics – such as reading, math, counseling; etc. – are selected for brief but thorough staff presentations. The process keeps governance focused on the
core mission, generates helpful media coverage, keeps staff on their toes, and provides a wealth of information to share with stakeholders.

There’s no question that school superintendents across the country are more engaged than ever in communications and public relations. The depth of their involvement in the formal delivery of the communication program varies for obvious reasons, but the superintendent is still the district’s chief communicator and responsible for making sure all aspects of the communication effort are adequately carried out. Good things happen by design and not by chance.

NSPRA Correspondent Larry Ascough is a retired school district communications administrator, NSPRA past president and NSPRA Presidents Award recipient.