



Editor's Note:

Last spring and into the summer school districts across Connecticut witnessed budget and referendum defeats, negative publicity on school and district governance, and other actions which, in some districts, has undermined public education.

Building Trust in Your Community — The Role of Public Relations in Times of Change and Uncertainty

By Ira W. Yellen, APR

President and CEO

First Experience Communications

Glastonbury, CT

Across Connecticut elected school officials are fighting tough battles with the very communities they serve. Dozens of budget and bond referendums have been defeated and Boards of Education (BoE) are at a loss to understand why. It seems that parents, residents, and community groups are challenging school districts with an irrational vengeance. Some examples of this discord include:

- Voters in Litchfield rejected a \$37.5 million school building and renovation proposal that was approved a few months earlier.
- Voters in Glastonbury twice rejected a proposed bonding referendum for their high school.
- In Regional District 8, the proposed 2002-03 budget was rejected for a fifth time.
- In Regional District 10, the BoE plans to hire a consulting company in an effort to develop a school-construction proposal that voters will accept.

As one BoE member put it, "People are plain mad at us. It is like we are doing something bad to them, and ultimately the children pay the price. The voters don't care."

Having worked with over 50 school districts throughout the State, I have found that a lack of trust and credibility combined with an almost irrational anger underscores these budget and bonding battles. Much of this attitude can be attributed to the current state of angst and mistrust that is overshadowing our country as a whole.

The economy, the war on terrorism, and the scandals that have plagued our major institutions weigh heavily on the minds of our local voters. People have witnessed leaders of all types misguide the public, leaving individuals to wonder who will lead them into the future and whom can they trust.

Now, more than ever, it is the job of elected officials to curb anxiety and gain trust. In a

USA Today-CNN Gallup Poll taken in July 2002, more than 500 adults were asked which groups they trusted. Teachers came out on top with 84 percent, while CEOs of large corporations and stockbrokers fell at the lowest end of the poll with 23 percent. BoE members need to ask themselves this question: are you perceived as teachers or CEOs?

The best strategy to help you build your case and foster trust is to embrace open communication with your communities. You are already devoted to your communities and have shown you care about the future of our children. Why else would you freely pursue the daunting task of being an elected volunteer official?

All of the harsh criticisms and rejected referendums are the direct result of residents feeling that local officials are not listening to or caring about their concerns. It is up to you to accomplish what so many in Corporate America failed to do — build effective community relations programs.

There are four key ingredients to a successful community-relations effort: strong leadership, honest communication, clear direction and inclusion in the decision-making process. What's more, you must be willing to take an honest look at the real issues and challenges that may impede effective dialogue.

To a large extent, all school districts are facing the same hurdles. Many of the issues and challenges stem from misinformation or misconstrued perceptions on the part of voters.

Issues & Perceptions:

- Voters are angry at their elected town officials and nervous about the future.
- Voters do not trust that traditional institutions are protecting their best interests.
- Elected officials do not understand or adjust to the changing demographics in their community.
- Elected officials do not empathize with the angst that their residents are feeling.
- Elected officials do not present a direct cause and effect relationship of decisions in a way that voters can understand.
- Towns and Boards of Education often send conflicting messages to residents.

Communication Challenges:

- Most students today are children of Generation X parents (24-40), who have very different attitudes about public schools than Baby Boomers (41-56). Generation X parents are more focused on their relationship to their child's teacher than on the overall school district needs. These parents do not see beyond

short-term needs. School Boards on the other hand, are accustomed to communicating with Baby Boomer attitudes and don't understand the mindsets of younger parents.

- ERG A through C school districts are having the hardest time getting budgets and referendums passed in their towns.
- Voter turnout is dismally low — generally below 35 percent for most referendums, making it nearly impossible to get a "yes" vote.
- Interest groups drive agendas, causing Boards to be seen as defensive and confrontational.
- The media tends to only present the controversial or conflict side of Board initiatives.
- There is a growing lack of support from school staff.

These issues and challenges may seem insurmountable. However, with a solid community relations program and strategic plan, you can begin to address residents' fundamental concerns and build trust. The question then becomes how to get started?

- First, reconsider your job description and add "Public Relations Counselor" to it. Think of yourself, your administrators, and your teachers as ambassadors of the school and conduits of communication. Everyone involved in the school system must play an active role in gaining community support.
- Understand the changing demographics and attitudes of your community by surveying residents every two years. Doing so will provide key insights that can help you shape your communication messages.
- Understand the level of your staff's interest (or lack thereof) in supporting board initiatives. If necessary, develop an internal communications effort to bolster inside support. This is an essential component to winning over your external audiences.
- Develop and implement a sustained year-round communication strategy.

What voters want most from elected officials is trust, competence, and leadership — qualities that already exist in local Boards of Education. All that is needed is to communicate on a sustained basis the value a Board provides to its community members.