



“Over 25 Years of Public School Community Relationship Building Experience”

PUBLISHING AN E-NEWSLETTER BUILDS SUPPORT FOR YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT: MAKING THE CASE

Position Paper by
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“Dramatic changes are taking place in the educational landscape ... These changes are being driven by the new realities of the digital marketplace.”

Toward a New Age in American Education, The U.S. Department of Education, 2004

Overview

An ongoing dialogue with your community builds sustained support for your school district’s financial and educational goals. Traditionally, boards of education have relied on meetings, media stories, sporadic newsletters and PTOs to “get the word out.” Today, these delivery systems are not the most effective vehicles for reaching your key stakeholders and supporters. Boards of education need to communicate much more frequently and on a sustained basis. This position paper lays out a case for using e-newsletters. They are cost-effective, easy to create, and more convenient for the growing number of Internet users in your community who want to understand what is occurring in their schools.

A strategically designed e-newsletter is one of the best tools a public school system can use to build and maintain relationships with key members of the community that have a vested interest in a properly funded educational system. This publication was written for School Superintendents, Boards of Education members, Principals, Senior Administrators and anyone with an interest in building relationships with school district constituencies.

“Technology savvy parents today want quick and readily accessible information. Our comprehensive, monthly e-newsletter includes a variety of school news, colorful pictures, upcoming events, and a wealth of other tidbits. The volume of subscribers is testimony to the value of this communication – we are pushing 2,000 readers and the list continues to grow. We gained the trust of the subscribers by keeping the e-newsletter relevant and their email addresses confidential. People tell us they look forward to reading our e-newsletters!”

Lois Lanning, Assistant Superintendent of Schools, Region 15

Here are six important reasons why your school district should have an ongoing e-newsletter communication strategy.

Reason #1:

E-Newsletters Address the Challenge of Reaching Your Primary Constituency

School districts today face the challenge of building relationships with students, young parents, and community members who are media savvy, technology savvy and want to be kept informed. Like it or not, most Generation X parents, born between 1965 and 1980, do not have the blind faith and loyalty of their predecessors to the public school system. Long before their child reaches kindergarten age, parents are in the marketplace researching their educational options. Between magnet and charter schools, home schooling, private and religious schools, competition is keen for students and the state funding that supports their education.

Effective communication is fundamental to building support for school budgets and referendums from parents, students, teachers and the surrounding community. The primary challenge schools face in today’s information-overloaded society is to break through the clutter to give people the information they want at a time when they can pay attention to it.

For students and young parents, the website has become an electronic version of the old town crier. School districts need to engage in successful Internet communication, versus informational data dumping. Successful organizations are using their websites to form the relationships they need to establish credibility, increase participation, and build trust and support. E-newsletters complement a website by delivering your message to your target audience on a regular basis. A 2006 Pew Research Center study on how people get news today showed that 61% of Internet users have been sent a link in an email to a news story. On the sending side, 40% of Internet users have shared a link to a news story in an email. This suggests that news is a social currency, passed around in a lot of ways online.

Reason #2:

E-Newsletters are More Cost-Effective than Print Newsletters

The benefit of reaching the entire school district community by mailing printed newsletters is a strong one and should not be discounted. But given the current economic conditions, e-newsletters are a valuable, cost-effective option to communicating with your primary target audience. To illustrate the cost savings from a school district printed newsletter that is contracted out: the cost of writing, designing, printing and mailing 8,500 copies of a single-color, 4-page newsletter is \$6,800. This works out to approximately \$.80 per household. To send an e-newsletter via e-mail that is contracted out costs only \$.41 per household, almost a 50% savings.

Building relationships by maintaining ongoing communication with the people who decide whether future budget referendums and other educational initiatives pass or fail is too important to ignore. School districts with tight budgets can still implement a strong communications strategy using e-newsletters.

Reason #3:

E-Newsletters are Interactive

E-newsletters give your audience the flexibility to be interactive with access to your website, a supporting document, video or sound clip that is just a click away. Providing these links gives readers the option to explore deeper into an issue that is of particular interest or concern, and opens the door for two-way dialog that is essential to relationship building.

Reason #4:

You Can Test How Effective Your Internet Communications Strategy Is

A well-designed Internet communications strategy is one of the most effective means of communicating school issues. Given the current population's increasing dependence on the Internet for information, a well-maintained district web site with up-to-date e-newsletter communications establishes a primary source of information about the district and offers a way to control the agenda when complicated issues, such as crises or capital improvements, face the school community. The more sophisticated e-newsletter programs can track which links in your newsletter are being clicked on and which are being ignored, allowing you to gauge public interest in various topics.

Reason #5:

E-Newsletters Facilitate Word-of-Mouth Communication

It is easy for your subscribers to forward your e-newsletter to friends and associates. Since you are your own publisher, this helps ensure that accurate information is being distributed through the community grapevine, versus unsubstantiated rumor.

Reason #6:

E-Newsletters Enable Timely Communication

In the event of a crisis or major development, an e-newsletter enables a school system to disseminate timely, accurate information without the delays associated with printing and mailing. By signing up to receive your e-newsletters, your subscribers are indicating they want to be kept informed of what is going on in your schools. By communicating with them on a timely basis, you will build a loyal following.

Internet Usage Trends

In 2006, Pew Research Center for The People & The Press studied how people get news today and issued a report that is full of interesting insights:

- 73% of adult Americans are Internet users.

- Some 80% of adults agree with the statement “there are so many ways to get the news these days that I don’t worry when I don’t have a chance to read the paper or when I miss my regular news program.”
- When people know that a big story is breaking, the Internet is more important than newspapers or radio for getting breaking news. Some 75% of respondents picked TV as the place to get information when a big story is breaking; 18% picked the Internet; 8% picked radio; and 6% picked newspapers.
- Fully 61% of Internet users have been sent a link in an email to a news story. On the sending side, 40% of Internet users have shared a link to a news story in an email.
- On a typical day, a quarter of those who say they got news from newspaper websites said they actually encountered the news on non-newspaper web sites. It is also shared through such things as newsletters and aggregation web sites.
- Some 6% of those who get news online say they have paid for news content on the Internet.
- The Pew Research study also showed that 54% of online news consumers have filled out a registration form in order to get access to news.

Myth	Reality
My district has a lower average income than others, so they probably don’t have access to our website.	Internet use among people who live in lower income households has increased more rapidly than in higher income brackets. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under \$15,000, 25% growth rate. • \$15-25K, 24% growth rate.
Messaging through the web and email won’t reach the older people in our community.	Ages 55 and older show equally strong e-mail use as any other adult age group. 55+ are also among the fastest adopters. 60.5% of users consider it to be a very important or extremely important source.
The Internet is not a reliable source of information.	Among very experienced users, it ranks higher than books, TV, radio, newspapers and magazines.
Email already takes up too much of people’s time.	2/3 of users disagreed. More than 3/4 of users said it was a way to communicate with people that they could not ordinarily communicate with.

“A community that must rely on local property tax because of inadequate state funding and the lack of a strong corporate tax base annually faces a more confrontational public and the reality that its local schools will be under-funded.” – Superintendent

How to Make the Internet a Relationship-Building Asset

Until a few years ago, most people relied on the media, friends and other third-party sources to get their information about schools. On the flip side, the very people schools needed to hear from, never had an easy outlet to share, vent or express their views about what was happening in schools and their districts. Today, technology and personal publishing are changing the relationship between schools and their communities.

The shift is a good one. Moving beyond communication filtered by news media, editorial boards and word of mouth messengers, schools can now use the Internet to directly engage people on their time at their convenience. Today’s technologies, such as e-newsletters, web logs or “blogs”, are designed to be interactive, encouraging open dialogue. Engaging people in the ups and downs of a superintendent’s job or a school board’s decision-making process humanizes the positions, which builds understanding. Taking it a step

farther, people are more likely to support and get involved in areas that are familiar to them. In this time of dwindling volunteers and human resources, schools have a vested interest in familiarizing the public with their board of education activity, if they want to fill those positions with quality candidates in the future.

Websites, webcasts, podcasts, e-newsletters, RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds and permission e-mail are all publishing mediums that can provide first-hand information on school issues and initiatives. They establish streams of information people come to rely on. Time sensitive subjects such as school board decisions, construction updates and news events lend themselves to proactive information feeds coming directly from the school. More importantly, proactively communicating your school district's message in a real-time forum creates a balance to third-party sources that may bungle the story or miss the point.

Frequent Communications at a Fraction of the Cost of Printed Newsletters

Electronic newsletters offer school districts the ability to publish regular, anticipated, relevant communications to key audiences at a fraction of the cost of printed publications. To guarantee delivery to every household, even those with limited or no use of the Internet, mailing traditional printed newsletters is still the most effective tactic. But, throughout the year, electronic newsletters can help keep community members well informed about their school system.

A number of well-established service providers including Constant Contact, Campaign Monitor, First Contact Suite and iContact are available to streamline the design and mailing of an electronic newsletter for your district. Many also provide useful tracking tools that show how many recipients opened your e-newsletter and how many of them clicked through to web pages you included. To send as many newsletters as you need, up to 10,000 recipients, most of these services cost less than \$1,000 per year. That includes scores of templates, SPAM protection tools and measurement systems. Most services also offer non-profit discounts to schools.

How to Get Your E-Newsletter Delivered

Whether you publish your newsletter independently or enlist the help of an agency, these are some of the costs and benefits you can expect.

	Self-managed	Cost	With an Agency	Cost
E-Newsletter Publishing Service	- Sign up and configure your account	\$1,000	- Interactive professional configures your account	\$1,000 (one time fee)
E-Newsletter Design	- Choose a stock template	\$0 and up	- Get a custom template consistent with your district's brand and image	\$600 (one time fee)
Email list management	- Gather email addresses and upload them - Regularly manage updates and additions	Staff time	- Build web forms to enable new subscribers to add themselves - Create campaigns to increase the size of your email list - Create custom subscription options	\$1,000 per year
E-Newsletter Publishing	- Written by school staff	Staff time	- Seasoned publishers maintain a tight schedule - Professional school communications writers provide objective articles on tight deadlines - Graphics staff optimize photos and graphics	\$1,500 per newsletter
Measurement	- Track how recipients respond to email	Staff time	- Interpret response rates and use for continuous improvement of content.	\$1,000/yr.

The tools to publish e-newsletters are relatively simple. They offer a cost-effective method for a focused communications team to reach their community. For schools that don't have a formal communications team, an agency with education experience can help plan, organize and sustain your communications effort throughout the school year, publishing relevant information 8-9 times for about \$10,000 – \$12,000.

Connecticut School District Case Study

A Regional School District Engages the Community

A Regional School's Board of Education has a long-standing commitment to its community relations program. The school district surveyed the community to determine if its informational goals are effective. By using this instrument, the school district hoped to learn more about the perceptions and expectations of its citizens.

The Board retained First Experience Communications to conduct the primary research to:

- Identify the communities' perception of challenges and issues facing the district.
- Identify perceptions that may be corrected or addressed as part of subsequent public information efforts.
- Determine how much, when and what type of information the district should be conveying to the residents of both communities.

A key finding related to an electronic newsletter that had been launched as a result of a prior communications audit of the population. The survey uncovered that more than half the respondents (56.4%) were not aware that they could sign up for the monthly electronic newsletter. FEC recommended a high visibility campaign to boost community awareness of the electronic newsletter, which has significantly enhanced communications with the school district's residents for more than five years.

"Superintendents who are successful in dealing with today's parents realize that communication skills are really key and they know they need a savvy understanding of the job." – Superintendent

Conclusion: Be Your Own Publisher

Relative to other ways of conveying information to the community, e-newsletters and the Internet have several distinct advantages. First, information provided directly by the school is not subject to editorial interpretation, as is the case with news media. Second, the volume of information is not limited by available space, time or cost. Third, a school district can quickly shift its focus to a timely issue and directly convey an important message to their audience.

To see sample e-newsletter: <http://firstexperience.com/schoolnewsletter/> For a free consultation on how your school system can successfully launch an e-newsletter communication strategy, contact us at:

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Visit this site to learn more about our public schools experience in community relationship building:
http://www.firstexperience.com/ed_public-magnet.html

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