

PUBLIC EDUCATION IN AMERICA: THE TIDE IS TURNING... IS YOUR DISTRICT PREPARED?

Dynamic social forces are changing the way school districts must operate, communicate and interact with their publics in order to gain support.



Position Paper
by Ira W. Yellen, APR

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“Public education is going through a metamorphosis, which is accountability for the end product. With increased accountability, comes increased demands.”
- Superintendent

Introduction

This publication is for superintendents, boards of education, principals, educators, public policy decision makers and community members with an interest in public education. It addresses why public schools are not supported by the community today as they once were; why it is harder than ever before to be a superintendent, board member, principal or teacher; how public schools reflect the changes in our society; and what we can do about it.

First Experience Communications produced this position paper to share more than twenty years of experience and counsel in helping school districts manage and overcome these challenges. It outlines approaches we have used to help school districts of all sizes pass school budgets, gain support for bond referendums, and communicate to the public about redistricting and special education issues. Some of the questions that we address include:

1. Why aren't communities generally supporting public education as they once did?
2. How does a school district meet the challenge of unfunded or under-funded federal and state mandates, such as special education and No Child Left Behind?
3. How does a school district convince a community to pass a school budget or capital improvement referendum?
4. How can school districts overcome a growing shortage of teachers and administrators, while facing the largest public school enrollment in the history of the United States?

Overview

In a perfect world, educators wouldn't have to fight for financial support, approval for technology and capital improvements, or increased parental involvement. But this is not a perfect world. Budgets are shrinking, funding is tight, and a divided general public is not as supportive of our public schools as it once was.

Districts compete for students under school-choice plans. They vie for more money in the face of dwindling grants and tighter budgets. And they struggle to gain community support and involvement from constituents.

Public Agenda research findings on public opinion and public schools report that the public generally supports higher standards and standardized tests, but cautions against their misuse. Survey data indicates that employers and college professors perceive the quality of high school instruction to be much lower than what parents and teachers believe. There is general concern over the uncivil atmosphere in many high schools; and politics and bureaucracy are obstacles for today's superintendents and administrators.

The educational playing field is changing and its most visible leaders are expected to formulate new game plans. So what can you do to help your district?

In a word, communicate.

Throughout the United States, public school leaders are realizing the bottom-line benefits of communication. Neither a gimmick nor a trend, good, solid communications is a tool that progressive school administrators are using to build community support, pass budget increases, and forge healthy relationships with boards of education.

Historical Context

Public schools reflect the changes in our society. Twenty to thirty years ago research showed that citizens valued a public education. Offspring of the Depression Generation saw the connection between education and economic well-being. During the last ten years, we have seen support wane for public education. Public apathy toward public education is growing. School referendums have seen voter turnout as low as 5%. From our experience in working with school districts, when voter turnout is lower than 30%, referendums are usually defeated.

Funding education has become a greater struggle. Gaining support for spending tax dollars on public schools is more confrontational than ever. In most towns, the largest expenditure of tax dollars is for the public school system. About 20 years ago in a Connecticut district, 25 cents of every dollar spent on public education came from the state. Now it's 4.5 cents. The burden of support has transferred directly to the local taxpayer.

Life is different. Parents and their kids are over-committed. Relationships suffer within the family and the community. And educational institutions suffer because of it.

Issues that challenge superintendents are a function of a new generation of parents. The Generation X parents, born 1963-1978, tend to be demanding and expect immediate results. Electronic mail and voice mail have exacerbated this demand for immediate response and instant satisfaction.

The World War II generation and Baby Boomers, born 1946-1962, were more predictable and dependable in their support of school budgets and capital spending. Now that Generation X has become the majority of parents in our public schools, it is harder to find people willing to roll up their sleeves and work for the system.

Overcoming the Challenges

MACRO TRENDS

- After a two-decade decline, the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey reports schools are returning to the record enrollment numbers at the height of the baby boom
- Apparent grade inflation noted by the College Board in 2001 when 24% of SAT test-takers reported an A average or better, compared with 15% 10 years earlier
- 55% of the public supports increased use of standardized tests*
- 75% of the public favors "holding schools accountable"*
- 77% of the public wants to give states more authority over spending*

*(Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools, 33rd Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll)

Across the nation, even in wealthy communities, we see a divide among people over supporting education. Every district faces its own issues. The challenge of raising test scores required by state and federal governments is one example. Lower student participation in mandated tests can also impact negatively on schools and the community. Yet schools are held accountable and their credibility is closely scrutinized by taxpayers and politicians. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is a well-intentioned, but under-funded mandate that brings with it all the implementation problems of cost and accountability. For the federal government to say that by 2014 all children will attain a certain level in reading and math is easy, but not necessarily realistic in any social context.

In almost all school districts, there is a real issue associated with inadequate funding of special education. The IDEA (special education) grant from the federal government presents enormous challenges to operating budgets.

"No Child Left Behind is a noble idea, but implementation leaves a lot to be desired. It's a public relations problem, an instructional problem and a fiscal problem."

- Superintendent

“We are facing the largest public school enrollment in the history of the United States at the same time we are seeing the largest percentage of teachers and administrators retire. Attracting and retaining high quality teachers and administrators is a huge issue for school systems.”
- Superintendent

School districts are required to meet the educational needs of an ever-growing range of students with special needs without adequate funding. In some parts of the country, enrollment growth translates into a need for space and gaining support for construction.

Board of education membership turnover is another growing problem. One of the major responsibilities of a superintendent is to work with his or her board. Today, superintendents spend inordinate amounts of time on governance and developing their boards. For a superintendent to work with the same board members throughout his or her entire term is rare. Yet for organizations to move forward and improve, management and governance stability is necessary. The relationship between boards of education and superintendents is key. Issues of governance and defining responsibilities demand much of a superintendents' time and energy.

Research shows a positive correlation between school district success and greater continuity of superintendents and boards of education membership. Our nation's shortfall of teachers and administrators is growing. One superintendent competed against 180 applicants for his position in 1984. When he retired in 2004, only 21 candidates applied for the job. Superintendency is not the magnet it once was.

The growing diversity of America's public schools is evident. The American School Board Journal reported that one Iowa school district with fewer than 2,000 students publishes a newsletter written in three languages: English, Spanish and Laotian.

Research shows that one of the best investments a school system can make is in early childhood education. But until proper funding is received from local, state and federal sources, good programs like early childhood education and early literacy will not be able to meet the needs of the total population.

Looking to the Future

Society is in an age that demands timely and easily accessible information. These demands are no different for public schools. School parents are pressed for time and most are technologically savvy. They are accustomed to receiving and sending information electronically via e-mail or checking a website to quickly find the information they need. A successful public school communications program needs a balance of direct communication and interactive features. Direct communication may come in the form of printed newsletters, articles and op-ed pieces in local newspapers. The interactive component may be HTML (electronic) newsletters and a robust district website.

Websites are fast becoming the most important communication vehicle for public schools. However, the educational culture still lags behind in fully utilizing technology. A school district website can:

- Help parents understand how their child is being prepared for the future
- Build and foster good relationships with various constituencies
- Bring down the cost of communicating and channeling relevant information to each of the targeted audiences

Providing information on each district's website about No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – what it is and how the district is addressing it – educates parents, students and community members, and reduces confusion if a public school appears on the NCLB academic warning list. Addressing NCLB on a district website is also a cost-effective way to engage and inform parents, as mandated by the legislation.

Social marketing communications firms that specialize in education, partner with schools and offer key services to work through issues together:

- Short- and long-term communication and community relations planning and implementation
- Communication audits
- Superintendent and Board relations
- Crisis communications
- Board communications via newsletters, press releases, media relations
- Internet development through customized website design for districts and individual schools
- Sustained parent-teacher communication on school improvement and achievement
- School business partnership planning
- Communication workshops and training

The bottom-line benefits these services bring to school districts include:

- Better relationships with the various constituents in a school district, e.g., parents, town/county government leadership, teachers/staff, seniors, and other interest groups
- Passage of capital and/or school improvement referendums through effective design and planning
- Proactive communications with target audiences, instead of reactive and defensive communications
- Helping boards and superintendents interact and work with pro-school/PAC groups
- Maximizing the potential of social marketing collateral and web-based tools to communicate with people
- Helping boards and superintendents understand the value of investing in marketing and public relations for their school district

Three School District Case Studies – An Inside Look at Successful Communication Strategies

Challenge #1: Getting a Bond Referendum Passed

Voters in a middle- and upper-middle class community were divided over school spending issues and defeated an initial attempt to pass a \$22 million high school renovation project. During the 11 years prior to the high school renovation proposal, residents and the Town Council had defeated 26 of 29 requests for improvements to school facilities. Poor communication, a politically weakened school board, and an extremely active anti-spending group contributed to the town's general distrust and apparent indifference to school improvement issues. After more than a decade of delay, the district received notification that the high school would lose its accreditation if improvements outlined in a renovation request were not completed in a timely manner.

Solution:

First Experience Communications researched, planned and executed a fact-based, grassroots community relations campaign to change public opinion.

Research – Through analysis of previous budget requests, an examination of the demographic and socioeconomic factors, and informal interviews with key stakeholders (parents, students, board members), FEC identified major issues and audiences.

Planning and Execution – Key audiences were targeted, beginning with the revitalization of a citizens for education group to assist in reaching the community. FEC worked with group leaders to create a series of informational meetings at each school to serve as forums to expose parents' and residents' concerns and promote a better overall understanding of the benefits of the project. Reading aloud the notification of possible loss of accreditation gained attention and promoted a sense of urgency for moving forward with the project. A follow-up newsletter from the board was created to specifically address issues raised

“Superintendents today are doing more with more kids, more challenges, less money and eroding populace support for public education. Our overriding issue is: How are we going to support public education in the future?”
- Superintendent

“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

at meetings. FEC also created presentations for the board Chair and Superintendent to use at meetings with other interested/affected groups.

Results:

The town forum meetings conducted by FEC facilitators were extremely well attended. One meeting at the high school attracted 700 residents, who toured the facility to examine physical deterioration first-hand. In a record-breaking turnout where over 53% of the town’s registered voters participated versus 32% for the first referendum – the \$17 million base plan was approved. The long-term effects of the high school referendum campaign were evident via changes in the Board of Education’s organizational plan and the community’s sustained interest in educational issues. The board committed resources to a long-term communications plan and created a standing committee dedicated to improving communications with residents. With a clearer understanding of their respective roles, the board Chair (as a communications leader) and the Superintendent of Schools continued to embrace the models they implemented during the referendum, as part of their everyday management functions.

Challenge #2: Improving Community Relations

A regional school district is made up of two towns, each with distinct demographics. One town is home to a large retirement community, giving it a disproportionate senior citizen population that largely vetoed school budget referendums. Serving two towns can make communicating school-related information not only more difficult, but crucial.

When it came time for the Board of Education and administrators to begin the strategic planning process, they turned to FEC to help them gain an understanding of their communities’ perceptions of the school district, and how to create and sustain effective communication with community members.

Solution:

In order to understand the issues that were important to community members and how they

were receiving information about the schools, FEC designed and mailed a survey to each household in both towns. A random follow-up telephone survey was conducted. The surveys were utilized as tools to establish communication and give residents without a direct connection to the schools, such as retirees and households without children, an opportunity to share their thoughts. Many of the survey comments specifically addressed the need for sustained communication between the Board of Education and the communities. Survey responses also indicated what issues residents believed were important to address, including technology proficiency and science curriculum.

Based upon the survey results, a Board of Education newsletter mailed three to four times a year was recommended to deliver consistent information to each household. Topics related to the strategic plan, curriculum, budget, capital improvements and testing. FEC held communication workshops with administrators to help them understand the importance and benefits of establishing open communication and dialogue with community members. Training was provided on how to form relationships with local media to utilize them as a means to deliver accurate school-related information. And, FEC provided ongoing counsel to ensure that important relationships with parent organizations and other community groups were established.

Results:

The communication campaign designed by FEC for the Board of Education and school administrators resulted in both towns approving a \$3.3 million dollar budget increase in the first referendum vote scheduled for the district. It had been several years since a budget was accepted after just one referendum. The school district continued to improve communication by redesigning its district website, applying for a grant that allowed it to hire a school-community liaison, distributing monthly electronic (HTML) newsletters with more individual, school-specific content, and creating an insert with student and teacher accomplishments for a local weekly newspaper.

Challenge #3: Making a District Website a More Effective Communication Tool

A public school district's website lacked the organization and focus it needed to deliver relevant and timely information to the district's key audiences: parents, the community, students, the Board of Education, faculty and staff, civic and government officials, and the media.

The website's navigation was not user-friendly, making it difficult for users to easily find information that was pertinent and helpful to them. The site's content also had more of an administrative focus that delivered internal information and documents. The site did not serve as an effective communication tool for the district.

Solution:

FEC developed and executed a new design and navigation that organized the district's website information, tools and resources according to target audiences. A hierarchy of information was created on the home page, which allowed the district to begin to segment information by audience and then by what needed to be delivered on a district-wide level versus an individual school level. It also separated the internal tools and information, and folded that content into an Intranet for faculty and staff.

The Home Page was organized with links to provide relevant categories such as individual school information, district and board of education information, community news and press room resources, parent and educator information and resources.

Results:

The new district website helped parents align the educational process for their children, helped build and foster good relationships with core constituencies - parents, the community and political leaders - and helped bring down the cost of communicating and channeling relevant information to each of the targeted audiences.

How to Plan Your Future Direction

First Experience Communications has developed a set of questions to help school districts take steps to strengthen public support in their favor. To define your own position and set your strategic communications plan in place, ask yourself:

1. Are your strategic communications and Internet goals aligned with your district's objectives?
2. Do you communicate your district's essential information in a way that reaches your various stakeholders and increases their understanding and involvement in your public schools - including parents, board members, civic leaders, anti-tax groups, students, donors, the media and the community at large?
3. Does your communications strategy include all aspects of a school district's needs, both internally and externally?
4. Have you ever surveyed your constituents (online, phone, focus groups) to uncover their attitudes and specific communication needs?
5. Do you address your leadership decisions in the largest possible organizational context?

Conclusion

School systems must reach out to clearly, simply and accurately communicate with their stakeholder audiences. Awareness is the first essential step in turning the growing national tide of apathy for public school systems. Ongoing communications foster positive relationship building for educational leaders with their constituents. This ultimately translates into long-term support.

An absence of meaningful communications and relationship building, coupled with inadequate funding of public education, will make it nearly impossible for local schools to sustain their current level of services. Additional problems arise when state and federal policy makers pass on the cost of new mandates to the towns.

But public education can be a beacon of optimism to people. We will constantly be challenged to change, reinvent and take a different approach to education. Students need to learn independence and how to synthesize as the world becomes more complex. It is an exciting time and a challenging one.

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

About Ira W. Yellen, APR, President & CEO

A believer in lifelong learning, Yellen carved a unique marketing niche in the public education arena by creating communication models for public school districts and community colleges in Connecticut. Currently, he counsels over fifty school systems in community relations, budget and referendum issues, technology, curriculum improvement, diversity and inter-district issues.

A recipient of the 2001 National Distinguished Leadership Award, he dedicates his time and energy, along with his agency's talent and efforts, to promote literacy, pre-school programs, adult education and programs to feed the poor. As chronicler and fundraiser for the Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island restoration project in the 1980s, his entrepreneurial skills helped raise more than \$100,000 for the preservation of these important national monuments and created the national youth campaign for schools.

A graduate of Pratt Institute, he began his career as a designer of residential renovation projects in Brooklyn, New York. While working with Margaret Mead in the early 1970s, he explored the relationships that intertwine commerce, civic institutions, society and human nature – a perspective that continues to influence his work today.

About First Experience Communications (FEC)

First Experience Communications serves three core market segments: education, business-to-business and non-profits. FEC has been helping school districts strengthen relationships within their communities for more than twenty years. FEC provides high-level counsel in public relations and communication to superintendents, educational leaders and boards of education members. FEC provides counsel on issues from helping to get bond referendums passed to No Child Left Behind and school district websites. From early childhood programs to higher education, FEC has immersed itself in a holistic approach to identifying educational issues and meeting challenges. The company's services help

educators and administrators connect and form bonds with all their various audiences, including parents, board members, civic leaders, anti-tax groups, students, donors, the media and the community at large. The common element for success is the same in each case – strategic communications planning. Here are some of the tools and services FEC uses to help clients improve communications and win community support.

Marketing

- Websites
- eNewsletters
- Community-based surveying and research
- Direct marketing

Communication

- Strategic counsel
- Audits
- Crisis
- Workshops and training

Public Relations

- Media relations and coaching
- Editorial services
- Press kits

If you have questions about this paper or want to discuss an issue related to public education, feel free to contact us:

First Experience Communications
3011 Main Street
Glastonbury, CT 06033
860-657-3815
1-800-426-5170
www.firstexperience.com

Ira W. Yellen, President & Senior Counsel
iwyellen@firstexperience.com