

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Leveraging Outside Forces

How to successfully manage people outside the school

No school is an island. Schools are community centers—focal points for happy celebrations and civic pride. They are also lightning rods for adults who are deeply and emotionally invested in the future of their children.

The effective principal steers the school on a steady course between these two poles. Keeping an eye on the school's mission and vision, while respecting diverse viewpoints, helps principals keep all stakeholders focused on students' best interests, especially in a learning-centered manner.

This section explores the ins and outs of cultivating external stakeholders, leveraging their resources, warding off disgruntlement, and saying no to offered assistance that's well-intentioned but doesn't contribute to learning.



BUILDING A STAKEHOLDER COMMUNITY

Many principals think of the school community in tiers or circles, assigning students, families, and school staff to the closest level and working from there. Though external stakeholders don't merit top priority at every moment, they can be valuable players in promoting and strengthening a culture of learning.

Choose Key Stakeholders

Principals agree: Everyone is a potential stakeholder, but not all bring equal value to learners. Applying an objective approach to critiquing and cultivating key partners ensures alliances that enhance the learning atmosphere.

- Cast a wide net when considering external stakeholders. Parents and local businesses might be most obvious, but consider grandparents and extended family, neighborhood residents, law

enforcement, business groups, lawmakers, alumni, media, social services, adult fraternities and sororities, STEM organizations, children's clubs, and district officials and school board members.

- Stick closest to those who understand the school's vision and mission and those who see an asset-based institution devoted to great learning. Be crystal clear about expectations and be sure that all offers of help fit with school systems and structures.
- Consider aligning with people and organizations who offer fresh insights and new perspectives on education, such as researchers and institutions of higher education.
- Leverage the resources and experience of stakeholders to enrich classroom units and school programs. Align their contributions with school goals and curricula, and be sure that visits don't disrupt academic schedules.

NOTES

Which student populations are being served by partners?
Which student populations are not currently being served?

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What are some events to which we could invite stakeholders?

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Key Considerations:

If you can help children lead better lives outside of school, they'll do better academically inside the school.

- Know when and how to say no. Accept only the offers of help that make a positive difference in learning.
- Share good or bad news in a straightforward and timely manner, before stakeholders hear it from the media or a gossipy neighbor who distorts the facts.



Reflection Questions:

- Does an offer of help benefit and respect all students?
- Have our community partnerships helped us meet our goals for the year?
- What were some successes?
- What were the challenges?
- What stakeholder efforts are worth stopping, starting, or continuing?

Make Transparency Work for Students

Build an understanding of the school's goals and purpose by sharing the ups—and even the downs—of school life.

- Invite stakeholders to school events. Showcase students as achievers with talents, while also encouraging stakeholders to align their plans with school goals.
- Invite business partners to an annual breakfast to remind them of the school's mission, vision, goals, and focus on learning.
- Because stakeholders have busy schedules, consider replacing or augmenting formal programs with informal “chat and chews” or seizing opportunities for conversations and information-sharing in all settings.

should be both clearly articulated and in line with your strategy.

- Be succinct to ward off misinterpretation of your intent.
- Be transparent about the school's standing and its goals. Share data and clear messaging about the vision in order to help stakeholders see their support within the context of boosting achievement and benefiting all students.
- Institutionalize structures that reinforce the belief in school inclusion and diversity. Create and communicate rules to prevent situations that violate any student's sense of belonging.
- Carefully weigh any drawbacks before approving fundraising requests from external stakeholders that would benefit only certain subgroups of students.

PROMOTING DIVERSITY, AVOIDING CONFLICT

Today's principals strive to deliver excellence for every child in every class, but that doesn't always align with the interests of stakeholders focused on distinct students or groups. Principals promote a culture of respect for diversity and access to high-quality education for all students of all abilities.

Maintain Unequivocal Messaging

Inclusion starts with carefully crafted messaging. Your communications

One new principal at a distressed school scaled back nearly all school events organized by outsiders, calling them well-intentioned but exhausting. The shift helped teachers refocus on teaching, while conversations about the change alerted partners to the school's true purpose. A church and a women's club with longtime ties to the school continued their supportive activities without staff help because its members believed in the clearly articulated vision.

Deflect Opposition

Confrontation is almost inevitable in a principal's career. Veteran principals have learned that even the angriest parent or community member has the concerns of children at heart.

- Maintain a consistent procedure for dealing with oppositional voices. Start with transparency about the school's needs and goals, and conclude with a listening ear that shows understanding of opponents' valid concerns.
- Establish tight structures and communicate the purpose behind all activities clearly to ward off potential disgruntlement. Constantly remind participants that teaching and learning are the primary goals.
- Talk to people at every opportunity. Building relationships from the start helps smooth the bumps when opposition does arise.

DELIVERING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Communications that build relationships are staked on concise messaging and effective delivery. Sharing the goal of raising good citizens and strong scholars helps convince stakeholders that the work benefits everyone, including themselves.

- Communicate uniform messaging in as many formats as possible, reaching stakeholders where they are.
- Thank-you letters, invitations, and tokens of appreciation go a long way. Offer student artwork for a pizza shop to display, for example, and model the effort to shape students into contributing members of the community.

- Use regular newsletters to communicate the school's belief system. When necessary, address the school's response to moments that might have raised concerns in the community.
- Share good news and photos with the district communications office to amplify the message.
- Enlist the power of visuals. A Facebook post showing a teacher holding an umbrella to keep students dry during a rainy dismissal projects a message of caring. •

Related Topics:

In addition to the ideas addressed in this section, here are some other topics for consideration related to managing people:

- Keeping small tussles from ballooning into major incidents;
- Building alliances that keep the focus on students;
- Balancing openness with school safety;
- Saying no but keeping the door open; and
- Building a consistent social media presence.

NEXT STEPS

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