

Combat Cyberbullying With Communication

Every student at Seven Oaks Elementary in Lacey, Washington, can recite the school's motto: FRED—Fairness, Respect, Empathy, and Dignity. But students don't always act with FRED, especially when they're online, says principal Ron Sisson.

"Cyberbullying is happening younger and younger," says Sisson, who's navigated several cyberbullying cases in his school. "We're handing technology to students at younger and younger ages, but we're not arming them with things to think about before you post or hit send."

Most schools have bullying policies in place, but cyberbullying—using the Internet, cell phones, video game systems, or other technology to post hurtful text or images—poses unique challenges for school leaders.

"It gets harder to decipher conflict and bullying when you're talking about social media," says Jill Ramsay, counselor at Midway Elementary School in Des Moines, Washington. "What may start out as conflict—how does that turn into cyberbullying? How do you teach kids the difference?"

Further, cyberbullying doesn't typically happen at school. It can be done anonymously and quickly, and is touchy to discuss with parents. For principals, one key to combating cyberbullying is smart, honest communication with students, parents, and community members.

What You Can Do to Combat Cyberbullying This Week

- **Update your school** social media policies to clearly address cyberbullying—against both students and staff.
- **Review your student handbook** to make sure the process for reporting cyberbullying is clear. Include instructions for documenting online incidents, such as taking a screen shot or printing a message thread.

This Month

- **Anonymously survey your students.** "We ask some education questions—like, how do you define bullying? But we also get down to asking: Who are the two or three kids most likely to bully?" says Sisson. "We can tell teachers to keep an eye on these students. Then, you can bring that information to your discussions with parents."

- **Outline expectations** for conflict management in a series of schoolwide assemblies or discussions with classes.
- **Enlist students** to create an anti-bullying slogan, online buttons, or banners

This Quarter

- **Organize parent classes on digital citizenship.** "It takes the parents being on board to try to stop [cyberbullying]," says Amanda Nickerson, director of the Alberti Center for Prevention of Bullying Abuse and School Violence. Classes should cover monitoring kids' social media use and teaching kids appropriate strategies, she says.

Sisson tries to frame interactions with parents in a positive, rather than accusatory, way. "My experience has been that the parents aren't even aware that these interactions had occurred," he says. "It's an opportunity for them to step in and work with their child."

This Year

- **Partner with teachers** to weave digital citizenship lessons into your school's curriculum.
- **Model positive interactions** with students online and encourage staff to do the same.
- **Share your successes.** It's easy for the media and the public to focus only on tragic bullying incidents, which Sisson says is tough to counter.

"That's the hardest issue we deal with in the school system. The 'Bully' movie, these media stories—many of them are isolated incidents. For the most part, when schools have bullying incidents, we deal with them," he says.

Share your anti-bullying program online in a blog post, or tweet about it. Publicize your parent classes, or collaborate with local law enforcement to hold a town hall-style meeting, and invite your community to take part.

Visit www.naesp.org/bullying for more resources.

Meredith Barnett is associate writer/editor at NAESP.



This special edition features the top articles from the last five issues of PRincipal Communicator. Consider it your essential back-to-school communication guide.

PRincipal Tips

Strengthen your base of parent volunteers with these ideas.

- **Explain the variety of opportunities** and be specific about how parents can help.
- **Invite parents to fill out a volunteer form** when they attend open house programs or teacher conferences.
- **Find a reliable parent** to serve as volunteer coordinator. This person could develop a database of information from volunteer forms, arrange for training sessions in using equipment and schedule work times.
- **Provide a comfortable, friendly space** for volunteers to work, with chairs, tables and supplies. This environment encourages parents to build good relationships.
- **Stress confidentiality** about students.
- **Communicate regularly** through your newsletter, website, and automated calling/email system.
- **Show your appreciation** through an event such as a thank-you luncheon, a gift made by students, or a gift card provided by a local business partner.

From NSPRA resource files

Combat Misperceptions With Positive Messages

As a school leader, you know the facts about what goes on in your building. But outside audiences may not—and when facts and perceptions clash, communication gets a lot trickier.

Say your school district has an issue—a highly publicized bullying incident, for example. Parents, public officials, and community members might perceive that *every* school in that district has a severe bullying problem. It's up to you to combat that misconception.

Facts and perceptions can differ on other important issues such as budget cuts, test scores, and student safety. The facts may be clear to you, but your community members' perceptions can tell a different story. You need a strategy, beginning with a message, to address them.

Budget Cuts

Fact: State budget shortfalls have resulted in significant cuts to public education funding. Less state money has led to program and staff cuts, as well as tax increases in many districts.

Perception: Since companies have had to cut back, schools should, too. School districts are to blame for higher taxes. Despite those extra taxes, schools still appear to be performing poorly.

Message: Make the case that an investment in public schools is also a good investment for children and the community. As a building leader, you can personalize budget cuts. Speak in terms of how children in your school are affected.

Test Scores

Fact: Legislatures are increasing the frequency and difficulty of standardized testing in the name of accountability.

Perception: School officials complain because they don't want to be held accountable. School ratings based on test scores determine the quality of education that the school provides.

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Combat Misperceptions

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Message: Emphasize that testing can be helpful, but it's only *one* of the tools that can be used to measure student success. Strategies to promote that message might include writing a short note in your newsletter or speaking about testing at a parent-teacher meeting.

School Safety

Fact: Legislation and parent expectations place a great deal of pressure on schools to address or solve safety issues such as bullying, violence, or drugs. It is also a fact that schools cannot guarantee a child's safety, they can only create the safest possible environment.

Perception: No expense should be spared to protect students. Or, on the opposite end of the spectrum, schools overreact to national events and spend too much on safety.

Message: Promote the idea that safety is not a goal, it is a non-negotiable for your school and every school in the district. To that end, consider doing a safety audit of your school. And if an incident occurs in your school, first focus on the immediate safety of students and then address corrective actions to be taken.

Personnel

Fact: No employee screening or evaluation system is perfect. Laws that protect employees are very specific in outlining what

schools can and cannot do regarding staff misdeeds.

Perception: School districts and unions protect bad employees. Many people also think they deserve to know everything about an employee incident because they're parents or taxpayers.

Message: In any situation involving employee misconduct, your message to parents and community members can be that your school's obligation is to the children, and behavior that compromises student safety will not be tolerated. This statement stops short of accusing anyone of a misdeed. If you're faced with an employee misdeed, first gather the facts. Before making any statements, confer with district administrators or legal advisors. In addition, you should anticipate parent questions, even if you can't answer all of them.

Build Positive Relations

Even though perceptions may differ significantly from the facts, recognizing the reasons for those differences and creating a single message to address perceptions will go a long way toward building positive relations with your parents and school community.

Tim Carroll is public information director for Allen (Texas) Independent School District.

DATES TO OBSERVE

September

Hispanic Heritage Month

Sept. 17

Constitution Day

Sept. 19

Talk Like a Pirate Day

Sept. 24

National Punctuation Day

October

National Principals Month

Connected Educators Month

Bullying Prevention Month

National Dental Hygiene Month

Oct. 1

Child Health Day

Oct. 1-7

Sukkot

Jewish Holy Week

Oct. 5

World Teachers' Day

Oct. 7-13

Fire Prevention Week

Oct. 8

Thanksgiving Day in Canada

Columbus Day

Oct. 15-19

School Lunch Week

Oct. 16

Dictionary Day

Daniel Webster's birthday

Oct. 22-26

National School Bus Safety Week

Oct. 24

United Nations Day

Oct. 31

Halloween

National UNICEF Day

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Avoiding Email Miscues

A recent survey by The Creative Group indicates that nearly 80 percent of corporate executives polled admitted making a mistake in sending email. Here are several tips to remember when sending work emails:

Give it your undivided attention. Avoid multitasking when sending or responding to important or sensitive messages.

Save the distribution list for last. When writing a confidential or sensitive message, wait until it's complete before selecting the recipients. This will help you avoid sending out an incomplete thought or selecting the wrong individuals.

Review your message on a big screen. When sending an important email, it is better to view it on a full-size computer screen instead of on a phone or tablet.

Check attachments. Insert any documents—and confirm they're the right ones—as soon as you refer to them in the message.

Keep it professional. Keep in mind this nugget of wisdom from a veteran NSPRA member: "If you don't want to see it on the front page of a newspaper, don't put it in an email!"

From NSPRA resource files

QUOTABLE

"To understand is hard. Once one understands, action is easy."

—Sun Yat-sen

Communication Checklist

Every decision you make, whether it's about policy or practice, has public relations implications for your school. The same is true of decisions that are handed down to you from the central office and district governing board.

Stakeholders want and deserve to know about key decisions in your school that affect them. It's important for principals to remember that a communication void will always be filled by someone. Make sure it's filled by someone presenting accurate, factual information—you or a knowledgeable staff member.

When determining how to communicate about important issues, consider these questions:

- What is the issue or problem?** First, discuss the decision with your leaders (staff, parents, other principals, district administrators or community leaders, depending on the significance of the issue). Clearly identify the core issue or problem to be addressed.
- How will the issue be framed?** Consider how the issue should be outlined and how it will be presented to stakeholders—staff, parents, students, key communicators.
- How does this issue or problem affect other issues?** Consider what impact a particular issue or problem might have on other, ongoing issues in your school and the entire district.
- What stakeholder groups need to know about the issue?** Identify the primary audiences for information about the issue. In other words: Who will be affected by an issue or decision, and who will be upset if they don't hear about it from you?
- What are the key messages that we will communicate about the issue?** Identify the most important ideas you want stakeholders to know about this issue.
- How will we communicate?** Identify the methods and strategies to be used to inform identified stakeholders.
- What is the timeline to release information or respond to the issue?** Set up a schedule listing when you will communicate to each stakeholder group.
- Who will be the main spokesperson, or spokespersons, on this issue?** Identify the most appropriate person to present the information. In many cases, this will be you. But you may want to include other "key leaders" of stakeholder groups as primary information providers.

From the NSPRA resource School Public Relations: Building Confidence in Education, available for purchase on the NSPRA website: www.nspr.org.