

By Kaylen Tucker, Associate Editor
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Principals are natural public relations officers because everything they do is geared toward increasing the capacities of their schools, students, and communities, creating a perpetual well of good news to share. When thinking about what it means to do good PR—positively influencing perception or reputation—principals should consider what they already do to lead effective learning communities as a part of their outreach efforts. Here are some unique ideas from the 2008 National Distinguished Principals of ways to spread a positive school message by increasing parent and community involvement.

Involve parents in academic standards. Engaging parents early and often can go a long way toward assuring them of your school's commitment to providing the highest quality learning experience. For example, Sherrie Bayles of Bernice Young Elementary School in Springdale, Arkansas, uses report cards as an opportunity to communicate directly with parents. "Each semester before sending each student's report card home, I look over the student's progress. I review each performance area and write positive comments regarding their progress and challenge those that need to focus," she says. "I've had many comments from parents and students about how 'cool' it is and how the students feel special when they open up their report cards and see comments from the principal."

Sandra Kent, principal of Wilson Elementary School in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, engages parents in improving test scores and attendance by providing "data postcards" that "celebrate the successes of our previous year's data and outline our goals for the upcoming year." Kent's school keeps parents involved and knowledgeable about standards by periodically sending a data postcard,

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which is "a note detailing our attendance percentage rate, how it relates to our goals, and tips for keeping up the good work to achieve our goals."

Patricia E. Brady, principal of St. Alban Roe Catholic School in Wildwood, Missouri, also aims to keep parents knowledgeable about academic standards and the curriculum by distributing the Parent Guide to the Curriculum, which "contains a copy of the curriculum for each subject at the child's current grade level, as well as age-appropriate extension activities that they are encouraged to do with their child to reinforce learning." Each parent receives a copy of the guide at the beginning of the school year, which helps to maintain transparency about what their children are learning in school.

Consider the members of your school community. Diverse communities provide schools with both the challenge and the opportunity to develop innovative communication strategies. For example, Edith Scheuerman Elementary School in Garden City, Kansas, is the district's elementary site for hearing-impaired students and, according to principal Sandy K. Almos, "this and other special education programs help us celebrate and address the diverse needs of all students." The whole school learns sign language and "through a local business grant and service group donations, we started the Tigerific Sign Choir, which includes about 40 students. The choir practices after school and performs throughout the community."

At Cleveland Elementary School in Fayetteville, Georgia, community involvement is cemented through the goal of language acquisition for the Spanish-speaking population. Principal Jean Preston Miller explains, "To increase the academic achievement of our Spanish-speaking students, we formed a partnership called Amigos" in which students from a high school work with Spanish-speaking students each Friday morning.

Parents are involved in the project as well, as they help celebrate the success of the program each May. "We recently began the first phase of expanding our partnership with a local church to assist us as we implement a weekly after-school tutorial program for our Spanish-speaking students, as well as informational programs for their parents," says Miller.

The American School of The Hague, led by Mary E. Russman, is another school that takes into account its unique population. The families in Russman's transient school population move often without being able to take all their personal belongings with them. "Rather than having perfectly good things going to waste, a parent opened her garage for storage until new teachers or new families arrive. The new arrivals take what they need with a promise to 'pay it forward' when they leave," says Russman. "This small effort plays a big part in a positive transition process."

Principals are charged first with leading effective learning communities, but any practicing principal will tell you that they are increasingly expected to manage other nontraditional duties, such as communication and public relations. However, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. The principals profiled in this column illustrate that good school public relations begins with what you already do to improve teaching and learning, including involving parents in academic standards and valuing diverse communities. ■

These unique ideas, and others, appear in the latest edition of *Ideas That Work*, a collection of more than 200 tips from the 2008 National Distinguished Principals that you can use in your school. You may purchase your copy through the National Principals Resource Center at www.naesp.org.