Parent Connection: A School Marketing Effort that Works

For the past several years, the Sheboygan Area School District (SASD) has faced declining enrollment due, in part, to Wisconsin’s public school open enrollment. With an increase in the number of choices parents have for their child’s education, they are becoming savvy shoppers. Consequently, schools must be prepared to handle requests for information, tours, and visits from potential new families with a high level of customer service. They also must be proactive in promoting their strengths in academics, programs, and parent involvement.

The process of public school choice in SASD, and the state’s open enrollment program that began with the 1998-1999 school year, presents Lincoln-Erdman Elementary School with competition and the challenge of keeping the kids living in their attendance area. It also offers the ability to recruit kids from other cities.

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The solution was to form a new type of parent team called the Parent Connection Marketing Committee. The committee was to serve as a “welcome wagon” by reaching out to families with younger children living within the school neighborhood and to new families moving into the neighborhood. The focus would be on parent-to-parent contact in order to get the word out about the great things happening at Lincoln-Erdman. When the principal gives tours and talks to families, it’s propaganda. But when committee members talk to parents, it’s real. Parent-to-parent contact develops a much stronger connection.

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The Committee at Work

The committee comprises parents who represent different attendance areas, or subdivisions, within the elementary school’s boundaries. Teachers, other SASD staff, and community representatives also participate in the group.

During their first year, committee members set high expectations for themselves and what they hoped to accomplish. They identified multiple opportunities throughout the school year to reach out to new families. To raise awareness and promote enrollment in the school’s new kindergarten program for 4-year-olds, the team sent out an informational letter and a survey to gauge families’ interest in enrolling in the program. Two weeks after the letters were sent out, committee members followed up with personal phone calls to each family. The committee wanted to find a way to connect with parents and talk to them about the wonderful things happening at Lincoln-Erdman.

Committee members sought to be a resource for parents who had not yet decided where to send their children to school. As a result, they have been able to attract students earlier and retain them throughout their elementary school years.

The group targets families with 3-year-olds for special mailings and personal invitations to attend such school events as the Halloween party and Santa breakfast. The new families are offered tours by the principal or a Parent Connection team member. Any costs to attend the events are waived for potential new families.

To encourage enrollment in the regular kindergarten program, the committee sends out two invitation letters for a kindergarten open house: one to families who plan to enroll and one to families who are considering enrolling elsewhere. The letters, again, are followed up by personal phone calls.

Marketing Materials

The first long-term project the group tackled was creating a brochure highlighting the assets of Lincoln-Erdman. The end result was a full-color tri-fold...
brochure. The brochures are distributed to several local real estate agencies and the town hall. They are also included in welcome packets for new families.

In keeping up with new technology, the Parent Connection Marketing Committee thought it was important to use new techniques to capture parents’ attention. Using their brochure as a guide, the group laid out a plan to create a DVD using pictures, video clips, music, and testimonials to promote the school. The video clips made the DVD more personal and emphasized the parent-to-parent contact they strive for. The final production is 13 minutes long and is distributed as a package with the brochure.

The committee’s efforts do not end here. The committee is enhancing the school’s Web site to make it easier to use for both current and prospective parents. The team also is gathering information on middle and high school alumni of Lincoln-Erdman to use their success to help validate the great education received at Lincoln-Erdman Elementary School.

Lincoln-Erdman, along with the other 24 SASD schools, has a contact person who is in charge of submitting at least one press release per month to the communications chairperson for the district. Releases are e-mailed to three internal media outlets—the student-run cable channel, our student-run radio station, and our district Web site—and to four local media outlets, including three newspapers and one local radio station.

The district has experienced great success in generating free publicity through media releases. The releases are frequently printed in the local papers and some are expanded into feature stories. Since all of the releases are posted on the district Web site and archived for six months, it’s easy for new families to learn a lot about recent activities and successes in the district. In the future, the district plans to have each school’s media releases automatically updated on their school homepage as another way to keep families informed and involved in the school’s success.

The Parent Connection Marketing Committee has served as a pilot program, and now two other schools have started their own committees. “Lincoln-Erdman has led the way for school marketing efforts in the Sheboygan Area School District with overwhelming support from their involved and enthusiastic parents and staff,” said superintendent Joseph M. Sheehan. “They represent their school and our district very well.”

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Lori Biebel and Andrea Haen are co-chairs of the Lincoln-Erdman Parent Connection Marketing Committee.

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NEW FROM THE NAESP LEADERSHIP ACADEMY!
A COMPREHENSIVE WORKSHOP PACKAGE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS

NAESP has a new comprehensive workshop package based on the six standards outlined in the NAESP publication, Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do.

The workshop package includes:
• A facilitator’s guide with pre-work assignments, suggested schedules, talking points, activities, PowerPoint presentations, video segments, participant handouts, and resources for delivering seven full-day workshop modules — an introductory module, and one module for each of the six standards.
• Ten copies of the Leading Early Childhood Communities publication.

Sessions are designed to engage participants in activities that will strengthen their understanding of the early learning continuum, serving children from birth through the start of fourth grade. They will learn why the continuum is so important and develop strategies for incorporating early learning into their own learning communities.

The content is appropriate for presentation by state and district groups providing professional development for principals, but can be equally effective for individual principals to use with staff members to ensure that their school learning communities incorporate a focus on early learning principles and practices.

For more information on this and other professional development workshop guides, or to inquire about facilitator training and assistance, contact the NAESP Leadership Academy at 1-800-386-2377.