

Communicat That Conquers Divides





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Emphasize your school's mission and impact instead of joining ideological debates

BY BARBARA M. HUNTER

In his 1965 ballad “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” Bob Dylan sang about the state of upheaval in society: “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.” I suspect that most principals would agree with Dylan’s sentiment and would predict that today’s ideological storms will stay part of the weather pattern affecting schools for quite some time.

Whether it’s parent anger about COVID-19 safety measures such as masks, quarantines, and vaccines, or community conflict over misguided beliefs about the teaching of critical race theory in schools, your leadership role as principal is more important than ever—and just as difficult, if not more so.

In a time of likely community divisiveness on multiple hot-button issues, there are several communication practices to consider as you work to bridge the divide, move your school communities forward, and continue to deliver an engaging and relevant education to all children:

Become the voice of reason by rising above warring factions. Today’s rancor can reach a fever pitch and create deep divisions among stakeholders. In your communications, draw upon the tenets of your school’s strengths—namely, equipping students to thrive and lead in a multicultural society that welcomes diverse views and people.

Dr. Julie Sweetland, senior adviser at the Frameworks Institute, advises educators to not become part of “us vs. them” arguments. Instead, rise above unwinnable conflicts to provide a loftier, more inspirational view of the power of public education in your school. Focus on what your school is doing rather than spending time defending what it is not—for example, it is probably *not* teaching whatever people think critical race theory might be.

Your teachers and staff are the most credible sources of information about what's happening in your building because they live it every day.

Daniels Run Elementary School in Fairfax, Virginia, for example, clearly states the school's mission on its website: "At Daniels Run, we empower students to develop themselves, inspire others, and impact society in a positive way." Another example comes from the Creighton Elementary School District in Phoenix: "Creighton neighborhood schools inspire adventurous thinkers, collaborative learners, and kindhearted leaders."

When faced with unfair accusations and angry parents, principals can lean on their vision statements to offer a framework for why their school makes certain decisions. If you don't have a vision statement, this is a great time to start creating one with input from your stakeholders. Bringing a school community together to uncover its common beliefs for public education can be especially beneficial for early-career principals who need to develop positive relationships.

Understand the realities of your influence and messages. Social scientists have determined that the No. 1 predictor of what people believe is how often they hear it. Whether parents in your community lean left or right, they tend to pay attention to information sources that reinforce their strongly held beliefs. Bottom line? Don't waste time trying to convince otherwise inconvincible parents. Instead, set your goals on focusing communication to the vast majority in the middle.

The core of this messaging should again focus on your school's strengths and stories of those strengths. For example, a teacher who organized a fundraising drive to support Afghan refugees demonstrates your school's commitment to caring for all students, as well as creating a safe learning space no matter where students are born.

Focus on transparency amid the noise. In many schools, social media has become an easy outlet for the anger and frustration expressed by parents and citizens. It's hard to read some of the nasty comments hurled at principals and teachers. Any post, even on an unrelated topic, can be overtaken by the "antis" (anti-mask, anti-vaccine, anti-CRT, etc.).

While your inclination might be to avoid posting anything on social media, remember that some of those individuals might not live in your community. One district deals with negative social media comments by reminding families of the terms of use for its Facebook and Twitter feeds, which include rules to prevent spam, avoid

repeating the same comment multiple times, and keep comments on topic.

If blatant misinformation is posted, you can correct it or wait to see if a parent or another citizen steps in to provide a balance. A good tactic is to use your school's social media accounts only for posting positive stories, and use other methods of communication such as newsletters or phone calls to share information on controversial issues.

Tap into the power of internal communications. Your teachers and staff are the most credible sources of information about what's happening in your building because they live it every day. When you are ready to send a newsletter or other communication to parents, show it to internal stakeholders first.

This simple strategy shows that you consider them to be critical partners in the school's mission. It also allows teachers and staff to become familiar with information before parents have a chance to call or email with questions. Treating internal stakeholders as the ambassadors they are will pay off in extraordinary ways, including their feeling more valued and engaged.

In addition to sending them communications first, be sure to consistently emphasize two or three key messages about your school's core values. This could happen as part of a faculty meeting in which you acknowledge the rancor among stakeholders and equip teachers and staff with the same strategies you use. Encourage them not to engage in arguments or debates with parents, but instead to share consistent messages focusing on positive stories of success.

Conversely, your faculty and staff can also provide a finger on the pulse of what's happening in the school community. Set aside 10 minutes at your faculty meetings to ask the question: "What are you hearing, and why is it important to teaching and learning in our school?"

Stay away from buzzwords and develop "sticky" messages. Strong emotions can be triggered by words and terms such as CRT, mask mandates, anti-vax, and so on. Avoid using them in writing or speaking. It's even better if you can develop a message that's meaningful and memorable, or "sticky." The Kearney RI School District in Kearney, Missouri, for example, uses the slogan "Mask up because it adds up."

"The key moment when it came to messaging was when we had a moment of clarity that even though there was no mask 'mandate,' there was definitely a quarantine mandate," says Ray Weikal, the district's director of communications and community relations. "We knew that we would have to quarantine more students and staff if

there were unmasked individuals in our buildings. So, we shifted away from the whole debate about the effectiveness of masking and focused on the message that masks were needed to keep schools open.”

A video produced by the district explains in clear, simple terms the power of masking and keeping students in school. “I’ve also stopped using the word ‘mandate’ as much as possible,” Weikal adds. “It’s a hot-button word that just gets folks riled up. I use ‘universal indoor masking’ instead.”

Engage parents and the school community only when they have authentic influence on decisions. An engaged school community creates a sense of belonging and encourages responsibility in each stakeholder for student outcomes, says Kathy Leslie, author of *The Politics of Authentic Engagement*. “Engagement strategies help participants put their viewpoints, as well as the reasoning behind those perspectives, on the table and seek insights from others in order to refine thinking to help resolve a common issue of the group.”

Not every school decision needs extensive input. As a rule of thumb, seek engagement when an issue impacts a large number of families and staff—for example, a building renovation, a change in policy, or the renaming of the school. A valuable benefit of authentic engagement is that participants become natural ambassadors in explaining how decisions are made. Even if some participants don’t agree with the outcome of the decision, they will likely vouch for the transparent process that got them there.

Once you are ready to engage your parents, staff, and community, clearly communicate expectations about the outcome. How will you use the input? What is your promise to them in the process? The International Association for Public Participation offers a handy tool, the Spectrum of Public Participation, to use as a guide for clarifying and managing expectations.

Most schools and school districts fall within the “Consult” or “Involve” levels of engagement on IAPP’s matrix. The goal at the Consult level is to obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions. At the Involve level, the goal is to work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.

Both levels of engagement require feedback to stakeholders on how their input influences a decision. This is often overlooked in the engagement process, and skipping the feedback loop with stakeholders—especially those who took the time to participate—sets the stage for frustration, distrust, and lower participation rates in future engagement efforts.

Core Concepts: Communication

- **Communication best practices can help administrators bridge ideological divides to deliver a quality education to all children.**
- **Emphasize your school’s strengths and mission to help students thrive in a multicultural society to rise above any “us vs. them” arguments.**
- **Share communications with teachers and other internal stakeholders first to get their feedback and make them the ambassadors of your school’s messaging.**
- **Engage parent perspectives when they have actual influence on the outcomes to seek solutions in concert with the community transparently.**

Continue to celebrate your school’s many successes. Don’t forget to stop and celebrate the courage and efforts of those around you. It’s been a difficult two years, and storms like these are predicted to continue. Outward celebrations of success are a sure sign that you recognize the toll that community conflict takes on your faculty and staff. In addition to food and festivities, a personal note to each of your teachers and staff is a gesture that will be deeply appreciated. ●

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