Telling Your Story

A Communications Guide for School Boards

By Nora Carr & Glenn Cook
Introduction

School board members have one mission: to provide the best education possible for all children. You do this by making decisions that affect every important aspect of our K-12 public education system, governing a $432 billion industry for a pittance.

And yet, negative messages about school boards and public education abound in the media, which tends to cover stories of board dysfunction or controversy or frame public schools as “failing.” That’s because we’ve let others tell our story and define the agenda for public education.

We hear that public education should run more like a business, and that schools with struggling students should convert to charters or close, or be given a tax-supported vouchers to religious-based schools.

We know many businesses refuse to operate in the neighborhoods and outlying areas we serve, and that children are so much more than the sum of their test scores. The “run it like a business mantra” also puts hard-won fights for creating democratic and socially just schools at risk.

How can you change that perception? By telling your stories — of how your board is making a difference, of how your district is improving student achievement, of how public education matters in your community.

Talking about your board’s goals and priorities for improving the district is not, in and of itself, a topic that will interest the public, the media, or your critics. But showing how those goals and priorities have led to improvements in student achievement can make a difference.

Simple demographic shifts underscore why we need more proactive storytelling about why locally controlled public schools are so important. An aging population and other trends mean fewer U.S. adults have school-age children.

In terms of impact, this means public schools can do a great job of teaching students and communicating with parents, and still miss 70 percent of the people upon whose support they depend. Lacking relevant, first-hand knowledge, voters are going to rely on news coverage, neighborhood gossip, water cooler discussions, and other personal experiences to fill the gap.

As a result, simply doing a good job is no longer good enough. We have to do a good job, and tell parents and the public about it — on a daily basis. Does your community understand how your board’s decisions set the stage for gains in student achievement? Do your business leaders care about the impact that your decisions have on their bottom lines? Are you showing your mayor and your county and state leaders how your local leadership is leading to dramatic improvements in your public schools?

The reality is that public education today is an incredibly complex human enterprise, one that simply defies many of our most coveted business maxims.

This toolkit does not attempt to give you everything you need for a solid communications program. It is designed to spur conversations by your board and district administrators about ways to tell the story of school board leadership and public education. Better public support for public schools is possible, but it requires courageous leadership and a strategic approach that views communications as a never-ending campaign.

It is time to tell your story.
Chapter 1:  
Set the Record Straight

For far too long, educators have allowed others to set the public’s agenda for public schools. Understandably, many feel beaten down by the nasty, anti-teacher, anti-board, and anti-public school rhetoric and legislation ricocheting across the country.

When public school opponents split the board, parents, teachers, central office administrators, and principals into warring factions, they win. When educators and school officials unite around a shared concern about the best interest of children, they create a powerful force for change.

The key is to focus on areas of agreement and set aside issues that create the greatest conflict. This can be extraordinarily difficult. However, going into battle with kinks in your armor is foolish in today’s brutal political climate. Strategists, pundits, and reporters will leverage any perceived weakness for maximum benefit, highlighting dissent and skewering any hint of hypocrisy.

Three Things You Can Do

We live in a world in which facts often don’t matter, suspicion is high, and the economy has undermined consumer and national confidence. Not surprisingly, the notion of doing the public’s business for the public good feels as outdated as a 1950s sitcom.

Yet that’s precisely what school boards do. We need to take more pride in our accomplishments and more care in how we conduct the public’s business.

Here are three things you can do:

Choose your words carefully: Rhetoric matters. Take time to craft memorable sound bites and analogies for complex issues and topics. Practice these with people who know nothing about public schools and gauge their reaction. Are they bored? Interested? Excited? Saddened? Moved? Adjust as needed until you get your three to five key messages just right.

Share the facts: Find a way to salt meetings, public forums, media interviews, Rotary Club lunches, and elevator rides with your key messages. Stay on top of district news and take every opportunity to share just those nuggets that illustrate how well public schools are doing, or why we need their help to make sure all students succeed. Back up statements like, “We need more resources to reach more children,” or “We can’t afford any more unfunded mandates,” with stories about the impact on your schools.

Cut the jargon and statistics: Try to talk more about real kids, teachers, principals, and their challenges, successes, and needs, rather than about dollars and cents, the latest educational jargon, or mind-numbing statistics.

It’s one thing to say 83.1 percent of all students in a county-wide district graduate within four years, or that your system is a national leader drop-out intervention and prevention. It’s another to share how caring teachers kept a homeless high school senior in school and on track for graduation after her parents died within a few months of each other, or how a teenage war refugee who never attended school in his native country now must pass standardized tests in English to graduate.
Wise leaders choose their battles and compatriots carefully, and recognize that coalitions win wars, even though compromise is sometimes necessary. Giving up is not an option, however.

If preserving high quality public schools for all children is this generation’s civil rights battle, and many believe it is, then educators and school officials need to act accordingly. At the very least, set the record straight, and stop letting inflammatory and inaccurate statements about public education go unchallenged. Doing this strategically doesn’t mean engaging in an online war of words or uncivil debates during televised school board meetings.

Instead, setting the record straight can be as simple as issuing corrections and clarifications to supporters and posting statements of fact online. Business and community partners, parent organizations, and other groups can contribute by purchasing paid advertising space to tell the district’s story and show their support.

Stop apologizing for what hasn’t been accomplished, such as single-handedly closing achievement gaps, and start challenging community members to step up and get in the public school game. Elected officials, business leaders, foundation reformers, pundits, advocates, and reporters need to join educators and parents to improve students’ lives. The blame game helps no one.

School officials also need to stop pointing fingers at each other, as if the shared survival and interests of urban, rural, and suburban schools and districts are not at risk. It is not helpful for school officials who haven’t dealt with schools highly impacted by poverty, mobility, language barriers, racism, and other deep societal issues to judge those who work daily in struggling neighborhoods and districts.

Any teacher, custodian, principal, or counselor who has worked in a high-need school, even the most successful, will tell you that the work is harder, more difficult, more complex — and for those with the requisite skill and passion — more rewarding.

They also will tell you that kids and parents are not the problem, although both the kids and their families need more ongoing support — support that costs money and time, in the form of extended learning days and years, workshops for parents, Saturday sessions, and more opportunities for collaborative work among professionals.

**DISCUSSION: Your Role, Your Messages**

Here are five key messages about the role of our nation’s school boards. Think about how these apply to your district. Can you customize these messages and use them in communications with your constituents? Do you have others that are just as powerful?

- School boards have stepped up to the challenge of dramatically improving our public schools for the 21st century. We know what works — and research is helping us to know more than ever what the governing role looks like.

- Education must be a collective venture and a community-wide priority. Delivering higher levels of student achievement won’t happen overnight. But school board members are the right people — working with the community and the superintendent — to make this happen.

- Collaboration among city, county, and school officials is critical to student success, especially in tight budget times.

- Mayoral control, in isolation, is an oversimplified solution to the complex challenge of raising student achievement in urban districts.

- Working together as partners, instead of opponents, will move all of us — students, school boards, mayors, and communities — in the right direction.
These educators — our nation’s unsung heroes and today’s human rights activists — also understand that early intervention, while important, is not an inoculation that offers a lifetime guarantee against the negative impact of poverty, poor health, and high stress on student learning and performance.

When school boards, administrators, central office staff, parents, and community members show teachers they care, children and young people benefit. In the zeal to transform public schools into private, for-profit enterprises, reformers have lost sight of a key business school lesson: Every organization's success rests more on its employees than its strategy, board leadership, cash flow, shareholder value, or CEO.

Returns on investment and returns on equity are driven by employee productivity and employee performance. Businesses forget this at their peril, which may be why so many companies once heralded on the Fortune 500 list no longer exist.

Chapter 2: The Work of the School Board

Lack of communication — about the importance of maintaining local control of public education and real facts about the effectiveness of local school boards — is creating an information vacuum. And it is one that is being filled by those whose priorities may not center on providing a high quality education for all children.

But you can change that. Let’s start with some facts:

- School board members rank among their community’s hardest working elected officials, with 41.6 percent spending 25 hours or more a month on board business, and one in five spending more than 40 hours a month.

- As the only local officials focused exclusively on pre-k-12 education, school board members represent the community’s values and beliefs. Education is not one of many competing priorities; it is school board members’ only priority.

- By representing the public’s voice in public education, school boards are accountable to the taxpayers footing the bills, as well as to the parents of those benefiting most directly from the services public schools provide.

Operating in a transparent manner, school boards manage the public’s business in the public’s eye, engaging parents, students, employees, senior citizens, and other community members in important discussions regarding public policy.

If voters are unhappy with the performance of their elected officials, they have the right to select new members who they believe will do more to help children succeed, not only in school, but also in life.
The growing cadre of pundits and school reform leaders are calling for new governance structures, including the abolition of locally elected school boards. Others seek to replace public education’s cherished and historic role in preserving democracy by preparing future citizens and leaders with mandates from business and industry or partisan think tanks.

Research shows, however, that effective school boards have a positive impact on student achievement, especially when they work as a unified team with their superintendents.

Relentlessly focused on teaching and learning, these high-performing boards set clear goals, have high expectations for everyone involved, and spend more time on policies driving improvement in student achievement than on operational concerns.

Effective school boards also actively engage both employees and the public in their decision-making processes, use data well, and align resources, including professional development, to meet district goals.

For these boards, continuous growth and improvement take center stage, even during tough economic times. This means they pay attention to their own growth and development as well, often participating in conferences, seminars, reading groups, and other shared learning experiences with their superintendents.
If your school board and district are performing well, gather your own data and use some of the key points in this booklet, along with other resources provided by NSBA, the Center for Public Education, and your state association. Use this information to tell your story at the local, state, and national level.

While the vast majority of school boards are working well together and supporting meaningful improvements in various measures of student achievement, some are operating at less than optimal levels.

Before engaging in more proactive public relations and marketing efforts, struggling or dysfunctional school boards need to take stock of their performance and seek help from their state associations, NSBA, or other resources.

If the school board does not look good, the district cannot look good. It is as simple as that. No amount of positive school press or superintendent charisma can overcome bad behavior broadcast live during school board meetings.

DISCUSSION: Your Board and the Research

NSBA’s Center for Public Education (www.centerforpubliceducation.org) has compiled and identified, based on research, common traits of effective school boards that positively impact student achievement. According to the research, these boards:

- Create a shared vision of high standards with teachers, parents, students, business leaders, and community members.
- Set tightly focused goals and rigorously monitor the district’s progress toward meeting those goals.
- Use data to monitor and evaluate progress, ensure resources are allocated where they can make the most difference, and constantly strive to improve instruction and learning for every child.
- Focus on policy, not administration.
- Have trusting, collaborative relationships with the superintendent and fellow board members.

Some questions to ask:

- Does your board exhibit these traits? If not, what can you do — through training with your state school boards association — to ensure that you become effective in your governance?
- Has your board purchased and read the Key Work of School Boards (www.nsba.org/KeyWork), a framework of eight interrelated action areas that can help you focus and guide your work?
- Is your board communicating how your work is leading to increased student achievement?
Chapter 3: From Learning to Leading

Every dollar counts in today’s economy, and public entities — including school boards — are under intense scrutiny. That’s why it’s vital to leverage your investment in your own professional development by sharing what you have learned with your community.

Workshops, conferences, roundtables, publications, exhibits, and other forms of professional development serve as valuable sources for proven strategies, groundbreaking work, and data-informed solutions to public education’s most pressing challenges. As leaders of organizations focused on learning, school board members have an obligation and a responsibility to invest in their individual and collective growth.

By staying in touch with what’s working — and what’s not — in districts nationwide, school board members can ensure local taxpayers a better return on their investment while improving the quality of education provided to their community’s children. Better informed leaders make better decisions, and safeguard students, teachers, support staff, principals, parents, and community members by avoiding wasteful spending.

Educational leadership is difficult, complex work. By sharing research, information, and resources gleaned at state and national conferences, school board leaders help shape the public agenda for public schools. Don’t assume that parents, teachers, and the public understand why local control matters. Instead, cite research that shows how strong local board leadership and good governance contribute to higher performing schools and better student outcomes.

For example, research shows that effective boards and high-performing school districts support extensive professional development for administrators and teachers, even when the economy falters and budgets are cut.

Working as a united team with the superintendent, effective boards invest in their own development and training. Savvy leaders recognize that building shared vision, knowledge, values, and commitments will help move the organization forward.

High-achieving school districts also have “formal, deliberate training” for new board members, gather together to focus on specific topics, and focus more on teaching, learning, and academic issues than operational concerns.

Publish data regarding annual individual and collective board member contributions to the community in terms of time. Place an estimated monetary value on board members’ public service. Use the conference agenda item as a bully pulpit to reinforce the idea that school boards work — and work hard — to create effective public schools that serve all children.

Remind your constituents that your board gives the community a voice in how their schools are run, and that public schools serve as the cornerstone of a free and democratic society.

The combination of smart phones and social media sites like Twitter and Facebook make it easy to stay in touch with constituents. At the same time, you can symbolically position your board as the district’s
Set the Stage Before You Leave for Professional Development

Professional development opportunities allow school board members and leaders to explore education issues and concerns on a national level. As they learn from peers all over the country, board members identify new strategies and gain a broader perspective on local issues.

Decisions school board members make about policy, personnel, student assignment, finance, curriculum, and communications impact organizational effectiveness. Yet too often school board members make important decisions without being fully informed. Mistakes and missteps cost time, dollars, and political capital — resources districts can’t afford to squander.

To demonstrate accountability and set the tone for how the district will benefit from its investment in board member development, address it in policy, set annual goals, and make conference attendance and reports board agenda items.

Before traveling to a state or national conference, review the program agenda and materials publicly, including registration costs and travel fees, and then highlight which sessions board representatives plan to attend and why.

If you are attending the National School Boards Association’s annual conference, note the opportunity to learn from thousands of school leaders, exhibitors, and speakers. Take the time to highlight speaker credentials, and topics that relate to local issues and concerns.

School board members also may demonstrate fiscal accountability by announcing plans to secure hotel and travel arrangements well in advance to get the best rates, sharing rooms and cab fares, and taking other cost-saving measures.

By rotating board member representation at professional development opportunities, as well as referencing policies and statutory requirements for continuing education and certification for school officials, you underscore your commitment to learning.

When you return from attending state and national conferences and other professional development opportunities, take the time to share what you’ve learned with your fellow board members, the superintendent, other administrators, and the general public.

A simple way to accomplish this is to have each board member who attends a conference submit and lead a brief public discussion about the sessions they attended, and the implications of what they’ve seen, heard, and experienced for improving their local school or district operations.

Broadcast or cablecast on television, the district website, YouTube, and social media sites, and captured in the official minutes, these reports demonstrate a deep commitment to learning and organizational development.

top learners by blogging, tweeting, tumblr-ing, and posting conference updates and news.

Once you return, you can extend the learning even further by writing brief, bulleted summaries of sessions you attended, and by posting or linking to session handouts (give appropriate credit and cite permissions).

Even something as simple as posting your daily (and evening) meeting schedule helps illustrate that conference attendance is work, not play or a form of political junket at taxpayer expense. The information presented by board members can then be packaged and distributed by district administration as a press release to local reporters and as electronic news items to parents and employees.
A word of caution, however: If teacher, principal, and administrator staff development and conference travel has been slashed to the bone, this strategy likely will backfire. When it comes to professional development, school officials have to “walk the talk” and show they value it for all levels of the organization, and not just the top.

The investment is worth it, however. Your attendance and your learning will benefit students and the entire community. If reporters or pundits chide you about wasting taxpayer dollars on “junkets,” take the time to set the record straight.

**DISCUSSION: Translating Your Travel**

Professional development for school board members, through attendance at your state and national conferences, can prove incredibly helpful to your work and to your district. It is equally important, however, to communicate what you learn to your fellow board members and to your constituents.

Here are some questions to ask when looking at travel:

**Before:**
- Does your board have a process for determining who attends state and national conferences?
- Do board members state what they hope to gain from the conference?
- Do you take the time to review the program agenda and materials in public, then highlight which sessions you plan to attend and why?

**After:**
- Do you extend the learning by providing summaries of the sessions you attend and session handouts to other board members and the public?
- Does your board make time available post-conference for you to report on what you learned?

**Chapter 4: Building a Network of Supporters**

In today’s knowledge-based economy, where economists say 80 percent of all new jobs will require higher-level math and science, we know that more education is required, not less. With so much at stake and public schools commanding a decisive market share in terms of the percentage of available students served, the case for public education seems obvious, at least to most school board members and superintendents.

That said, competing successfully in a more hostile environment may require a new approach and better packaging. Most public schools already offer what charters and private schools offer — and then some. But we tend to do a much poorer job of telling our stories and selling our schools.

We forget to highlight the things we often take for granted — such as Advanced Placement offerings,
special education services, athletics, after-school activities, visual and performing arts, etc. Relying on word-of-mouth and high levels of parent satisfaction, while still important, is not enough to win a marketing war.

Entrepreneurial approaches, such as creating new programs and services to meet consumer demands, and robust school marketing campaigns now include paid media (ads) as well as earned media (publicity), targeted communications, special events, and social media outreach are now augmenting traditional open houses, newsletters, videos, Realtor coffees, and school tours.

Since strategy considerations underpin any successful communications program, it’s necessary to have a keen understanding of today’s generational politics and fractured electorates. Today’s voters — remember, 70 percent don’t have school-age children — feel threatened by economic woes and are tired of paying for public services they do not use, or only hear negative things about, including K-12 education.

Parents of school-aged children typically are willing to pay more for good public schools, but they also rank among those hardest-hit by the economic downturn as well as decades-long negative trends in employment and income inequality.

According to Pew Research Center, employment rates and household net worth have declined for young adults in comparison to their same-age counterparts in 1967. As a result, poverty rates for households headed by young adults have soared, from 12 percent in 1967 to 22 percent in 2009.

These young families represent a much greater variety of races, ethnicities, cultures, and languages than previous generations. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, minorities will comprise the majority of children under age 18 by 2023. Older adults, the majority of whom are white, have fared much better, thanks to increases in federal assistance programs like Social Security and Medicare. Older adults also are staying on the job longer, often delaying retirement until the economy improves.
Public schools and other government entities are caught in the middle of these disruptive demographics. With the rational middle temporarily in hiding, school leaders need to ramp-up their personal and collective outreach efforts to shore up their support base and create new, cross-generational coalitions around shared interests.

Too often, school officials confuse information distribution with communication, and announcements with engagement. At its core, strategic public relations is about building relationships with the people who matter most, and then nurturing and growing their commitment to the organization through a steady diet of information, engagement, experience, and appreciation.

The goal is to build a network of coalitions and groups that can mobilize and respond quickly, often around specific issues. That way, when naysayers unfairly or inaccurately attack public education, or when toxic legislation and budget cuts threaten quality public schools for all children, supporters and diverse constituents can set the record straight.

Board members and superintendents can start this process by mapping out their community’s political landscape. Much like a working a capital or tax levy campaign, this is a painstaking effort. Influential in-

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**School Boards & Social Networking: Dos & Don’ts**

As elected officials — at least in most places — school board members tend to have more freedom in terms of social networking. But with that freedom also comes responsibility.

Follow the public official’s golden rule: Don’t blog, tweet, or post anything you wouldn’t want splashed across the front page of the daily newspaper.

Here are some other quick tips:

- Board ethics and conflict of interest policies apply to social media outlets. Don’t use social media to leak closed session materials and/or information that is protected by law.
- Keep the tone conversational and informal, but use proper grammar and show the same sensitivity regarding word choice you would in other venues. If this is difficult for you, have someone follow behind you as a proofreader before you hit send.
- Social media is a commitment. If you don’t want to keep sites updated, it’s better not to start them in the first place. Content aggregators, such as Hoot Suite, that can update all social media sites simultaneously help.
- Snarky doesn’t play well if you’re not a teenager. Keep your communications professional, albeit more informal in tone and manner.
- Connect your site to the official district website, social media outlets, etc.
- Be transparent — let people know who you are and what you stand for. Don’t hide behind the anonymity afforded by social media.
- Take the high road. You’ll take some unfair hits — that comes with the territory. Don’t get into fights with parents, students, teachers, and other bloggers. You will lose.

Let people know what the rules of the game are for your sites. As the “editor,” you have the right to remove profane comments or other material that could be offensive to others. But often you build more credibility by responding professionally and courteously.
individuals, groups, institutions, and organizations need to be identified, contacted, and classified as to negative, positive, or neutral.

The goal is to move neutrals to a more positive position through personal contact, sharing information, crafting memorable experiences, and engaging them as volunteers and partners. Since everyone and every group do not have the same level of influence, it is important to prioritize contacts.

In general, the demographics for an external coalition should mirror the community, while a parent or internal coalition should reflect student or employee demographics. Rather than leave these contacts to chance, the district’s communications specialist or another staff member needs to track the number of contacts being made to each individual or group, and the results of these contacts.

This will require a relational database or some form of contact management software that interfaces well with the district’s technology infrastructure. A database program that is difficult to use or hopelessly out of date will do more communications damage than an electronic newsletter that no one bothers to read. To work, this strategy requires precise segmentation of message and medium by audience. One-size-fits-all efforts simply fall flat.

While technology helps manage this process, and makes targeting and personalizing messages easier, it does not replace the personal touch. Face-to-face communication still makes the world go round, even if it is digitized.

And that’s one place where the school board can make a true difference.

**DISCUSSION: What Makes Your District Unique?**

Like education, business, law, and other professions, marketing uses jargon as code words for various concepts. One of these is USP, or unique selling proposition.

Simply put, your USP is what makes your district or school unique, special, different, or better. The key is capturing that essence in just a few words, and providing an example or painting a picture that people can grasp instantly without further explanation.

A USP is not a slogan or yearly theme, but it can serve as the focus of your communications program, or what businesses call their brand position. Businesses spend time and money on branding because, in today’s information-saturated world, it’s simply impossible to tell parents, taxpayers, or concerned citizens everything they need to know about their products. The same holds true for schools.

Before you can zero in on the handful of key messages you want every single person to know, you must clearly define and articulate:

- What sets your district apart in the marketplace.
- Why parents should care enough to send their children to you.
- Why taxpayers should fund public education.

Here are some other questions to ask:

- Has your board, working with the superintendent, mapped out your community’s political landscape (positives, negatives, neutrals)?
- Is your district taking a one-size-fits-all approach to communications, or segmenting messages by different audiences?
- Do you have the infrastructure — in terms of staffing, content management software, and technology — necessary for this type of work?
Chapter 5: Building Your District’s PR Department

Telling public education’s story more effectively is essential, especially given the political tenor in many communities, not a “nice to have” when budgets get better. Having a vision for better communications is just the starting point, however.

Conducting public opinion and marketing research, developing and executing smart strategies, providing wise communications counsel, and managing crises well are systemic management concerns that require proactive plans and professional staff and guidance.

While many former educators and reporters have done well in acquiring the knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences required as part of a more strategic approach to communications, increasingly, superintendents are turning to professionally trained and accredited public relations professionals.

This makes sense, given the complexity of the tasks involved, and what is at stake in terms of maintaining strong public schools for all children, including those who pose the most challenges and the greatest costs.

Just as “public schools are only as good as the public that supports them,” public relations initiatives are only as effective as the strategists planning them and the tacticians carrying them out.

While staffing needs and patterns vary according to the size of the school system, diversity of publics, complexity of internal and external communication needs, and the reputational issues at stake, most school systems need at least one seasoned PR professional on their team.

The office also will need access to technology savvy administrative support and to skilled technicians in public opinion polling, public engagement facilitation, community outreach, writing/editing, media relations, Web development, special event planning, fund development, social media production, graphic production, video editing, etc.

Whether these specialists are full-time staff members, freelancers, or agency personnel hired on a contractual or as needed basis depends on the program goals and workflow requirements. Many larger systems opt for a mix of both: full-time staff handles day-to-day operations while contractual staff may be used for special projects, campaigns, or guidance.

Staffing a position without providing adequate resources will limit the position’s effectiveness. So will burying the position under an administrator with little or no communications experience. For maximum benefit, the top communications executive should report directly to the superintendent and serve on the superintendent’s cabinet.

Investments in technology and communications infrastructure are also important. Even the savviest strategist will quickly become hamstrung without access to a Web-enabled mass notification system, a relational database, interactive websites, and other tools.

A good rule of thumb to consider in today’s 24/7 world is whether your district can reach key publics in
15 minutes or less, using multiple channels of communication simultaneously. If the answer is “no,” there probably are some infrastructure and training issues that need to be addressed.

**Working with district staff**

When speaking to internal audiences, it is often safe to assume they are as ill informed as external audiences, at least when it comes to news and events at the district level or those involving other schools or departments. As a result, they enjoy hearing good news and fun facts about others in the system, especially if the district is county-wide or has a large number of schools.

Everyone wants to be associated with a winner, and many public school educators feel as if they have taken a beating in the news media and public opinion since the economy tanked in 2008. Union-busting tactics, biased studies on teacher pay, and the national blame game in politics have not helped.

While all school board members should play an active role in promoting public education as well as the school system and individual schools, going rogue simply plays into the hands of the opposition. As team members, board members need to articulate the board’s position clearly and in a positive manner, even if they personally disagree with part or all of the decision. You can have a different opinion and state why; no one expects school board members to rubber-stamp every decision.

However, civil discourse means affording your colleagues and the people who work for the school system the same respect and courteousness you would like to be shown. Belittling the board’s position, haranguing staff members from the dais during school board meetings, or trying to distance yourself from your colleagues in media interviews communicates the wrong message to the public upon whose support public schools depend. It also has a demoralizing effect on hard-working students and staff.

Treating employees well makes good business sense, and education is nothing if not a people business. While protecting job security or joining the fight against budget cuts and the movement to privatize public schools may matter most to teachers, they also appreciate low-cost measures

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**What to Expect from Your PR Department**

If your district has a school public relations professional, he or she should be able to supply you with a basic school board member PR kit, including business cards, talking points, sample scripts, a basic presentation, fact sheet(s), and news coverage reprints.

School public relations professionals can also tailor your remarks to fit specific audiences, as long as you give them ample notice. If you’re not sure how or where to begin promoting your schools and district, the PR officer should be able to point you in the right direction, or make contact for you with key groups such as chambers of commerce, civic groups, professional associations, etc.

The communications office should also maintain a district presence on the major social media networks, including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Other Web 2.0 tools include online surveys, interactive websites, video editing and uploading, blogs, subscription-based, html newsletters, e-mail blasts, and podcasts, to name a few. These tools, with the possible exception of interactive websites, are relatively cheap and easy to use — and can play a major role in building and maintaining public support for public schools.

School PR professionals cannot and should not be asked to do any work related to school board campaigns, individual board member constituent relations that are not district-oriented, or issues that conflict with the position of the school board as a whole or the superintendent. To avoid putting undue pressure on a staff member, or making requests that conflict with other work already assigned, make sure to check in with the superintendent before asking district staff members for help.
such as frequent and ongoing communications, and year-round recognition programs.

Employees take notice when superintendents and other officials show — by their behavior and budget support — that communication matters. Leaders who treat teachers and other employees with respect, listen to their opinions, engage them in district decision-making processes, and value their input set the tone for the entire organization. This includes school board members as well as district level administrators, principals, supervisors, and mid-level managers.

Treating public school employees like the professionals they are goes a long way toward improving job satisfaction, even during a tough economy. Ultimately, students and parents benefit, as happier employees are more productive and successful.

School board members boost employee morale and increase public confidence in public schools when they recognize students and staff for jobs well done, debate ideas and proposals civilly and thoughtfully, spend money wisely, develop thoughtful policies, and interact respectfully with staff members and others who present at board meetings. They also help restore some of the trust in government lost in recent years to scandals, political rancor, misinformation campaigns, and sensational news coverage.

Keeping an eye out for unintended consequences is good stewardship of taxpayer dollars and the public’s trust. Listening more to teachers, principals, and other school-based employees is a good place to start. Wise leaders understand that they have two ears and one mouth for a reason.

Think about it this way: Districts with low staff morale have a major public relations challenge that better press and advertising campaigns cannot fix.

**DISCUSSION: Are You Making the Right PR Investment?**

An investment in communications and public relations will help your district, both internally and externally. Staffing needs and the level of investment will vary depending on your district’s size and the challenges you face, but the investment is worth it in the long run.

Here are some questions to ask about the communications team in your district:

- Does the communications office have the necessary tools for smart planning (i.e. public opinion polling, public engagement facilitation, community outreach, writing/editing, media relations, web development, special event planning, fund development, social media production, graphic production, video editing, etc.)?

- If you have a large school system, will you consider hiring outside contractors for assistance on special projects or campaigns?

- Have you discussed communications with your superintendent? Does the top communications executive serve on the superintendent’s cabinet?

- Is your district able to reach key members of the public within 15 minutes or less? Does your district have access to a Web-enabled mass notification system, a relational database, interactive websites, and other tools?
Chapter 6: Join the Communications RACE

Today, most overarching marketing and communications programs are integrated, blending a mix of employee communications, media relations, social media, community relations, and paid media (advertising) tactics.

The key to success often isn’t which tactical approach is used but whether the strategy behind it matches the audience and makes sense given the targeted objective. If, for example, the technology infrastructure required to meet Common Core Standards will require taxpayer approval for new bond funds, a year-long internal and external communications campaign that mobilizes employees, parents, and other likely yes voters may be needed.

If the objective is to secure $1 million in private donations, you may want to target opinion leaders active in the philanthropic community, including corporate chieftains, foundation honchos, and their respective executive committees and boards.

The National School Public Relations Association (www.nspra.org) offers a useful, four-step process for internal and external communications planning. Called RACE, the acronym stands for Research, Analysis and planning, Communications, and Evaluation.

Based on the diffusion process, excellence theory, and other literature regarding effective communications practice, this model walks educators through a sophisticated set of tasks and tools to develop a more proactive, strategic, and measurable approach to internal and external school public relations.

For example, school officials may begin the research phase by having a cross-functional team review the standards and conduct a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) to determine gaps in knowledge, experience, and understanding.

The team may then want to conduct an online employee or parent survey to determine their baseline awareness and perception levels, as well as any questions they may have, or preferences in terms of communication channels.

Once your team has a solid handle on where various audiences are in terms of awareness, perception (opinion), and

Communications Success Story: East Baton Rouge, La.

Louisiana’s East Baton Rouge Parish School System has taken a high-tech approach to school and district marketing, creating a powerful website and brand that challenges visitors to “think again” if “they think they know” their schools.

Showing the power of a less-is-more approach, the district packages powerful photography with a few compelling facts that quickly refute common myths and misconceptions about the schools.

“Make you think” facts include such items as, “More than 87 percent of EBR Parish Schools showed academic growth in district performance scores,” and “East Baton Rouge Parish Schools led the state’s public school system with 16 National Merit Semifinalists in 2012.” Three well-crafted videos as well as brief testimonials by outstanding teachers and students also are on the website (www.thinkebrschools.com).

The site appeals to parents by asking, “Who do you want your child to be?” This question is then followed by the declaration: “They can get there from here.”
behavior — the three major goals of any worthwhile communications plan — they can prepare an executive summary that succinctly captures what they’ve learned along with the most salient research points.

Much as the spine supports the human body, this research then serves as the framework that aligns the communication issues or challenges that need solutions with the audiences, objectives, strategies, messages, mediums, timing, benchmarks, budgets, and measures outlined in the communications program.

Unfortunately, in many school systems, the research step is skipped, or overlooked. Whether due to budgetary concerns, impatience, or skill deficit, this is a mistake.

Used to match and align goals, strategies, messages, and tactics to audience interests, needs, and preferences, research saves money in the long run by making communication initiatives more effective. Annual public opinion polls also allow school officials to see whether their investment in communications is working, and where the plan may require adjustments.

In terms of goals, most communication plans are designed to raise awareness, influence opinion, or spur some kind of action, or behavioral change, on the part of the intended audience. Since behavioral change is the toughest of the three goals, especially if public opinion on an issue as already jelled one way or the other, this is often a long-term proposition.

In addition to skipping research, another common planning mistake is to rush audiences from initial awareness to action or behavior without providing adequate time for meaningful engagement. Smart communication planning moves key publics carefully and systematically through the diffusion process of awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption.

Mass communication techniques such as media relations, websites, phone notification systems, and advertising tend to work best for making key publics aware of new information such as magnet school registration deadlines or an upcoming school event. These techniques also are useful for generating interest.

Communications Success Story: Detroit Public Schools

The marketplace of ideas always has room for clever messaging and creative approaches to getting the word out. Case in point: Detroit Public Schools’ (DPS) 2010 marketing campaign to win back students.

Faced with decades of declining enrollment, the district worked with the Detroit office of renowned marketing firm Leo Burnett to create the “I’m in” campaign, which combined paid media with grassroots advocacy to spur more positive, word-of-mouth about the district and its schools.

The team used wood and paint to build 172 blue doors, which quickly became the symbol of the campaign, as students and parents were encouraged to find out what DPS had to offer. Carted to grassroots community events, school open houses, and tours, the “I’m in” doors and slogan became a movement as teachers, principals, school employees, and satisfied parents and students told their success stories.

According to various media reports, the campaign generated $1.5 million in positive press coverage as well as several celebrity endorsements. As a result, DPS enrollment rose by 6,500 students, while the campaign earned a prestigious national award for marketing.
Communications Success Story: Fort Worth, Texas

Texas’ Fort Worth Independent School District has developed a new brand and an aggressive, multifaceted campaign around its 50 choice programs and schools. Funded in part by community grants, the annual “Gold Seal” campaign focuses on “college bound and career ready” students. It touts all district high schools as well as some middle and elementary schools.

Designed with the modern typography, interesting angles, and bright colors that appeal to high school students and their families, the campaign does not shy from the competition. Gold Seal programs of choice provide “a private school preparation without the cost,” proclaims a print advertisement extolling the “power of choice” and promoting the website, www.fwisd.org/choice.

Included are 30-second advertisements on radio and local television, as well as a website, color brochures, mailers with free magnets, posters, application packets, news releases, and a district-wide choice event. All collateral materials were available in English and Spanish.

Many choices reflect new programs and services developed as part of the campaign, which touts all district high schools as well some middle and elementary schools. The new programs reflect student interests, school traditions, and the job market.

To boost parent and student attendance at the “Choice Expo,” the district tweeted reminders and used its mass notification system to make auto-reminder calls to families. Thirteen individual high school videos, featuring parent and student testimonials and alumni narrators, also were produced. These videos, along with two others promoting middle school options and the district as a whole, kicked off school tours, open houses, and community meetings, and were shared online and via DVD.

The “Gold Seal” brand permeates. Gold seals are placed on student diplomas to remind families of the power of choice and the financial benefit of having students in public schools.

So far, it’s working. The campaign generated more than 67,900 website hits, 17,200 viewings of online videos, and generated a Choice Expo attendance of more than 2,000. More than 4,000 applications were received during 2011, the campaign’s inaugural year, and jumped another 10 percent in 2012.

Perhaps more significantly, given low teacher morale nationwide, employees talked about the pride they felt in seeing the “choices” television commercials, while students wore choice bracelets to show their support.

Business and community financial support, combined with strategic public relations explaining the campaign’s purpose, helped take the sting out of using taxpayer dollars for marketing and promotions.

in a topic, issue, or concern, such as looming state budget cuts, legislative actions, and new district initiatives.

At the same time, these techniques — which dominate many school public relations efforts — typically are not enough to influence or change public opinion, or trigger personal or group social action.

To encourage opinion leaders and key publics to evaluate and try out new ideas, or consider the pros and cons of new educational approaches and pending board decisions, savvy public relations and marketing professionals also include more personal and interactive approaches in their communications plans.

Page 18 — Telling Your Story
These techniques include various engagement tactics such as advisory councils and committees, feedback sessions, key communicator programs, online forums, workshops, and summits. The goal is to involve all community sectors, from the grassroots to the “grasstops.”

While employee and public engagement processes are powerful, the techniques are not panaceas, and require more flexibility and responsiveness on the part of school board members and superintendents.

If consensus is not reached among most public groups, or if the school board or administration decides to go against public sentiment, engagement may actually decrease trust and ratchet up the political costs.

It is also vital to communicate the goals and process clearly before, during, and after the engagement process. Engagement efforts go awry when there is a mismatch between expectations among participants and school officials.

When the employees or the public think they get to decide, while school officials simply want input or feedback about various options, tempers may flare. Even if communications are crystal clear, the nuance between involvement and empowerment (decision-making) represents an ongoing negotiation that requires careful and consistent attention.

Communication plans also come unhinged when more attention is paid to producing award-winning tools rather than strategy development or aligning themes and appeals with the right mediums or audience experiences and interactions.

At the end of the day, whether public relations or marketing efforts were effective rests on whether the strategic goals were met, not whether the e-mail campaign, electronic newsletter, website, or social media outreach program have the latest bells and whistles.

**DISCUSSION: Are You Using Research in Your District’s PR Program?**

Research serves as the framework that aligns the issues or challenges that need solutions with the audiences, objectives, strategies, messages, mediums, timing, benchmarks, budgets, and measures outlined in your district's communications program. A common mistake is overlooking the effect this research will have on your program's success or failure.

Here are some questions to ask when your district embarks on a major communications initiative:

- Is a cross-functional team reviewing the standards that have been set?
- Is the team regularly conducting a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis to determine gaps in knowledge, experience, and understanding?
- Does your communications team use employee and parent surveys and public opinion polls to gain knowledge about perceptions, awareness, and questions that may arise?
- Is communications research used to match and align goals, strategies, messages, and tactics to audience interests, needs, and preferences?
Chapter 7: Building Your Elevator Speech

As public school advocates, every school board member should have a prepared “elevator speech” in his or her pocket that can be given in the time it takes to ride an elevator from one floor to another, or to share while waiting in the grocery store check-out line, or at a favorite restaurant.

Basically, the elevator speech is comprised of a two- to three-minute story about the power or importance of public schools in your local community, supported by a couple of key factoids. For maximum effectiveness, the story should tie back to the district’s overall brand positioning strategy.

For example, if promoting a college-bound culture at home and at school is your brand positioning strategy, an effective elevator speech would include a general statement that captures the essence of your district in a few, jargon-free words.

Another school system may want to capitalize on its small size by focusing on its more personal approach to learning. For that school system, its positioning statement would be something like this: “At XYZ schools, it’s personal,” or “At XYZ schools, our small size lets us personalize learning for every child.”

Positioning statements should not be confused with mission statements. Mission statements may be meaningful to the people who helped write them, but generally, they provide little meaningful fodder for marketing purposes.

Marketing is about differentiating your school or district from its competitors. Focus is important; most consumers shy away from “all things to all people” companies and products because they seldom can deliver on all the promises they make.

Written by committee and designed to be all encompassing, most mission statements, while useful for strategic planning purposes, fail the laser-like focus test required for marketing.

If you are able to develop a slogan that captures your brand position well, stay with it and use it (or variations of it) in all communications. Good slogans are worth their weight in advertising gold. Easy to recognize yet hard to write, slogans should not change every year.

A great slogan becomes identified with the organization, not individuals. As such, it should outlast the administrator, firm, or communications person who originated it, as well as changes in leadership or school board membership. Typically, information is just beginning to stick when those closest to it threaten to redesign the website and dump all of the remaining collateral materials.

Once you have a sense of your school district’s brand position captured in writing and can repeat it verbatim without prompting or notes, it’s time to develop an elevator story about each of the major selling points you identify for your district — selling points that also resonate with the values, needs, and desires of your key audiences.

For example, if your district has a robust Advanced Placement program, or a significant commitment to visual and performing arts, arm yourself with a good story or two and a few “wow” facts or statistics. “Wow” facts make the listener, reader, or viewer go “Wow!” either because it the information is so impressive, or because they didn’t know public schools were capable of such feats.
Here are a couple of examples:

Theme: We have a great arts program.

Share a story…

‘Even in a down economy we have expanded our commitment to the arts by adding a six-week summer school program for gifted middle schoolers with interests in drama, music, theatre, dancing, music, acting, singing, script writing, painting, and technical production. One young man in the program had never acted on stage before, but he earned a standing ovation night after night. Now that is an experience he will take with him the rest of his life, and something that would not have been possible without the encouragement of his teachers and the financial support of the school system.

…then follow the story with some “wow” facts that buttress and support your positioning statement or overall theme:

■ Last year, more than 1,000 people attended the students’ final production at ABC Theatre. And that is just one example.
■ At ABC School System, we’re very proud of our extensive arts program, and believe that all kids benefit from cultural awareness and exposure to the arts. That’s why it’s woven into the curriculum in every grade.
■ We also believe that’s why colleges value our students so much — they know they’re getting well-rounded individuals who can do more than fill out bubbles on a standardized test. Last year, our graduating seniors earned a record $___ million in college scholarships — and we believe that is directly related to our pre-k-12 arts program.’

Theme: Bright kids are challenged in our district; we offer top tier academics at ABC high school.

Share a story…

“I was curious about how our high school graduates compared with their peers from our local charter, private, and parochial schools. So I compared the colleges the valedictorians and salutatorians were accepted to. Did you know that more of our kids were accepted at Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Brown, Duke, and Vanderbilt and other top tier universities than all the other schools combined? It blew me away.”

…then follow the story with some “wow” facts:

■ Last year, 70 percent of our high school seniors graduated having taken at least one Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate class.
■ Last year, ____ students passed at least one Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exam — that’s more than any other school system in the state. (Or, for large systems, “that’s more than ____ states, according to the College Board.)
■ ____ students passed five or more Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams.
■ Each of our high schools offers more than 20 AP classes — more than any private, parochial, or charter schools in our area.
■ The top 10 percent of our seniors outperform their peers at the state and national level on the SAT, ______ to ______ and ______, respectively.

Award-winning programs and major initiatives — from character education to career and technical education or special programs for gifted and talented students — merit some additional research and packaging in order to showcase them to prospective parents, Realtors, business leaders, and other key audiences. Often, a reprinted article from a newspaper or magazine, along with a simple, one-page fact sheet with great nuggets of information, serve as more effective marketing tools or “leave be hinds” than four-color brochures, videos, animated presentations, and other collateral materials.
Sample Elevator Speech/Dialogue

As a school board member, your top priority is to advocate for high quality public schools for all children. Having an elevator speech or a few sound bites prepared in advance can help you promote your schools more effectively. Here’s a sample:

**Constituent:** “I know you from somewhere. Are you on the school board?”

**Board Member:** “Yes I am! I’m a proud member of the ABC County Board of Education.”

**Constituent:** “I wouldn’t want your job. Public schools are….”

**Board Member:** “Actually, I have the best job in the world. At ABC County Schools, we recognize that every child is going to need an advanced education beyond high school in order to compete, so we’re making sure our kids experience a college-bound culture at school and at home.”

**Constituent:** “How do you do that?”

**Board Member:** “By talking about college and what it takes to get into good schools today every chance we get, from early childhood to high school graduation. We find that when kids know we expect more out of them, they tend to deliver. The same is true for parents, teachers, and principals. That’s why 95 percent of our kids graduate from high school and get accepted into the colleges they choose more often than kids from other schools. And we have the data to prove it.”

**Constituent:** “Wow. Sounds impressive. But aren’t parents today part of the problem?”

**Board Member:** “Not in our district. Our parents care deeply about their children’s success, and they help us make important decisions about our schools. We couldn’t do it without them.”

**Constituent:** “Really? But I thought you had a lot of poor families in your community.”

**Board Member:** “We do. But they understand that education will make a difference for their children or grandchildren, nieces and nephews. They still want and deserve the best, and we give it to them. In fact, our parent workshops are so good we’ve had 20 parents decide to go back to school or college to finish up their degrees. It’s really very exciting to be a part of public schools today.”

**Constituent:** “But I thought your schools have a lot of problems with violence and drugs.”

**Board Member:** “Who told you that? You can’t believe everything you see on the news or hear from others. If you’d like to come visit one of our schools and find out what’s really going on, give me a call or e-mail me. I’ll set it up for you. In the meantime, here are some facts about our schools. Maybe you can help me set the record straight about how well our publics schools are working in our community.” (Hands card with contact information and positioning message, website and social media outlets on one side, “wow” facts about the district and a QR code that links to the district’s website on the other side.) “Do you have a card? I can get you on our key communicator list if you’d like.”

**Constituent:** “What’s a key communicator?”

**Board Member:** “It’s someone who gets e-mail updates about our schools and is willing to share that information with someone they know. Key communicators also commit to contacting us anytime they hear a rumor, so we can help correct the facts.”

**Constituent:** “Well, I don’t think I’m ready for the key communicator program, although it sounds like a good idea. You can put me on your distribution list, though. I’ve enjoyed our conversation and good luck to you!”

**Board Member:** “Thank you. And remember, our public schools work, from cradle to college or career.”
Conclusion: Take Action — NOW

School boards need to convey they are on the same team as the educators they employ. If we want civil debates in this country, your meetings are a good place to start. If the board doesn’t look good, the district can’t look good. It really is that simple.

A photo-op, speech, or brochure can’t fix infighting, partisan politics, grandstanding, or failing to show respect to staff or board members with whom you disagree. Without strategic public relations interventions led by a unified coalition of public school advocates — including school board members and superintendents — public education’s dwindling demographic clout, lack of clear purpose, and history of infighting leaves it open to more attacks.

Telling your story is one aspect of this. Communications, as we’ve mentioned throughout, involves listening and engaging your parents, your business leaders, and your community. Discussing the board’s policymaking role, and knowing the effect your decisions will have is extremely important.

At the hyper-local level, traditional public schools, including high-performing suburban schools, could soon find themselves in a marketing war with charters and other public school alternatives. If current and prospective parents and others who influence school choices do not have all the facts, or are not given the red-carpet treatment by public school employees, they may choose to send their children elsewhere.

Even during good economic times, public schools are often at a distinct disadvantage in comparison to private, charter, and parochial schools when it comes to recruiting students. In marketing terms, these alternatives simply have more of a positive buzz about them than public schools, whether that perception is justified or not.

As a result, the alternative providers’ promises of smaller class sizes, more personalized attention, fancy buildings, college-prep academics, better peer role models, access to the latest technology, and more parent involvement ring true for many who are shopping for schools, even if those same attributes and more are offered by their local public schools.

Most public school principals, teachers, and support staff do not know what it is like to recruit students, cater to tuition-paying parents, or raise funds from wealthy alumni. In addition to having more entrepreneurial experience, most private schools and a growing number of charter schools have full-time student recruiters, development officers, or parent/alumni involvement specialists on staff; some have an entire team.

Between the lack of a marketing mindset and massive state and local budget cuts, the gap between traditional public schools and their competitors may have only grown wider in recent years. It’s tough to convince prospective parents you have a superior product when the daily news reports teacher layoffs, large class sizes, cuts to non-core academic offerings, and delays in technology purchases.

Yet public schools still have several distinct advantages over their often for-profit counterparts. These include richer curricula, better teaching, a full-range of co-curricular activities, and more diverse student...
bodies. Many of these attributes are very attractive to prospective parents, particularly those who now have more choices about where to send their children to school at taxpayer expense.

Transparency, public engagement in decision-making, and representation by locally elected officials also represent selling points for public schools. Today’s consumers expect to have a say in decisions that affect them and their children, and may not like the idea that a handful of insiders, or a for-profit management company headquartered out of town are calling most of the shots regarding local tax dollars.

Marketing battles typically are won based on reputation, customer service, and the ability to consistently fulfill promises made to consumers. As with other consumer choices, style and brand name cachet and other intangibles often win over superior products; while it’s difficult to think of something as vital as public education as just another product offering in the marketplace, that’s the situation we currently find ourselves in.

Most school board members are highly professional and understand they need to model the behavior and courteousness they want students and employees to emulate. However, some seem more interested in using their tenure as a stepping-stone politically and focus on what makes them look good, not necessarily what’s best for students.

This doesn’t mean you should act as rubber stamps for the superintendent, or that everyone has to agree all the time. Democracy thrives with the free and open exchange of ideas. We all know that democracy is messy — sometimes very messy — but personal, mean-spirited, divisive behavior has no place in the boardroom.

If behavior gets us into trouble, words won’t get us out of it. Address concerns professionally and privately, where appropriate. Respect the chain of command and try not to surprise staff at board meetings with “gotcha” questions.

The board’s job is to set policy and hire — or fire — the superintendent. It’s the superintendent’s job to run the schools. We’ve all heard that a million times, but if it’s so simple, why do so many of us have a hard time doing it?

At this point, either we can become just another slowly dying government entity with a stellar past that is used only as a last resort, or we can reinvent ourselves as marketing and entrepreneurial philanthropic concerns devoted to the greater good.

The choice is ours to make, but the window of opportunity is not going to stay open long. It is time to reinvent public education to meet the needs of 21st century students and their families, and it is time to tell our story — more often, loudly, and better than anyone else does.
15 Things School Board Members Can Do
To Boost Public Confidence in Public Schools

- Show the public what good governance looks like.
- Model the behavior you want students and staff to emulate, especially during times of conflict.
- Know your facts, and be proactive in sharing them.
- Develop your elevator speech about your school system, why you serve, and why others should care about your local public schools.
- Tell 10 success stories for every criticism you hear or share.
- Bring someone new with you every time you visit a school, attend a school program, or district event.
- Recruit new families for public schools, and stay in touch with current and prospective parents.
- Reach out to Realtors, grandparents, human resource officers, and others who influence where people live and where families send their children to school.
- Hit the breakfast, lunch, and dinner speaking circuit in your community, and remind people that public schools are the only game in town that serves all children.
- Build relationships with opinion leaders in your community, and have them on speed dial and in your e-mail distribution list.
- Add to your district's database of key audience members every time you meet someone new by sharing copies of the business cards you collect with the public information or superintendent’s office.
- Make sure your district is represented on other key community boards, groups, commissions, and committees. Require at least annual reports to back to the entire school board about news, information, tasks, and activities.
- Contact your local, state, and federal representatives regularly about the importance of public schools, to share good news, or invite them to school and district events and activities.
- Work with your local economic development teams to make sure public schools are represented fairly and on par with private school or charter options when new businesses are recruited, or new executives come to town.
- Don’t guess. If you don’t know something, or haven’t heard about something, don’t express shock and dismay, or assume the worst is true. Carry blank note cards and a pen with you at all times so you can take down the information or concern, and promise to have someone get back to them quickly. Then share the information with the superintendent or appropriate staff member. Reserve judgment until you have all the facts.
About the Authors

Nora Carr, chief of staff for Guilford County Schools in Greensboro, N.C., is noted for her experience in strategic planning, communications, change management, and organizational development. She has been the communications columnist for American School Board Journal since 2006 and is the winner of more than 90 local, state, and national awards for communications excellence.

Glenn Cook, executive editor of publications for the National School Boards Association, has worked in publishing and communications for almost 30 years. Under his leadership as managing editor, editor-in-chief, and now publisher, American School Board Journal (www.asbj.com) has received more than 30 national awards for publishing excellence over the past decade.

Additional Resources

National School Boards Association’s Success Stories — www.nsba.org/Board-Leadership/Governance

NSBA’s Center for Public Education
www.centerforpubliceducation.org

American School Board Journal — www.asbj.com

The Magna Awards — www.asbj.com/magna

School Board News Today — http://schoolboardnews.nsba.org

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