

Schools Rebuilding Public Trust

By Nora Carr

Few would argue that turning around struggling schools is not difficult work. District leaders covet principals who specialize in transforming failing schools in the same way that CEOs prize managers who can right failing divisions, product lines, and brands.

When an entire district's reputation is in the tank, it can take years to undo the damage. Parents, employees, and community members tend to have long memories. Not surprisingly, it often takes longer to repair an organization's reputation and restore public trust than to fix the problems that created the issues in the first place.

Restoring tarnished reputations and regaining public support require more than simply trotting out a shiny new logo or marketing campaign. In fact, rushing out new marketing materials too quickly is likely to make matters worse.

Mass communication efforts tend to work best when the goal is to inform the public or to make them aware of challenges or issues the school or district is facing. When trust is eroding, school officials need to rebuild tattered relationships and increase transparency first.

Rebuilding relationships

Finding time to invest in relationship-building activities is challenging for school board members, superintendents, district leaders, and principals. Do it anyway.

In bad times, leaders must fight the human instinct to hunker down and circle the wagons. Public problems require public solutions. Start re-engaging a wider, more representative group of employees, parents, and other key constituents in the decision-making process.

School boards can play a pivotal role in this process. Host brown bag lunches in partnership with administrators at schools, houses of worship, and places of business. By connecting informally in small group settings, you can hear concerns from diverse audiences, re-establish important connections, seek new ideas, and help correct misinformation.

To keep meetings from becoming gripe sessions, plan meeting agendas carefully and let attendees know that the board has different processes for dealing with individual student, employee, or school complaints. Focus on the bigger picture, and design group processes so they promote hearing from multiple voices. Prevent naysayers from dominating the conversation. This demonstrates a seriousness of purpose that will help rebuild trust.

Remember, this is a starting point, not the end of the process. Public engagement is most appropriately viewed as a continuum that begins with distributing information and concludes with shared decision-making.

New technologies engage

New technologies are rapidly expanding districts' public engagement reach and capabilities. Strategic use of social media, along with more sophisticated software and services, can help school officials create, monitor, and promote interactive and mobile-friendly websites focused exclusively on public engagement initiatives.

These Web-enabled and cloud-based tools allow constituents to participate by text, interactive voice response, and links on popular social media sites as well as through traditional online surveys, websites, and mass notification systems.

Some services make it easy to organize and generate reports that break complex data into easy-to-understand charts, illustrations, and graphics. When well-executed, these graphic elements provide fodder for various internal and external communications, and can help fuel more accurate and insightful media coverage, blogs, Web postings, and social media sharing.

District staff can use these tools to organize and manage various public engagement processes simultaneously. Sophisticated automation and calendar features help staff schedule notifications and communications on a regular basis, while social media can be linked to popular blogs and sites where important online conversations already are occurring in various school communities.

To overcome language barriers, many of these new tools use Google translator, which can convert English into 52 other world languages, albeit imperfectly given the wide range of dialects and cultural preferences.

Many districts may have pieces of an overarching digital engagement strategy in place, but few leverage all components together effectively and systematically. Gathering these tools under one website or Intranet is a great place to start improving the system, however.

Make it fun

Public engagement often has a serious purpose, such as involving more constituents in budget development, or finding common ground for a new bond construction proposal. But it also can be fun.

Minnesota's St. Paul Public Schools, for example, provides tours of its Nutrition Center, helping parents understand the importance of behind-the-scenes district services like child nutrition as well as how to prepare healthier meals at home.

In Texas, the Fort Worth Independent School District has launched a “Food for Thought” program, putting students, child nutrition managers, and a local chef together to develop, test, and display healthier -- and tastier -- recipes for its cafeterias. Students serve as food critics, judging presentation, marketing, nutrition, pricing, and taste. The program generates positive press, with the students creating perfect made-for-television moments.

Because many constituents no longer have school-age children, creating first-hand experiences like tours and special events and adding a public engagement twist to standard school and district functions helps put a human face on public education. Such efforts also build employee pride and replenish community goodwill.

Identifying metastrategies

As with most transformation efforts in education, the best strategies simultaneously meet multiple needs and align with multiple data sets and research into best practices. The same is true for rebuilding trust and improving a school’s or district’s image or reputation.

Engaging others in organizational decision-making processes and creating the equivalent of professional learning communities through issue-focused public engagement initiatives represent meta- strategies. These bring various publics through the stages of awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption. Combined with highly skilled process design and facilitation, open, honest, frequent, timely, and relevant communication then serves as the grease that keeps the engine running smoothly.

Once trust has been restored, marketing and other mass communication efforts can more effectively fuel more widespread adoption of the new image, idea, or behavior. As an advertising adage states, “The best way to kill a bad product is to market it.”

When budgets are tight and distrust is high, more positive media coverage and external communications will not fill hearts and change minds, but better public engagement and more flexible and transparent decision-making processes might.

Despite most leaders’ preference for rational, logical, and linear decision-making in education, government, and business, marketers know that most decisions and opinions are based on emotion, not fact. To win back public support for public education, including urban education, we need to spend more time listening and less time talking.

We must be more attentive to school and organizational culture and climate, and to the emotional and psychological health and well being of our schools, districts, and communities, and to the people in them. Wise business leaders understand that people matter more than profits, tough decisions, and short-term measures of return on investment.

Wise school officials recognize the same thing, and they make sure their schools and districts operate in a manner that makes a commitment to people, inclusiveness, and collaboration self-evident.

"I treat every person I meet and every group I speak to as an opportunity to sell my school," says Ged O'Donnell, principal of Montlieu Academy of Technology. "I tell our students all the time that they attend the best school in [North Carolina's] Guilford County. They know if they're coming here they are coming to a special place, and it makes them feel special before they even see it."

Formerly one of Guilford's lowest-performing schools, Montlieu has increased achievement dramatically and now serves as the district's prototype school for using one-to-one technology to transform teaching and learning.

"Our expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy," says O'Donnell, whose magnet school now has a waiting list for the first time in its history. "People know Montlieu is a special place before they even see it. We've created that expectation, that shared vision, and our students, staff, and community have embraced it. It's changed the whole school."

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Framework for change

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) outlines a spectrum that includes informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, and ultimately, empowering the public by placing decision-making in its hands. At each stage, the promise to the public, the goal of public participation, and the impact of the process differ, as do the tools used to facilitate the process.

Applying a conceptual framework like IAP2 can help leaders identify missing areas and links and avoid missteps caused by a mismatch in expectations between and among school board members, administrators, and the public. Public engagement efforts typically go awry when one group -- often a subset of parents, educators, volunteers, advocates, or other key leaders -- thinks it is making decisions, and district officials believe the group is simply providing input or information.

When thoughtful public engagement design is practiced by skilled facilitators and followed up by thorough, open, and transparent communications, constituents soon learn the district has nothing to hide and is sincere in trying to make necessary changes.

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