



Concise, practical public relations help for your school

PRincipal Communicator

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PRincipal Tips

Sometimes, email has made instant communication – too instant – when something should not have been written or mailed. Below are *guidelines to help parents use email in ways that will be most beneficial to students*. Considering posting them on your website or including them in your newsletter.

- ✓ **When there is a serious matter, it's best to meet with the teacher.** Email shouldn't be used for controversial issues.
- ✓ **Hostile email can make a situation worse** and tends to make people defensive.
- ✓ **Our school practice is to respond to parents' emails within 24 hours.** Don't be concerned if you don't hear back from the teacher immediately. And please remember, teachers have many students and are concerned about all of them.
- ✓ **A positive tone in your emails** can set the stage for a cordial relationship with teachers. The rules for civility in email are the same as in meetings.

From NSPRA resource files

Connect with the Influential 'Word-of-Mouth' Network among Your Parents and Community

How can principals get more satisfied parents talking about their experiences at their children's school? One district in Evanston, Ill., is connecting with the influential "word-of-mouth" network among its parents by positioning them as school ambassadors.

'Persuasive Communication Tool'

While many principals are using social media like Facebook and Twitter, it's also important to think of ways to generate word-of-mouth energy in "offline networks." In his book *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*, marketing professor Jonah Berger (scheduled to be a keynote speaker at the 2014 NSPRA Seminar) states that only seven percent of word-of-mouth happens online. According to Berger, word-of-mouth about products and services occurs more frequently in personal interaction. Applying that analysis to school communication, word-of-mouth that occurs during social gatherings or in discussions with neighbors is arguably one of the most persuasive communication tools in shaping opinions.

In Evanston Township, the goal is generating positive word-of-mouth energy in the community. Through the ambassador model, the principal is able to partner with parents who want to help others be informed about the school. As a result, there has been a shift toward more accurate word-of-mouth conversations, an increase in parent engagement and a growth in community pride for the school.

Some Basic Questions

To begin, answer these questions: What is your budget? What is your school's policy on volunteers? Who will coordinate the ambassador volunteers, provide training and organize ambassador meetings? Using some kind of management software or event organizing tool will help streamline the coordination process significantly, but it won't replace the need to allocate time by you or one of your staff.

In addition, ask some basic questions about prospective ambassadors. Who are they? Who are their kids? What is their own experience with schools? What are their interests and concerns

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Parent Ambassadors

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about our school? Then identify which school events and outreach activities could benefit from their support, such as open houses, parent nights or orientations.

Before contacting parents to ask for their participation, identify which parents' voices are already known at school and which ones have been left out of the conversation. A successful ambassador program amplifies the voices of parents who are influential and active in their neighborhoods, not just those who are seen as influencers within the school building. Also, consider expanding the definition of "parent" to include adult family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles.

What Should They Know?

Next, focus on the types of questions you think your parent ambassadors will encounter and develop a training session to support them. Do they know a lot about your school's "hot" topics? Do they hold any misconceptions that need correcting? What are sources for more information?

Once you've established what your ambassadors currently know and should know, decide what tools they'll need to be successful. Then hold a brief training. The most important part of Evanston Township's session is a 15-minute period when parents develop a 30-second speech to summarize **who** the school is, **what** the school does, and **why** it is an out-

standing school for all students. The result is a thoughtful response that any parent ambassador can use to answer the common inquiry: "Tell me about [insert your school's name]."

Assess and Evaluate

After your parent ambassadors have been "out there" for awhile, determine if they're making a difference. You can use input data to show how many ambassadors participated at school events and whether the parents who actively participate are representative of your school. You can establish a question in each post-event survey to learn: "How did we do?"

Also, reflect on testimonials from other parents who interact with ambassadors. How often are ambassadors referenced as a source for parent engagement?

Return on Investment

It may be hard to consider adding one more task to your list of responsibilities. But remember, parents are key influencers of perceptions about schools – negative or positive, and word-of-mouth can be one of the most credible forms of marketing.

Partnering with parents so they share their stories and empowering them with tools to respond to difficult questions can bring you and your staff a great return on investment.

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DATES TO CELEBRATE

March 1-31

Music in Our Schools Month

Youth Art Month

Youth Science Month (Canada)

National Nutrition Month

Theme: "Enjoy the taste of eating right"

March 2

Read Across America Day

Dr. Seuss's Birthday

March 3-7

National School Breakfast Week

Newspapers in Schools Week

March 4

Peace Corps Day

March 5

Ash Wednesday

March 6

World Book Day

March 8

Family Genealogy Day

March 9

Daylight Saving Time begins

March 16

Purim

March 17

St. Patrick's Day

March 17-23

Poison Prevention Week

World Folk Tales and Fables Week

March 20

First Day of Spring

March 23

World Meteorological Day

March 25

National Agriculture Day

■ “Concentrate all your thoughts upon the work at hand. The sun’s rays do not burn until brought to a focus.”

~ Alexander Graham Bell

■ “I know nothing of any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream.”

~ Vincent Van Gogh

■ “People don’t slip. Time catches up with them.”

~ Nat King Cole

■ “American people have the ability to laugh at themselves. It is one of the things that makes this country great.”

~ Desi Arnaz

■ “Whether I’m wearing lots of makeup or no makeup, I’m always the same person inside.”

~ Lady Gaga

■ “I never think of the future. It comes soon enough.”

~ Albert Einstein

■ “You have to stand for what you believe in, and sometimes you have to stand alone.”

~ Queen Latifah

■ “Risk is trying to control something you are powerless over.”

~ Eric Clapton

■ “The scientist is a lover of truth for the very love of truth itself, wherever it may lead.”

~ Luther Burbank

■ “Not only are a voteless people a hopeless people. A non-producing people are hopeless also.”

~ Ralph Abernathy

■ “Simplicity is the final achievement.”

~ Frederic Chopin

Help Your Parents Cement Strong Relationships with their Children ... with Ten ‘Power-Packed Phrases’

Choosing the right word at the right time cements a strong parent-child relationship. The National PTA compiled a “Top 10” list of phrases as a handy guide for parents to use in encouraging and supporting their children’s efforts. As with the *“PRincipal Tips”* on page one, consider posting these on your website or including them in your newsletter to help your parents communicate more effectively with their children. The phrases:

- **Thank you.** Always acknowledge your child’s efforts to help.
- **Tell me more.** Words like these show your child that you’re listening and that you’re interested in what’s on his or her mind.
- **You can do it.** Your expression of confidence in your child’s ability to do things without your help is important.
- **How can I help?** As your child takes on school projects, encourage him or her to think of specific steps necessary to complete them. You both can decide which tasks your child can handle and when you might have to help.
- **Let’s all pitch in.** A child is never too young to learn that cooperation and team effort make many jobs easier.
- **How about a hug?** Research indicates that young children deprived of hugs and displays of affection often fail to thrive.
- **Please.** When you ask a favor of anyone – including children, acknowledge that you’re asking for a behavior that will please you.
- **Good job.** Self-respect and self-confidence grow when your child’s efforts and performances are rewarded. Praise should be honest and specific. Focus on effort and progress, and help your child identify his or her strengths.
- **It’s time to ...** Children need structure in their lives to provide a measure of security in an often insecure world. You should establish and maintain a workable schedule of activities, always remembering that your child benefits from regular mealtimes and bedtime.
- **I love you.** Everyone needs love and affection, along with a feeling of acceptance and belonging. You can’t assume that your child knows and understands your love for him or her.

From NSPRA resource files

Is Your School Newsletter *Really* Serving Its Purpose? A Short Reader Survey Will Give You the Answer

Traditionally, the school newsletter is the one regular communication link principals have to parents, “key communicators,” business partners, community leaders and any other stakeholders to whom it’s distributed. Whether your publication is the traditional printed variety or electronic, do you know if it’s serving its purpose as well as it could?

Is your newsletter effectively conveying *important news about your school and student and staff achievements, keeping people well-informed about issues, and providing the kind of information parents expect?* In fact, do you know if it’s the *preferred way your readers would like to receive information?*

As you begin the second half of the traditional school year, this is a good time to learn the answers to those questions.

Don’t Guess ... Evaluate

Evaluation is one of the most important steps in maintaining communication with your stakeholders, or “publics,” but it is often the most overlooked component of public relations. Rather than guessing about the effectiveness of your newsletter, consider a brief readership survey.

A short survey can provide you with answers to all of the questions above. It can be *clipped from a print newsletter, or downloaded/printed or returned electronically from an e-newsletter.* And most importantly, it will enable you to determine if your publication is serving the needs of your readers. A survey now will give you “baseline” information, and then with a second survey at the end of the year, you can measure the value of changes you make, based on the first survey’s results.

Ask about Content and Readability

Survey questions about content should focus on the topics you regularly include, such as:

- Academics
- Learning activities
- Assessments
- Student achievements

- PTA/PTO news
- Parent tips
- Events
- Issues
- Facilities.

Questions about the readability of your newsletter should address:

- Length of stories and columns
- Size and readability of type
- Length of the newsletter itself
- Use of jargon
- Appropriateness of headlines
- Style of writing
- Use of photos or graphics
- Color of paper, if print, or colors used for backgrounds and text, if electronic.

Also, don’t forget to ask if your readers get the news in a timely manner, and if they prefer the current delivery method.

Increase Your Rate of Return

When composing questions, make it easy for your readers. *Be consistent in the style of questions* – whether you use a rating system (for example, a scale of 1-5) or multiple choice. Also, most readership surveys include at least *one open-ended question* for readers to raise a topic you haven’t covered. Most importantly, limit questions to a *number that can be answered in five to 10 minutes.* Completing your survey should not be a burden for parents.

If your survey is printed, the easiest way for readers to return it is probably with a student. Finally, give your readers an *incentive to take the survey.* To get back the highest percentage possible, consider an inexpensive reward such as a coupon from a local business partner or free admission to a high school event (make a deal with the principal), for parents who complete and return the survey.

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