

Is your communication with your community like a marriage? Or a series of one-night stands?

By Paul L. Vranish

Some school districts neglect communication with the community. Many other districts employ what might be called “one-night stand” communication. The leadership of such districts will host community meetings and hear concerns at those times when they want something in return, such as during a bond election.

In our school district, the 1,250-student Tornillo (Tex.) Independent School District, we think communication with the public ought to mirror communication in a healthy marriage: Tell your spouse that you love him or her frequently, and engage in dialogue. There does not have to be a specific reason for communication. It is natural and ongoing.

To manage our message, we have created monthly community meetings that we call parent chats.

Why wait for something to go wrong?

During a prior superintendency, I participated in a community meeting called in response to the firing of a school staff member who had lied on his employment application. Community members were angry, and the school leadership had been dreading the event. The format allowed members of the crowd to ask a question at the microphone, which was to be answered by a member of the panel – the school lawyer, the board president or me.

While every question came from a hostile perspective, to our surprise, an interesting phenomenon manifested itself during the responses. A lot of head nodding was apparent in the audience. When given the facts and the rationale for various decisions, most people agreed with the outcomes.

The value of such interactions was reinforced when, as a doctoral student, I read about instances in which community uproar had unseated the existing school leadership. In every instance, an issue important to the public had received no response or attention from the school administration.

This raised the question, “Why wait for something to go wrong to interact with the community regarding concerns?”

Chat mechanics

Our typical turnout at a Parent Chat – in Spanish, “Charla con los Padres” – is 150 to 200 participants. All chats are held at the high school cafeteria.

Immediately upon entering the school, attendees are welcomed by a staff member who points them to the sign-in sheet.

Young children are escorted to a separate area where they eat pizza and are supervised by teachers and staff.



Photos courtesy of Tornillo (Tex.) Independent School District
Texas superintendent Paul Vranish (upper left) says monthly meals and presentations for parents in the high school cafeteria have built a strong school-community relationship.

Parents enjoy a quality dinner provided by the high school cafeteria staff. We consider the food service a crucial component of a successful chat event.

A typical evening begins with a student performance. A chat is also a great environment for student recognition. At one event, the school board gave an award to every student who passed all sections of the state-mandated assessment test.

A chat can include presentations,

such as a briefing by the district’s architect on plans for a new high school or a slideshow of a recent student trip. We also regularly have Q&A sessions with school board members. We ensure that only two trustees are present so there is not a quorum.

After the presentations we often administer a written quiz about school issues to the audience and provide awards of gift certificates worth as much as \$100. These quizzes are written in

English, which requires about two-thirds of our parents, the Spanish-only speakers, to receive translating assistance from their school-age children.

Each year, one test focuses on the role of the school board. There are always certain people who want members to do their bidding, and that’s not a board member’s role. State school board associations spend a great deal of time and money training board members how to do their jobs correctly, but who’s training parents about what they can legitimately expect from board members?

The test also covers the division of responsibilities between the school board and the superintendent. For instance, one question is: “Can the board fire someone without recommendation from the superintendent?”

Next we ask participants to fill out a short questionnaire. Attendees are asked what they believe the district is doing well, what we may not be doing well and what areas need attention. Once these responses are tabulated and grouped, we generate a written synopsis that’s distributed at the next chat.

To give attendees an exciting conclusion to a night’s activities, we end every event with a door-prize drawing. Often parents will continue the night’s conversations with their friends, neighbors and relatives.

Bond vote barometer

One would have to attend a parent chat to fully appreciate how these exchanges encourage tremendous bonds to develop between parents and the district.

When asked at a National School Boards Association presentation how I knew the chats worked, I responded with this story. We had a chance to acquire state money for building a new campus, but we did not yet need the campus. We asked the public at our chats to support a \$5 million bond issue to lock up the state money, even though we were not going to use it for immediate construction and did not know what campus we would finally build. In fact, the wording on the ballot asked voters to “authorize Tornillo ISD to issue \$5 million in bonded indebtedness,” and nothing else. The measure passed with an 82 percent support. How many of us can pass a school district bond without stating the exact purpose?

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