

FOCUS: COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Squelching Small-Town Rumors Through Parent Chats

BY PAUL L. VRANISH

As an administrator, would you rather have the town gossip educating the public about school issues or retain that task for yourself and the school board? This matter is so important the staff in the 1250-student Tornillo Independent School District has created a formal mechanism to manage our message through the development of what we call parent chats.

Some school districts neglect communication with the community. Many other districts employ, bluntly put, one-night-stand community 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 Tornillo, we treat communication with the public in the same regard as communication in a healthy marriage: You tell your spouse periodically and frequently you love him or her, and you interact in a dialogue. There does not have to be a specific reason for this communication. It is natural and ongoing. The parent chat is designed to function within this paradigm.

Audience Agreement

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.

Later, while enrolled in the doctoral program at the University of Texas at El Paso, I read about several instances where community uproar had unseated the existing school leadership. Every situation had similar characteristics: An issue important to the public had simply received no response and/or attention from the school administration. This begged the question, "Why wait for something to go wrong to interact with the community regarding concerns?" Drawing upon that positive meeting experience during a turbulent time, my district decided to formalize a similar type of community meeting. We needed a catchy name so we called these events parent chats -- or in Spanish "Charla con los Padres."

Chat Mechanics

Parents of a child attending any of our four schools are notified of the upcoming monthly parent chat in a variety of methods. Flyers are posted throughout the community and a letter is sent home through the students. Using a sophisticated computerized phone system, parents receive a recorded phone message, in English and Spanish, inviting them to the chat. Our typical turnout is approximately 150-200 participants.

All chats are held at the Tornillo High School Cafetorium, which has the multimedia equipment vital to the presentation requirements of a chat. 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 teachers and staff provide child care during the evening. Small children are offered pizza and drinks and enjoy games or movies while parents attend the meeting, providing an environment more conducive to the exchange of meaningful dialogue.

A quality dinner, provided by the high school cafeteria staff, is served to the parents to allow an early start time on a school night and as an incentive for attendance. We consider the food service a crucial component of a successful chat event.

A typical evening begins with some type of performance by students. 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.

Up to three topics for informational purposes or dialogue follow. These can be presentations, announcements or Q&A sessions with a pair of school board members. Giving the trustees this platform is a better alternative to the public posturing that sometimes takes place at board meetings. By having only two trustees present, there is no danger of reaching a quorum or creating problems with an illegal meeting. The superintendent is on hand should a question need a more specific response. Examples of other topics include a presentation by the architects who will build the district's new high school; a slideshow presentation of a recent student trip; and a review of the district's academic status. The content and method of presentation will vary, but the question-and-answer dialogue with the audience is absolutely crucial to the success of the chat program.

After the presentations we often administer a written quiz to the audience and provide cash awards for 1st, 2nd and 3rd place. 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. Since the advent of these paired-partner tests at parent chats, we have never since heard this comment from a parent: "I can't help my child with homework because I can't speak English."

The quizzes serve a secondary role as learning instruments. As a parent works through the test, they often find the content includes information discussed at previous chats. We also include test items regarding the appropriate role and duties of a board member. Community members should high yet

accurate expectations of their trustees. Including test items about trustee roles helps to ensure good governance practices.

We then ask participants to fill out a short questionnaire so all opinions receive consideration. Attendees are asked what they believe the district is doing well, what we may not be doing well and what areas need attention. Responses must be signed to be included, ensuring a constructive caliber in the feedback. 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.

Successful Result

One would have to attend a parent chat to gain a full appreciation for the tremendous bond that has developed between the district and parents.

When asked at a National School Boards Association presentation how I knew the chats worked, I responded with a 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," 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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