

The Parent Chat: How to Hammer Small Town Rumors by Paul Vranish and Rudy Barreda

As an administrator, would you rather have the town gossip educating the public about school issues or retain that task for yourself and board trustees? This matter is so important that we created a formalized mechanism to manage our message. Due to the abundance of favorable research, every administrator knows the importance of communicating with parents and developing support from the community. Thinking creatively, the staff at Tornillo ISD has figured out a way to excel in this arena through the development of the TISD “Parent Chats”. In order to better understand what is unique about the Parent Chat as compared to other school-community meetings; it is important to establish the philosophical underpinnings that are the basis for the implementation of the Chat program.

One Night Stand Communication?

Some school districts neglect communication with the community. Many other districts employ what we call “one night stand community communication.” Bluntly put, the leadership of the district will host community meetings and hear concerns at those times when they want something in return; such as during a bond election. It is our belief in Tornillo that we treat communication with the public in the same regard as communication is treated in a healthy marriage: you tell your spouse periodically and frequently that you love him / her and you interact in a dialogue modality. There does not have to be a specific reason for this communication; it is a natural and ongoing process. The Parent Chat is designed to function within this paradigm.

History of the Parent Chat

During a prior superintendency, Vranish had a horrible experience that was the initiating event in his desire to develop a community communication program which we now call the

Parent Chat. To bring his previous district into legal compliance, there was a need to establish a disciplinary alternative program. In response to the job posting, Vranish received a visit from a newcomer to town – we will call him Mike – a 6’ 8” man who asserted the following: he had a Master’s degree, he was about to be certified as a teacher, he had worked for Houston ISD in an alternative campus for a private firm under contract with that district, and that he was a former pro football player (Philadelphia and Seattle) who could accept a teacher’s aide salary because of his “pension from the NFL.” It should be noted that Mike repeated this information, and added some other tidbits; such as, playing experience in the NBA for the Portland Trailblazers, which was printed in an article by a local, weekly newspaper. His references were checked regarding the contract work for Houston ISD and the information was verified. This district, like many small districts, did not have an HR department; personnel tasks were handled by a secretary. Mike was hired to operate the alternative campus and coach varsity basketball.

The school year progressed and a few nagging problems came to light. There were adult basketball tournaments being held in the school gym with no accounting of the entry fee and concession money. Questions were raised regarding state athletic rules that pertained to Mike’s students playing in private tournaments. Other questions were raised regarding the eligibility of a “nephew” of this coach; a terrific basketball talent who just happened to move in with Mike due to “problems in the Houston area.”

Then, one day the next summer, Vranish received a phone call from a lady who identified herself and established her credibility regarding the information she was about to give. She asked if we had a “Mike” working in our district. Upon hearing we did, she then asked, “Has he told you he played pro sports? It’s all a lie.” She then revealed additional problems she had experienced with his performance at the contract alternative center in Houston.

The district's central office staff conducted a preliminary investigation which indicated the pro sports career never happened. Because Mike had become very popular with the community, the board decided to pay for an outside investigation conducted by the school's law firm; hoping to remove any doubts about the matter. The report from the law firm basically stated that Mike's assertions of a sports career appeared to be false and that he was employed by a Houston department store during the time of his supposed stint with the Philadelphia Eagles. It was also discovered that the personnel secretary had missed two important facts: he had not yet been conferred a Master's degree, and the state had rejected his certification application making his teaching contract null and void under Texas law.

The board decided to terminate Mike – but on the night of that meeting, approximately 275 supporters of his flooded the tiny central office forcing the meeting to be moved to another venue. In reaction to actual death threats from some of the crowd – unresponded to by the local police officers who were part of the crowd themselves – the board lost its will and voted to continue Mike's employment. A very frightened board president promised the angry mob a “community meeting” within thirty days to discuss the “problems with the superintendent and the school's morale.” A misinformed community had distrusted the judgment of their own elected board members – who could not give the details of a personnel matter – to support an individual who was truly a charlatan!

The promised meeting was held three weeks later. The format allowed members of the crowd to ask a question at the microphone – which was to be answered by a member of the response panel; the school lawyer, the board president, or Vranish. The school leadership team dreaded this event but received a pleasant surprise. While every question came from a hostile perspective, an interesting phenomenon manifested itself during the responses; there was a lot of

head nodding on the part of the audience. When given the facts and the rationale for various decisions, most people agreed with the outcomes! While the damage was done in that community, and Vranish left several months later, this night had been a positive experience!

After moving to the El Paso area to begin his new position leading Tornillo ISD, Vranish enrolled in the doctoral program at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). As part of a class taught by Dr. Kathleen Stoudt, he read of several different 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 those horrible times in Vranish’s past, we 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.”

Mechanics and Logistics of the Chat

An “on the ground” perspective of how these Parent Chats unfold will aid the understanding of the program’s dynamics. Each month one of the district’s campuses is the “Featured Campus” for the event. As the parent of a child attending one of our four schools, you would be notified of the upcoming monthly meeting in a variety of methods. Flyers are posted throughout the community and a letter is sent to 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, regardless of which campus is featured. This facility contains not only the food service setting needed, but also the multimedia equipment vital to the presentation requirements of a Chat. Immediately upon entering the school, attendees are welcomed by a staff member who provides them access to the sign in sheet. Young children are escorted to another area where teachers and staff provide child care during the evening. Little ones are fed pizza, drinks, and will enjoy games or movies while parents attend the meeting. Our objective is to provide an environment in the Cafetorium 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. “Mom” does not have to go home from work, cook, and come back to the Chat. Since “Mom” is eating at the Chat, “Dad” has incentive to attend as well – since that is where he can find dinner. The cafeteria staff appreciates the added pay; yet their efforts are less costly than that of a caterer. We consider the food service a crucial component to the success of a Chat event. The program will commence when the food service line has diminished.

A typical evening will start with the principal of the host campus introducing the performance for the evening. Usually, the program is some type of performance by students of the featured campus. A Chat is a great environment for student recognition; as at our last event, where every student who passed all sections of the state-mandated assessment test (TAKS) received an award given by a member of the Tornillo ISD Board of Trustees.

The student performance is followed by up to three informational / dialogue topics. These can be presentations, announcements, or Q & A sessions with TISD trustees. The superintendent is on hand – should a question need a specific, technical response. By having only two trustees

present at Q & A events, there is no danger of reaching a quorum or creating problems with an “illegal” meeting. Giving the trustees this wonderful platform is a better alternative to the public posturing by trustees that one can observe at some board meetings. One may view a presentation made by the architects who will build the district’s new high school. At other times, community organizations may make a presentation. For example; we have had members of the community’s water board address the parents regarding current issues. Mr. Vranish may show a slide presentation of a recent student trip. TISD takes students passing TAKS on trips to Los Angeles, Washington DC, and other locales. Another informational topic could be the review of the district’s academic status (this year, three of the district’s four campuses were rated “Recognized” or “Exemplary”), or a presentation on district finances (TISD currently has over a 60% reserve). The content and method of the presentation will vary from meeting to meeting, but the question and answer dialogue with the audience is absolutely crucial to the continued success of the Chat program.

We often administer a written quiz to the audience and provide cash awards for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place. These tests are always written in English; which requires about 2/3 of our parents, the Spanish-only speakers, to receive assistance from their school-age children to translate. Since the advent of these paired-partner tests at Parent Chats, we have never again received the comment from a parent, “I can’t help my child with homework because I can’t speak English.” They have already employed the needed strategy while attempting to win the prizes at Chats.

These tests serve a secondary role as learning instruments. As a parent works through the test, they often find that the content of the test includes information that was discussed at previous Chats. We include test items regarding the appropriate role and duties of a trustee. It is

important that community members have high; yet, correctly focused expectations of their trustees. Including test items about trustee roles helps to ensure good governance practices.

We ask the participants to fill out a short and simple 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 that we, as a district, have never before addressed. Once these responses are tabulated, and similar responses are grouped; a written synopsis is produced which will be on display at the next Chat. Responses must always be signed to be included – which ensures that the caliber of comment is healthy.

To give our attendees an exciting conclusion to a night's activities, we end every event with a door prize drawing. Upon completion of drawing, parents are directed to the child care area to pick up the young children. It is a common occurrence that parents continue the night's conversations with their friends, neighbors, and relatives while exiting to the parking lot.

Does It Work?

This description of a typical Tornillo ISD Parent Chat can, at best, only give the reader an impression of the event. One would have to attend a TISD Parent Chat to truly gain an appreciation for the tremendous bond that has been developed between the district and the parents through the Chats. Mr. Vranish was asked at an NSBA presentation in San Francisco how he knew that the Chats worked. He responded, “We had a chance at some state money for building a new campus, but 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 stated ‘authorize Tornillo ISD to issue \$5 million in bonded indebtedness,’

nothing else. This measure passed with an 82% victory. How many of you here today could pass a bond in your district without stating what it was going to be used for?"

Another example of the effectiveness of the Chat was demonstrated on Election Day, November 6, 2007. Four El Paso-area school districts attempted elections; two for bond issues and two (including Tornillo ISD) for a voter-approved tax increase. The citizens of Tornillo produced the highest per-capita voter turnout in the county to approve a 5-cent tax increase; to be used for a pay raise for district employees. The other three districts all failed in their election attempts; two by crushing margins.

Come See Us!

Visitors from other districts have attended the Parent Chats. Superintendent Vranish, along with members of the board, has given presentations about the Parent Chats at the state TASB/TASA conventions; as well as the national NSBA convention. If you are ever visiting Tornillo, we'd love to have you attend our Parent Chat. If not, our team will be giving a presentation at this year's NSBA convention in Orlando. We hope to see you there!

About the Authors

Paul Vranish is the superintendent of Tornillo ISD; a 1,200-student district just east of El Paso, Texas. Rudy Barreda is the assistant superintendent of the district. Visit www.tisd.us for more information on this exciting public school system!