Communication Essentials
What Superintendents Need to Know and Want to Share About Communicating

This document was created as a result of interviews with local and intermediate school district superintendents. The focus of the interviews was on information about the groups with whom and in the manner in which superintendents communicate on a regular basis. The ideas are shared here in hopes of benefiting others. (Note: this does not reference communication with Boards of Education. For more information, see Administrators’ “Tricks of the Trade,” published by Michigan Association of School Administrators, referenced in bibliography.)

Communicating With the Administrative Team

Building a positive relationship with the administrative team is crucial to a superintendent’s success. Several ideas were shared that would help build collaborative relationships:

- Respect the administrators’ time in meeting agendas, etc.
- Talk with building principals regularly.
- Stay out of their way and let them make decisions pertaining to their buildings.
- Involve administrators in the budgetary process.
- Keep administrators informed of important issues.
- Use e-mail as effective form of communication.
- Seek feedback from administrators on district progress.
- Host an administrative retreat to establish goals, share ideas and voice concerns.
- Remain open for phone calls at all times.
- Meet every week with new principals for mentoring and coaching.
- Review daily bulletins and read building newsletters – offer comments.

Communicating With Staff

Next to the role of communicating with the Board of Education, every superintendent identified the importance of maintaining positive relationships with the staff. Some specifically mentioned the key role of the central office staff in helping the superintendent carry out his/her duties. Other ideas shared include:

- Get to know your staff – by attending staff and departmental meetings, and by keeping them informed of district events and progress.
- Be visible at building and district events – including the first day of school.
- Earn the staff’s trust and maintain it.
- Other specifics include:
  - Maintain e-mail communication with all staff groups.
  - Conduct an entrance interview with new employees to review their background, the employee contract, and discuss expectations.
  - Be friendly, but not “friends”; maintain a professional relationship.
  - Praise and recognize people who work hard to meet goals.
  - Don’t forget the support staff – meet with groups on a regular basis.
  - Remember staff birthdays.
Communicating With and Being Involved in the Community

This is a very important role for which the superintendent is chiefly responsible. Some superintendents shared more traditional methods of communication, such as newsletters, annual reports, and press releases, while others discussed the importance of visibility at school events and website communication (see section below).

Also emphasized was the need to focus on the positive aspects of the district’s performance and success, i.e. “This is a system you can be proud of because...” On the other hand, superintendents stressed that it is essential to be honest and fair with the public: admit if you are wrong, and call people on errors if they wrongly portray district affairs.

A Novel Idea – Key Communicators

The most novel idea encountered was shared by Harold Titus, Superintendent of Carsonville – Port Sanilac Schools. Titus utilizes a group he calls Key Communicators, 48 people in the community who were identified by the Board of Education as having a sphere of influence within the community. The Key Communicators were solicited to help get the word out about district initiatives to families in the district. They receive highlights from board meetings immediately after they are held. Key Communicators, in turn, share the information with others and are asked to contact the superintendent if they have questions about the school.

The system has worked effectively and is considered by the Titus to be “the only authorized grapevine in town.”

Serving the Community

The majority of superintendents also referenced the importance of involvement in and service to the community. Some districts cross the boundaries of more than one community. In these cases, the superintendents identified ways in which they made conscious attempts to be involved in each to some degree. Most superintendents served on some type of community organization or board, including:

- Chamber of Commerce
- Community Athletic Teams
- Community Foundations
- Church Board
- Downtown Development Authority
- Economic Development Commission
- Hospital Board
- Human Services Coordinating Body
- Lions Club
- Rotary
- United Way
- Workforce Development Board

Involvement in meaningful work of the community goes a long way toward establishing a superintendent’s credibility as one who cares about children and families, and who is willing to invest in pursuits that make a positive difference.

“I believe in the ‘bigger brain’. When I facilitate a group, I ask, ‘Who else needs to be at the table?’”

Mike Dewey
Bay-Arenac Intermediate School District

“It is important for the community to feel like we are all in this together.”

Tim Lentz
Sandusky School District
Communicate Via the District’s Website

Nearly every superintendent interviewed emphasized the increasing importance of the district’s website as a communication tool. Some of the ways that websites are being utilized to communicate with the public include posting and hosting the following:

- Classroom curriculum and homework sites.
- Demographic data and local community connections.
- District mission, vision and goals.
- District newsletters, annual reports and superintendents’ messages.
- Feedback surveys to collect input on district initiatives.
- Parent access to student grading software.
- Parent involvement plans.
- Photo galleries to celebrate student events and achievements.
- Staff directories and e-mail portals.

Website pick – Peck Community Schools

The website banner identifies Peck Community Schools as a Professional Learning Community.

The site includes user-friendly navigation systems. It opens with a welcome and news update from superintendent, Dave Bush. It also contains key communication tools, including a district newsletter and Parent Involvement Plan.

Visit the site at www.peck.k12.mi.us

“The Final Word

When all is said and done, there are several ideas that, no matter what your district demographics – small or large, rural or suburban – remain key to a superintendent’s success as an effective communicator and leader:

- Treat people as you would want to be treated.
- Be honest, straightforward and sincere.
- Get back with people in a timely manner.
- Do not pretend to answer questions for which you don’t know the answer.
- Lead by example – which cannot be done sitting in an office.
- Jump in and help wherever and whenever needed – in school and/or the community.
- Choose a district administrator whose style is similar to yours to represent you in public (in your absence) regarding issues or specific tasks.
- Hire good people in key roles, give them the tools and support necessary to be effective, and then get out of their way and let them do their job. If they look good, you will look good.”

Duane Lange
Marlette Community Schools

As we lead schools into the 21st Century, we must explore new ways to forge learning partnerships with school staff, parents and community members. Our children and our collective future are depending on us.
A Bibliography of Communication Resources for Superintendents

Pascopella, A. (2005, May). Selling your schools: Learn how good public relations can alleviate community fears, help support long-term projects, and boost local property values. District Administration, 30-34, 43-44.


Prepared by: Joanne E. Hopper, Director of General Education Services, Sanilac Intermediate School District
Doctoral Candidate, Central Michigan University, Education and Comm