

NSPRA Environmental Scanning Committee: Budget Communications

As responsible stewards of the taxpayers' dollars, school districts across the country are discovering that demonstrated fiscal accountability is important to their residents. More and more residents are seeking to understand complicated school funding issues, and are seeking engagement in budget decision-making.

The top priority when communicating with the community is to be honest, open, and direct. The community is not only parents and staff, but non-parents, business leaders, legislators, students, and parents with children not yet in the schools. Staff members are important because they often live in the community. Open and honest communication includes sharing difficulties as well as sharing information illustrating how school districts are spending their community's tax dollars wisely. Messages need to be delivered over, and over, and over again. The rule of thumb is 12 times, 12 different ways, and then do it all again.

It is important to develop clear goals for the communication efforts, including some of the following:

- Communicating factual information to stakeholders
- Increasing awareness among stakeholders
- Involving stakeholders in the decision-making process
- Keeping the focus on existing and future program qualities
- Maintaining the school district's reputation

Some practical tips for communicating include the following:

- Develop a comprehensive communications plan that specifically outlines the purpose of each communication tool, key messages for each communication, and how the messages will be delivered-by whom, when, and for how much.
- Seize every opportunity to communicate
 - Be honest and factual, but don't exaggerate and don't hold back
- Balance communications with factual information and human factors-loss of staff, loss of long-valued programs and services, closing of a school, etc.
 - Have someone review your materials to ensure that they contain heartfelt messages as well as the facts
- Use a mixture of communication tools, including
 - Face-to-face meetings, small-group gatherings, and forums
 - Develop a PowerPoint
 - If necessary, have interpreters available to help non-English speaking residents
 - Printed communications such as newsletters, newspaper columns, letters-to-the-editor, news releases, and fliers
 - If necessary, have the information translated to meet the needs of your non-English speaking residents
 - Electronic communications such as Web sites, email, and voicemail
- Ensure that there are budgeted time and financial resources for communication efforts
- Provide opportunities for input
 - Open agenda portions of School Board meetings
 - Comment cards
 - Voicemail and email
 - Meetings, forums, and hearings

- Determine who will be the district spokespeople; i.e., the superintendent, business manager, and/or school board chair
 - Put the most credible people on the front line for communications
 - Prepare the spokespeople for meetings and media interviews
 - Ensure that they speak from the heart as well as the head
- Respond to rumors or misinformation
 - Immediately correct any misinformation that is reported in the media. If not, this misinformation is sometimes used again.
 - Have a cadre of residents whom you can call on to respond to letters-to-the-editor. Have the superintendent or school board chair respond, if necessary.
 - Ensure that staff members have the correct information because they often will be approached while out in the community
 - Consider communicating information to your staff first
 - Establish a rumor mill section on your Web site that can be used for immediately correcting any misinformation
- If facing financial difficulties, remind people of your top priority-ensuring that your students receive the best education possible
 - Provide parents, community, and media with information about the good things going on in your schools, and the accomplishments of your students and staff
- Own your problems

Sources and More Information

Some possible resources include the following:

- Oregon School Boards Association's Budget Communication Tools:
<http://www.osba.org/commsvcs/budgtres.htm>
- Budget crisis communications plan:
<http://www.osba.org/HOTOPICS/FUNDING/crisis/commplan.htm>
- A Web search will lead you to an article written on budget communications by Edward Moore in 2003 for the School Business Affairs, *Communicate Your Tough Budget Issues Using the KISS* Principle* (*keep it short and simple)

This tip sheet was prepared for NSPRA's Environmental Scanning Committee by:

Eileen Harvala, APR
 Public Relations Director
 Hopkins Public Schools
 952-988-4024
eileen_harvala@hopkins.k12.mn.us