Public Engagement
TOOLKIT

Tipsheet: Establishing a Key Communicators Network

Real change doesn't happen without personal interaction.

''Publics, or groups, don't act en masse. They follow leaders who are pacesetters. These persons jump-start behavior within the group. Left to their own devices, publics may choose to be led in any direction. The choice is whether or not to influence this direction.''

—Patrick Jackson, editor of PR Reporter

People talk to people ... those people talk to other people. And that is how a lot of school news gets around.

One problem is that this communication system is unreliable and usually one-way. Bits of information filter outward from the schools into the community along informal channels without accuracy or completeness. Thus, rumors form, spread, and become difficult to counteract.

When the misinformation filters back to school officials, it is often too late for a meaningful response, and sparks that could have been quickly snuffed out become major fires.

School board members and administrators from every school district can cite examples in which rapidly spreading rumors caused misunderstandings to multiply. In these cases, crises that could have been headed off happened so quickly that the usual newsletters and news releases were useless.

What?
To control this grapevine system of communications, set up an active key communicator network. Essentially, a key communicator network is a group of opinion leaders who establish solid two-way communications among organizations and their publics. These opinion leaders talk to lots of people who tend to listen to what they have to say. Key communicators agree to disseminate accurate information and correct misinformation about the school system. They keep in touch with school officials and immediately report misperceptions and inaccuracies.

A key communicator network allows a school district to get accurate news out to the staff and community quickly. It enables school officials to intercept potentially harmful rumors. And it costs very little to set up and maintain.

Why?
Research shows that people believe their friends and neighbors more than they believe the media. Marketing research supports this view, revealing that people make major purchases based on what others tell them about a product or a service. It is reasonable to assume that people make decisions about schools the same way. Thus, school officials must spend time cultivating relationships with key employees and community members and keeping them informed if they want to gain understanding and acceptance of their school programs.

Studies have found that mass communication generally does not change minds but only reinforces existing positions, activating opposition as well as support. One-on-one communication, on the other hand, is quiet and speaks directly to the target audiences. The aim of key communicators is to build support, deflecting any effects of criticism.

The media rarely launch crusades; they usually report the ideas of others. A well-organized, campaign targeting opinion leaders discourages attacks by going straight to the people who bring issues to the media.

Benefits of a Key Communicator Network
Being person-to-person in nature, the program enables school officials to establish two-way communication and get a quick pulse of the community.

The program helps to bridge the distance between school officials and the community – the community gets to know school officials as people, not distant figureheads.

Regular communications to key opinion leaders offers more opportunities to convey the many successes of positive accomplishments in the schools.

A major benefit of the program is rumor control or a controlled grapevine whereby volatile issues or confrontations are quickly communicated to these opinion leaders.

Communicating negative news or problems to this group also establishes candor and openness and ultimately will establish credibility between school officials and the citizenry.

Who?
Key communicators are adults and students who have credibility in the community. They may or may not be in positions of authority or officially recognized leaders.

They may be barbers, beauticians, or bartenders. They often are dentists, gas station owners, firefighters, post office clerks, and news agency owners. Within a school, they are often secretaries or custodians. In one way or another, however, these opinion leaders have an interest in their community schools.

Interestingly, opinion leaders who make up a successful key communicator network are seldom the loudmouths who complain at every school board meeting. More likely, they are the people who only speak when they feel it is important and when they have a valid statement to make. They are the people others ask "What do you think about ... ?"

Key communicators should represent the different demographic segments of the community as well as the various segments of the school district staff. Having good two-way communication in place internally is extremely important. Employees resent hearing school information first from community residents.

Key communicators are everywhere, but even though they are highly influential, they may not be highly visible. Their distinguishing characteristics are that they are well-respected and people trust their opinions.

Critics should definitely be invited. In a group of 10 people, one or two critics usually add credibility to the undertaking. Experience has shown that after involvement in a key communicator process, critics frequently become supporters.

Where?
The work of key communicators is carried out in churches, homes, businesses, organization meetings, clubs, or schools. Only one meeting of all the key communicators is usually necessary, and it should be brief and to the point. Much of the two-way communication between a key communicator and school officials is by phone, brief mailings, or in person.

To better communicate with your key communicator network, you may want to set up a telephone system to record 30-second messages relaying the facts of the situation and telling callers to dial another number for more information. If a crisis develops in one school, the system allows calls to the key communicators serving that school.

When?
A good time to start a key communicator network is in the fall. While key communicators are most helpful in a time of trouble or turmoil, you need to establish mutual trust and credibility before you can depend on them to call you when they hear a rumor or to set someone straight who's spreading misinformation.

Once key communicators are identified, it is critical to communicate with them regularly on a personal, one-to-one basis. Their phone calls to school officials should be returned immediately, and their requests for information answered promptly. If you expect them to share good news about the schools, they must have that information in a timely and understandable fashion.

In addition, school officials should contact key communicators whenever there is a need to get information out quickly in order to counteract rumors or to defuse a potential crisis. The key communicators can then make a point of getting the information to the people they meet in the course of their normal activities.

Key communicators should, in turn, contact school officials when they hear rumblings, rumors, questions, or ideas from people in the community. They provide a quick, informal reading of the pulse of the community when a major decision must be made or when a sensitive issue is about to erupt.

How?
It's really not difficult to set up a key communicator system, but it does take some effort. Begin by contacting members of your staff and others from your community that represent various churches, clubs, civic associations, occupations, and so on. Be sure to include all socioeconomic levels.

1. Explain that you are compiling a list of people in the community who are not necessarily visible leaders, but who are respected and listened to and/or who interact with a number and variety of people.

2. Ask them to survey their friends and neighbors for the names and addresses of people they feel fit this description.

3. Give those names and addresses to your key communicator organizer. The names that appear most often will become the nucleus of your key communicator system. Study the list to be sure that all identifiable groups are covered. Since students and employees are prime relayers of information about the schools, be sure that the key communicators from within the schools are part of this list. In addition, analyze each person in terms of district or specific school or area impact.

4. Send a letter to each person on the list to explain the concept and point out how they can assist the district. Assure them it will entail only one meeting and ask them to attend that brief meeting (at a specific time and place) to discuss the program. Point out that you are not asking them to do anything that they aren't already doing but that you want to be sure they know some important information about the schools.

5. Follow up with a personal phone call. Letters alone attract only about half of those invited to meetings. A call by the principal or superintendent usually will generate a larger turnout.

6. Hold the meeting at a school or in the district office. Keep the tone informal. Explain the key communicator concept and illustrate how it might work by sharing specific examples of things that have happened in your district. (Most schools and districts already have small, informal key communicator groups working for them, and explaining how such a group has helped your district is a solid argument for setting up a slightly more formal system.)
   Caution: Don't structure the group. Never appoint a chairperson or committees.

7. Emphasize that the key communicator program is built on two-way communications. You will keep them informed about what's going on, and you want them to tell you about rumblings in the community, questions that many people seem to be asking, or rumors that are flying.

8. Keep them informed. Send them a monthly letter, background reports, school board agendas, and minutes – anything that will help them help you.

9. Return their calls promptly. Nothing will turn off key communicators more quickly than not getting your attention when they have something to report or a question that needs answering.

10. As the year progresses, track your contacts with key communicators to help you evaluate the program. Ask them to assess the program, too.

11. Periodically review the list to make sure it continues to represent the community.

Credits: This tipsheet has been adapted from an article originally published by the Washington State School Directors Association.