

## **Taking School Community Relations Up A Notch**

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### **Abstract**

*“ Schools do not exist apart from the society to be served” (Ubben, Hughes, and Norris, 2011). 21<sup>st</sup> century school leaders must have knowledge, understanding and collaborate with the various external entities in their school community. Most principals think of their community as just being parents and the internal constituents of their school. If the principal has a community relations plan, it does not take into consideration the school’s external community which is much more encompassing and diverse. Public/community relations with a focus on communication is essential for the success of a school, and can lead to a vast number of benefits for students and staff.*

*The author relates successful personal external community experiences as a principal, and provides some key suggestions to enhance communication, as emphasized in Standards 4 and 6 of the Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008.*

With the overpowering pressure of cutbacks in personnel and resources, and accountability to increase student test scores, one of the most neglected opportunities by a principal is that of developing an external public relations program. It is a given that a principal must develop a collaborative partnership with his/her parents, but the external school environment encompasses a much larger scope of diverse community entities.

Schools and principals who communicate with their external communities in an organized way enhance their chances of getting better public support, minimizing criticism, learning the values and priorities of a community, and receiving many functional ideas and resources that will help better educate students. For many principals, any program of communicating with their external public is very limited or nonexistent. Bagin (2001) states that principals who feel a need for an ongoing program usually limit it to parents or to some school-related group. Ubben (2011) further states that a high-performing school requires broad-based community support--support that will come from communities that are well informed and well engaged in the educative processes that go on in the school.

This partnership concept calls for the free and continual exchange of information between parents and teachers and the involvement of parents in school affairs. It includes cooperative work on problems that affect students and advance the cause of education. (Bagin, 2001).

The external school communities that I am referring to are state and federal legislators serving the community, local civic and business leaders, health and social care agencies, law enforcement, chambers of commerce, community service groups such as Rotary, Lions, Optimist, Kiwanis, cultural and fraternal groups, religious and youth groups.

The challenge in community relations is to cultivate collaboration along with the friendship and cooperation with these groups who share mutual interest in education and society within the local school community. It pays to get to know these dedicated individuals who lead these organizations and are committed to serving the community. I have always felt that the time spent as a member of some of these groups in my local school area was well worth it in payoff for my school.

### Where is the Payoff?

There are some excellent benefits that the principal can realize from these relationships and contacts, such as funds for bus transportation for field trips, resources for classrooms and libraries, classroom volunteers, and guest speakers for career programs and equipment, to name a few. At my former high school, when a local newspaper went out of business, I was the first in line for their photographic equipment and supplies for my high school photography class. The local district attorney's office contributed a large trust account acquired from successful lawsuits so that we could use the yearly dividends for student college scholarships. When local business remodeled and replaced equipment, furniture, carpeting, etc, I was eager to accept the donation for my library, classrooms and offices.

At every school that I have led, I have made it a point to visit and meet my neighbors surrounding the school and to solicit their participation in watching my school during after-school hours and report any vandalism or unusual activity. With funding from my teacher's union, I provided each neighbor a metallic pad with the telephone number of the district security office. I visited local fast food restaurants and other student-attracted businesses and gave them my business card so they could telephone the school to report truant and suspicious students. This paid off once for me when a student assaulted another student on campus and then fled to the local donut shop, still in possession of the gun. The manager said he looked suspicious and reported the fact to us, and the police arrested him.

### How a Principal can be a Lobbyist and an Advocate

In the true sense of the word, to lobby is "to influence members of a lawmaking body in their vote" (Webster, 1982). I believe that a principal can advocate for his/her school, students and staff and to lobby on behalf of educational issues at the same time. It is no secret that principals have a great deal of influence in their communities.

That influence can very well be used to your benefit with legislators. A special report in the *Pasadena Star-News* (de Sa, 2010) detailed the fact that lawmakers increasingly depend on lobbyists and the organizations they represent to decide on how to vote on certain issues. The article states that lawmakers generally partner with a sponsor, such as an organization or corporation for most bills they propose. The partnership gives the legislator the support needed to push the law through the legislative process. (July 18, 2010)

In California, the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) with a membership of approximately 16,000 school administrators is highly recognized as the most successful state-wide professional organization representing principals. This association currently maintains a lobbying staff of registered lobbyists to handle all of the policy and fiscal issues that impact preschool through adult education in California, in addition to maintaining a

close liaison with all of the pertinent state boards and agencies, as well as frequently meeting with legislators and their staff. ACSA is the organization that principals call upon to promote their local educational issues and needs through the association's legislative process. With the onset of term limits, the legislators depend on their staff members and lobbyists to provide them with information regarding issues and legislative bills. The most knowledgeable persons on educational issues that the lawmakers can come to for advice are their local school principals. Consequently, an educator does not have to be a professional lobbyist to influence his/her local political leader or legislator.

### Some Helpful Suggestions in Advocating and Lobbying

For advocating and lobbying, I have always considered a variety of community contacts such as local businesses, community leaders and local politicians to be equally as important as legislators. Each person or company will generate an abundance of ways they can benefit your school. One-way and two-way communication is the key. First, identify the names of individuals within the external community who you wish to approach. District offices, the internet, professional organizations and community directories should provide the names and companies that are in your community and who are the local district or civic representatives.

The following are some tips on how to get started developing a successful relationship with external community leaders:

- 1) Get to know the company president or representative, the legislator or community leader. Keep regular contact with them. Each has an interest in the community, including the school.
- 2) Familiarize them with the school and your issues. If they visit your site, prepare an informational paper on the school as well as educational issues and concerns to hand them, e.g. school facilities, transportation, resources, staff/program cutbacks, and positive statements about your school, staff and students.
- 3) Put them on the school mailing list that you use in communicating with the PTA, parents, etc. Send them newsletters, school newspapers, brochures and activity announcements.
- 4) Invite them to events at the school. Give them a reason to visit. Most are very willing to present recognition certificates, gift certificates or plaques at special events honoring the school, students or staff. If they cannot attend they will send a representative.
- 5) Be aware of and sensitive to political realities and hot button issues in the community. Get to know the local companies and businesses. Regularly read the local newspapers and try to get as much information about happenings in the community as you can. Be sure you know your legislators or leaders agendas, both legislative and political.
- 6) Send letters, faxes or e-mails; make phone calls on specific issues to your legislator. Personalize the contact. Do not send form letters. Short is better. Do not send letters asking the author of a bill or issue to support or oppose their own bill. Do send a letter briefly indicating your support or opposition and the reasons why. Include your address.

- 7) Organize or allow group functions at your school such as Town Hall Meetings, special events, banquets, legislative breakfasts, receptions, local business activities etc. This is another opportunity to show off the school to the community.
- 8) Another way legislators or businesses can be involved in the school is through programs such as Adopt-a-School. Invite them to adopt a local school and partner in school activities. There can be many advantages to this, like career speakers, volunteers, providing resources and equipment contributions, and not just monetary gifts.
- 9) Take an active part in the life of the school community. Maintain a membership in community service clubs, chambers of commerce, and foundations, etc. Talk as often as you can before each group about the school and educational issues.
- 10) Be a resource on educational issues for your legislator or group.
- 11) Make personal presentations through visits with legislators, civic and local business leaders. Remember the legislators have local (district) offices, as well as offices at the capital. Always contact them to make an appointment in advance of your visit (about three weeks). Don't be disappointed if you will talk to a staff member or assistant. Staff members communicate regularly with their bosses and are often better acquainted with the specifics of an issue or company. Never underestimate the importance of a legislator's staff. Call on them when you don't want something specific, and be brief. Attend their fundraisers.
- 12) Include staff members from your school or administrative colleagues, when you visit local businesses, government leaders and legislators. Keep the group small, no more than two to four. If you have more than that, you may overwhelm the person and sometimes their offices are too small to hold everyone anyway. The team approach is always very helpful and supportive.
- 13) Remember to always follow-up meetings with a letter of appreciation, and include any promised pertinent information.
- 14) Take the opportunity of a special event in the community by volunteering student entertainment such as your orchestra, band, choral group, student clubs, etc. In many ways, students do more to keep the school in the public eye and win support than some of the other things that are done to bring about good community relations. Look at this as another opportunity to advocate for your school. Some schools overlook the opportunities connected with such routine events as commencements, plays, musicals, athletic events and service projects.
- 15) Take part in advocacy/lobbying opportunities at the state and federal levels organized by your professional associations such as ACSA's Legislative Action Day and Chamber of Commerce Grass Roots Day.

**GET INVOLVED IN YOUR COMMUNITY AND STAY INVOLVED. IT PAYS OFF FOR YOUR SCHOOL IN POSITIVE COMMUNITY RELATIONS!**

## References

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