

Public Advocacy



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Everybody's Job

Focus on customer service improves community relations

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, FLORIDA'S

Osceola County Schools had a back-to-school hotline in place for parents. If transportation was the issue, all you had to do was press 1. For other concerns, press 2 and you would be routed to the communications department.

"That year, a lot of the calls coming in on line 2 wanted transportation information," says Dana Schaefer, public information officer for the 67,000-student district. "Parents were very, very upset. If we were hearing about it, guess who else was hearing about it: the superintendent and school board."

An investigation showed the transportation department had unplugged most

of the hotline phones. Hold times were long and calls were disconnected or not being returned. The district, quite simply, had a huge customer service problem on its hands.

The timing, in retrospect, could not have been better. The school board and superintendent were working on a new strategic plan, and customer service became a large part of it. Over the past two years, the district has developed standards and guidelines, trained its staff, and established an awards program for schools that provide outstanding service to parents and the community.

"We now focus on customer service every single day in our county," Schaefer

says. "Just like academics and community engagement, it's everybody's job."

STUDYING CUSTOMER SERVICES

For school districts faced with competition from private schools and charters, customer service is quickly becoming "next-level school communication," according to a forthcoming study by K-12 Insight, a Herndon, Virginia-based company that works to "help school leaders build trust and drive positive change in their local communities."

The study, which was sponsored by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), includes more than 500 responses from superintendents, school board members, and communications leaders. At press time, it was scheduled to be released in mid- to late September, according to Shelby McIntosh, K-12's vice president of client success.

According to McIntosh, more than 90 percent of schools list building trust with community members as very important. However, a 2017 survey of parents by researchers at Rice University showed only 34 percent of parents whose children are enrolled in traditional public schools were satisfied with the level of community engagement, compared to 47 percent of charter school parents.

"School districts are realizing that without focusing on the customer experience, we don't get to do the work that we want to do," McIntosh said, while offering a sneak peek of the study's findings during a session at NSPRA's summer conference in Washington, D.C. "Customer service is not the weekly newsletter. It's not push-out communication. It really is about taking things to the next level in terms of how you interact with parents and your community."

'WHAT IS GOING ON FOR THE REST OF US?'

Melissa Martinez is the chief communi-

cations officer for El Paso Independent School District, which serves 57,000 students in 85 schools. The inner-city Texas district, which has open enrollment, is facing declining numbers due to urban sprawl and an aging population.

“Our buildings are older. They’re not shiny and new like the other districts, and a lot of that comes from being the largest and oldest district in our area,” Martinez says. “We talk to parents about the fact that we offer something more. It’s not the schools you went to.”

With nine districts in the county, two of which also have open enrollment, as well as a large number of charter and private schools, Martinez says her district has strategic and targeted marketing efforts aimed to “reintroduce ourselves to the community.” But, several years ago, an experience involving incoming Superintendent Juan Cabrera showed her that “all the marketing dollars in the world wouldn’t matter if a parent went to our schools and their experience wasn’t a good one.”

“Our superintendent was visiting schools, unannounced, just as a regular guy, with his child and his wife,” Martinez says. “He went to one of our schools and asked to see the principal, saying he was thinking about enrolling his daughter there. The secretary said he couldn’t do so without an appointment and told him the principal was not available.”

The superintendent left his name and number with the secretary, who “luckily” gave the message to the principal, who recognized Cabrera’s name and sprinted to find him.

“Before the superintendent got to his car, the principal ran out and said, ‘How can I help you?’” Martinez recalled during the NSPRA session. “If the superintendent of schools had that type of experience, what is going on for the rest of us? At the time he was just a regular

person coming in off the streets.”

The school district has since provided customer service training for the front office staff in all of its schools. At least one administrator at each school also has participated in the training.

“We told them we were not asking them to compromise safety, to open the doors wide and let anyone in,” Martinez says. “It’s the little steps you can take to make a more friendly environment. A lot of times they just didn’t know what to do. Now they actually have those tools on how to deal with those difficult people.”

Martinez says setting expectations for “stellar” customer service, especially around response times, has “made it a lot easier for the community to talk to us.” All calls must be returned within three business days, and the central office now monitors response times to inquiries.

“Usually it’s a crisis that pushes you into these types of decisions, but ultimately it can make you much better,” Martinez says, noting that her team often goes out to schools to give tours to parents. “It does take time. It takes energy. It takes effort. But everyone we talk to about marketing we also talk to about customer service. They’re starting to understand it, and now they get it.”

IT’S A JOURNEY

During the NSPRA session, McIntosh did not delve deeply into the forthcoming report, but she noted a few recommendations to help schools and districts improve customer service. Among them:

- Tie the customer experience to your district’s strategic plan. “It has to be baked in to be funded,” McIntosh says. “It has to be a priority right up there with teaching and learning.”
- While customer service often falls under communications, McIntosh says partners such as the human resources

department are critical. “Don’t do it alone,” she says. “Find like-minded departments to do this with you.”

- Customer service is not a one-time expenditure nor a single staff development opportunity. “This is a journey,” McIntosh says. “You’re not going to put a lot of money and a lot of time behind this for one year and then put it away. This is a multiple-year commitment.”
- Measure how your training is working by tracking response time and developing ways to gain feedback through surveys and other types of quantifiable data.

“This gets talked about a lot at the start of school because first impressions are so real,” McIntosh says. “Everyone is starting to feel the urgency around this, and schools find themselves talking about customer service more and more. This is something that’s not going away.”

To look at a preview of the report and get access to a copy when it’s released, go to www.k12cxreport.org. You can also download various free resources there to help in implementing and refining your own customer service programs.



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