

Telling Your Story

A Communications Guide for School Boards

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Introduction

School board members have one mission: to provide the best education possible for all children. You do this by making decisions that affect every important aspect of our K-12 public education system, governing a \$432 billion industry for a pittance.

And yet, negative messages about school boards and public education abound in the media, which tends to cover stories of board dysfunction or controversy or frame public schools as “failing.” That’s because we’ve let others tell our story and define the agenda for public education.

We hear that public education should run more like a business, and that schools with struggling students should convert to charters or close, or be given a tax-supported vouchers to religious-based schools.

We know many businesses refuse to operate in the neighborhoods and outlying areas we serve, and that children are so much more than the sum of their test scores. The “run it like a business mantra” also puts hard-won fights for creating democratic and socially just schools at risk.

How can you change that perception? By telling your stories — of how your board is making a difference, of how your district is improving student achievement, of how public education matters in your community.

Talking about your board’s goals and priorities for improving the district is not, in and of itself, a topic that will interest the public, the media, or your critics. But showing how those goals and priorities have led to improvements in student achievement can make a difference.

Simple demographic shifts underscore why we need more proactive storytelling about why locally controlled public schools are so important. An aging population and other trends mean fewer U.S. adults have school-age children.

In terms of impact, this means public schools can do a great job of teaching students and communicating with parents, and still miss 70 percent of the people upon whose support they depend. Lacking relevant, first-hand knowledge, voters are going to rely on news coverage, neighborhood gossip, water cooler discussions, and other personal experiences to fill the gap.

As a result, simply doing a good job is no longer good enough. We have to do a good job, and tell parents and the public about it — on a daily basis. Does your community understand how your board’s decisions set the stage for gains in student achievement? Do your business leaders care about the impact that your decisions have on their bottom lines? Are you showing your mayor and your county and state leaders how your local leadership is leading to dramatic improvements in your public schools?

The reality is that public education today is an incredibly complex human enterprise, one that simply defies many of our most coveted business maxims.

This toolkit does not attempt to give you everything you need for a solid communications program. It is designed to spur conversations by your board and district administrators about ways to tell the story of school board leadership and public education. Better public support for public schools is possible, but it requires courageous leadership and a strategic approach that views communications as a never-ending campaign.

It is time to tell your story.