

## Public Advocacy



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of 1 percent of their budgets on communications, according to research by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). As a point of comparison, large charter school companies spend 20 percent to 45 percent of their dollars on marketing.

As Rich Bagin, NSPRA's executive director, notes: "Show me any multimillion-dollar budget entity whose growth and success depend on a good reputation that also spends almost nothing on communication, and I will show you a failing organization or one that is destined to fail."

### PROFESSIONAL ISLAND

Earlier this year, I attended my first NSPRA conference in several years. The meeting was held in Washington, D.C., and I wanted to catch up with some former school PR colleagues as well as check out the latest trends in my former line of work.

I freely admit to a certain nostalgia for the five years I spent in Rockingham County. My wife and I had three children in the first 15 months I worked there. The support we received from co-workers proved that school district employees are some of the most family-focused people you will ever meet.

But if you think working as a department of one was a luxurious 40-hour-a-week gig, you would be sadly mistaken. The long hours were comparable to any previous newspaper, and I've joked that the primary difference between the two jobs was that the school district had a bounty of available office supplies.

At the NSPRA conference, I decided to attend a session on the challenges of working in a one-person shop, primarily to see what had changed since I left school PR. These sessions are staples for those who often find themselves working on a professional island where few — if any —

# A Department of One

Tales from solo communications practitioners

**TWO-PLUS DECADES AGO, I LEFT** the newspaper business to become the public information officer for a North Carolina school district still reeling from the challenges of a contentious merger three years earlier.

The goal, as stated in my job description, was to develop a unified communications program for Rockingham County Schools, which had merged three city districts and a fourth that served unincorporated areas. It was part of the 1990s merger mania that saw the number of districts in North Carolina and other states shrink dramatically.

Like other districts that had undertaken similar initiatives, consolidation had proven contentious. Within a year, the superintendent had been forced out.

The following year, a redistricting plan failed. A huge bond issue — one that would result in the construction of five new schools and renovations to several others — was coming up for a vote in a few months.

The new superintendent, a person I credit, to this day, with teaching me a great deal about how schools operate, knew a focused communications program could make a great difference. There was only one issue, something that remains all too common in school districts: I would be a one-person shop, with limited to no administrative support and a \$6,000 annual budget.

Granted, that \$6,000 would be more in terms of today's dollars, but school districts still spend less than one-tenth

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colleagues truly understand their roles.

“When we have a problem, people say they were going to call me next,” said the communications director for a West Virginia district. “I say: You should have called me first. That’s how we could have avoided this.”

So what has changed for solo communications practitioners since I left Rockingham County in 2001? The media landscape is certainly much different, especially given the rise of social media and the decline of traditional news outlets. Discourse is more strident, especially in areas that are struggling economically.

But in terms of the day-to-day work, the answer is, “Not that much.”

**CONSTANT CHALLENGE**

Given the challenges all public schools face, a compelling case can be made to increase communications funding in any district. A one-person shop is certainly better than having no one in the position, but you need to be realistic from the outset in terms of what can be accomplished.

In Rockingham County, we had our share of successes: The bond issue passed. The district was praised for its handling of a devastating tornado. We became more aligned as a single district, rather than four separate ones. Our schools scored well on the state’s accountability program. We developed partnerships with local newspapers and other businesses that helped raise the profile of our students and staff.

But the lack of budget and staff resources restricted our ability to get more

done, and more important, to prepare for a future that would turn uncertain. A severe economic downturn, combined with declining fiscal support for education from a changing state legislature, was on the horizon when I left in the spring of 2001.

Not being able to devote time to long-term strategy is a common — and valid — concern you’ll hear from those who work in one-person shops. If you’re constantly reacting, strategy gets thrown out the window, often to the district’s detriment.

“It’s impossible to do everything,” said the director of a 5,200-student school district in New Jersey. “I’ve had people tell me they want a website and a social media campaign to promote a certain initiative, and they don’t think about the strategy behind it. I have to explain to them why it’s unwise to just jump into all of these tools without a strategy. You can’t always be crafting something as you go along. Ad hoc doesn’t work all the time.”

Another school PR veteran, this one from a 14,000-student district in Georgia, says “figuring out how to get everything done without scrambling all the time” is her biggest challenge.

“I desperately want to be strategic, but survival is often the mode I find myself in,” said the communications director for a 3,800-student school district in Missouri. “It’s often tactics. How do you do everything within this amount of time? There’s so much to do with so many stories to tell and only so much time.”

That was echoed by a Massachusetts

communications director who was the first person hired for her role.

“It’s a constant challenge, because I’m forced to play defense rather than offense. It’s not what I want to do but what I need to do,” she said, noting that two parents have been “relentless” in making public records requests since she took the job. “Fortunately, the superintendent has been understanding. I don’t know what I would do if that wasn’t the case.”

For a Virginia communications director, finding the work-life balance has been a challenge as well, in part because she also supervises staff development and school safety for her district.

“If I’m going to stay in this role in this district, this will be my life for the time being,” she said. “I know I’m not irreplaceable, but I’m needed. Being able to focus on that rather than the struggles and challenges helps me get through those tough things at work because sometimes I don’t know which direction I’m going.”



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