

Tips for Communicating During Tight Budget Times!*

Remember to: communicate ... communicate ... communicate!

Focus on face-to-face communications.

Five Tenets of Crisis Communications

Crisis Communications must be:

1. **Prompt.** Or rumor and innuendo fill the void.
2. **Compassionate.** Consider the reality that addressing feelings is often more important, initially, than addressing facts.
3. **Honest.** Or it will come back to bite you.
4. **Informative.** Enough information to create a story without legally compromising your position.
5. **Interactive.** Allow for two-way communication with all important audiences, using methods appropriate to each.¹

What do we communicate?

- Develop key messages to communicate with your audience(s).

Communicate to whom?

- Staff
- Key communicators/opinion leaders
- Parents
- Legislators
- General community
- Media

How do we communicate these messages?

- E-mail
- Key communicators
- Face-to-face meetings
- Internal & external newsletters
- School Web sites
- Media (local newspapers, radio, television, school cable programs etc.)

Number one priority: Keep staff well informed.

Research shows that the public views school employees as the most trusted source of information about schools – especially budget cuts.

In fact, 90 percent of all information people receive about schools comes from staff - including teachers, counselors, custodians, bus drivers, and secretaries as well as administrators.

Employee communication tips

- Employees prefer hearing major news from direct supervisors, face-to-face, so plan frequent, regular “stand up” meetings. The grapevine is the fastest communication tool, so feed it often with accurate information.
- E-mail lists are a vital link for fast-breaking information; but not all employees are “linked” so make sure someone is assigned to post/distribute hard copies.
- Have a method to announce school board and budget committee decisions the morning after meetings occur. This could be a “Board Action Update” e-mail or faxed newsletter to staff.
- Be open and honest; whether it’s good or bad news, staff should be the first to know.
- Good communication should be on-going: Have new employee orientation and recognition programs and periodic training in good communication and “customer service” skills.

Establish a Key Communicators Network:

A key communicator network allows a school district to get accurate news out to the staff and community quickly. It enables school officials to deal with potentially harmful rumors before they are blown out of proportion. And it costs very little to set up and maintain.

Essentially, a key communicator network is a network of opinion leaders who establish solid two-way communication between an organization and its publics. These opinion leaders talk to a lot of other people, and their audiences tend to listen to what they have to say. They agree to correct misinformation and to disseminate accurate information about the school system. They also keep in touch with school officials and immediately report misperceptions and inaccuracies before they are widely spread.

Research shows that people tend to believe their friends and neighbors more than they believe the media or publications. Marketing research supports this view by 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 in 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, thus activating the opposition as well as supporters. One-on-one communication, on the other hand, is quiet and speaks directly to the target audiences. The aim of one-on-one communications, through a network of key communicators, is to build support, thus deflecting the effects of criticism, should it come.

Who are Key Communicators?

- Key communicators are adults and students who talk to and are believed by a large number of people in the community. They may or may not be in positions of authority or

officially recognized leaders. In fact, most are not recognized as being the formal power structure of the school district or the community.

- They may be barbers, beauticians and bartenders. They are frequently 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 the schools of their community.
- Interestingly, opinion leaders that make up a successful key communicator network are seldom the people who complain at every school board meeting. They are more likely to be the people who only speak when they feel it is important and when they have a valid statement to make. They are the people to whom others ask, “What do you think about...?”
- Key communicators should represent the many different demographic segments of the community as well as the various segments of the school district staff. Having a good two-way communication system 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 their peers respect them and other people trust their opinions.
- Critics should definitely be invited. In a group of 10 people, one or two critics usually add a needed bit of credibility to the undertaking. Experience has shown that after involvement in a key communicator process, critics frequently become supporters without having a negative effect on others.

Communicate to build support

Start early, focus on personal relationships

Effective communication about your budget crisis will be the key to public understanding and support of the solutions you create.

The good news out of this turmoil is schools have a great opportunity to build better public understanding of the financial challenges schools face.

Consider these goals to get you through the next few months:

- **Create awareness.** Informing staff and your Key Communicators via e-mail, letters, face-to-face communication and newsletters is a top priority because these groups are your “rumor control” and trusted information sources. If you don’t have a Key Communicator Network, start one. Consider creating an easy-to-understand description of your school budget, how the money comes and goes – you’ll use this repeatedly! Include room on it for people to jot down questions or ideas.

- **Inform and educate.** Consider asking your local newspaper to write a series on your situation or submit a guest opinion by your board chair or business manager. If you have school newsletters, make sure each has an article about your budget situation.
- **Target key groups.** Get a speaker (board member, superintendent, business manager) on the agendas of your local service clubs, site councils, senior citizen club, chambers of commerce - anyone who has a regular meeting.
- **Create a section on your Web site.** Post the budget explanation sheet we mentioned earlier and allow staff and public to provide feedback. Update the site often.
- **Convene a Key Communicator meeting.** If you haven't met with local civic leaders lately, this would be a good time - before you start budget hearings. Hold a series of breakfasts or lunches. Allow time for questions and feedback. Consider sending a personalized letter from your board chair and superintendent about the challenges you face.
- **Establish a spokesperson.** Your financial situation is complex, so make sure you have one expert who can explain the process when reporters call. This is likely district business manager or superintendent.
- **Keep everyone in the loop.** Use the tools you've created to keep each audience informed as your budget adoption process evolves. Focus on communicating with staff first.

Tips for Talking to the Media about Tough Budget Times:

General Media Considerations

When speaking with parents, community leaders and the media, remember to use your "key messages" to communicate what your district is doing.

Media Tips

- Prepare media packets and include facts, figures, and program information about your district. Include annual reports and/or other easy-to-understand publications. Have these materials on hand at all times.
- Once you know the areas that will be affected by cuts, determine three key messages and prepare related talking points to make sure these messages are concisely and consistently presented to the media.
- The school board and staff are a part of the communication team. They should have access to the key messages/talking points to allow everyone communicate the same messages.

- Hold media interviews in an active program location, not the superintendent's or principal's office. Let them see, firsthand, the student- and teacher-driven activities that are taking place in your building(s).
- Stick to the facts. Make sure all the information you share with the media and your various publics is factual, straightforward and consistent.
- Establish a target audience before meeting with the media; get a clear message of who needs to hear the message to reach your goal.
- Don't use "educationese" or jargon. Use language geared toward your target audience.
- Answer each question and then be silent. Refrain from embellishing your comments and resist subtle pressure to chat about them.
- Don't dwell on the problem(s); emphasize what you are doing to improve a given situation(s).
- If a negative question is asked, "bridge" your response to the message you want to convey.
- Always remain positive. This is an opportunity to provide great clarity about what your district does and whom you serve.
- If you have questions about communicating with the media or need assistance, contact the person in your district responsible for media relations, call your intermediate school district or contact the Michigan School Public Relations Association at www.mspra.org.

Acknowledgements:

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* Oregon School Boards Association (OSBA)

¹ Jonathan Bernstein, President & CEO of Bernstein Communications, Inc.

² Michigan School Public Relations Associations (MSPRA)