Building Staff Support for New Ideas

Panelists:
Mandelé Davis, Strategic Planning Project Manager, SKY Partnership, Spring Branch ISD
Adam Hawf, Assistant Superintendent, Louisiana Department of Education
Moderated by Joe Jones, Research Analyst, CRPE
Notetaker: Rosa Pazhouh

Main Takeaways:

1. **School staff should be seen as an important stakeholder group** and one to always be considered in communication and engagement processes.
2. In building staff support for new ideas, sequencing is incredibly important. **Staff should be made aware prior to external groups of any major impact decisions.** External groups can include the media, for example.
3. **A strong communications strategy should encompass several elements**, such as being inclusive and proactive with engagement, and creating a clear narrative that drives the desired story that is easy for others, including staff, to repeat to external stakeholders.

Summary:

Adam Hawf of the Louisiana Department of Education shared his lessons learned on building communications campaigns around the controversial topic of school closures. Hawf noted two critical points: (1) any communications strategy rollout will be a learning process, and (2) the key is to align all internal stakeholders with a clear vision and message that can be repeated to external stakeholders. Based on his experience, he believes that districts should inform all constituents, including staff, about major changes.

Mandelé Davis of the SKY Partnership discussed her approach to communication and building staff support as it relates to district-charter collaborations. In the context of partnerships and collaborations, she stressed the importance of identifying and engaging with stakeholders in order to cultivate support for new ideas and projects. To this end, decision makers should begin with preliminary conversations of possibility and create one singular message for the partnership. With a view to maintain support, lead communicators within the partnership must keep stakeholders updated and informed to ensure they are keenly aware of ongoing successes. In addition, partners should look to collaborate centrally on branding, messaging, collateral material, media releases, and emergency/crisis communications plans.

Key Discussion Points:

Highlighted below are several critical factors that can lead to successful district communications with all stakeholder groups, especially in the context of school closures.

1. Start with a clear vision of how you want the literal and figurative headline to read, and plan backward from there.
2. Generally, the best headlines come from a simple message focused on students and how the decision to close the school will improve academic achievement and/or otherwise help them.

3. Create a detailed project plan sequencing all internal and external communications, including central office staff, school-based staff, parents, and the public.

4. Create a detailed list of all stakeholders and the sequence in which you will communicate with them. For example, engage with elected officials on the front end rather than back end, because if you make their job easier, they will be much more collaborative.

5. Be prepared to repeat the same points over and over again with the intention of getting people to understand and accept your facts and rationale even if they dislike your decision.

Further Discussion Points/Research:

**Best principles:** A strong communications strategy should include the sharing of best principles among districts and other groups in the education sector. It is important to note that these principles are not necessarily best practices, because communications will differ in context and across districts. Research may be done to synthesize available best practices in order to develop universal best principles that support a successful communication strategy.

**Engaging with staff prior to making decision:** Further research could be done to understand how and why the timing of engagement with staff differs among districts and the effects of such timing decisions. Adam Hawf proffered that the best strategy prior to making a final decision is to engage with staff on an informal basis in order to gather intelligence about how they already feel and what they are most concerned about. By avoiding formal engagement, the decision makers can avoid providing assurances and promises they cannot keep.