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Communicating Change in Education: Ideas from a PR Expert

The portfolio district strategy, like any bold public sector initiative, requires broad endorsement.¹ Principals and teachers must understand the approach and its potential to enhance their work. Members of the community must feel they have a voice. Parents must believe that the district is acting in the best interests of their children. Yet district leaders seeking support for change often face instead the twin challenges of disengagement and deep engagement. Some families and community members have tuned out the heated debates around public education reform, or have simply come to expect the worst. For others, the difficult decisions that are a consequence of performance management, such as closing schools, inspire fervent protests. So we wind up with opposing camps, each of which feels like they lose.

This presents a formidable political challenge for district superintendents—one that they too often underestimate. Regardless of how successful a strategy is in raising student achievement, failing to engage the public at the outset and throughout implementation will simply mobilize opposition. For this reason, public engagement is one of the key components of the portfolio strategy.

District leaders and elected officials can build meaningful engagement and support for the strategy they are implementing through a carefully considered and executed approach to communications. Researchers at the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) interviewed John Ulyot, a senior vice president in media relations and issues management at Hill & Knowlton's

Washington, D.C., office. Ulyot recommends four strategies for building effective communication around district change efforts: hire a professional firm, develop an achievable plan, pay attention to communication pathways, and anticipate opposition.

1. Hire a professional firm

An experienced public relations firm that understands education reform and the local context can help a district successfully roll out changes. To ensure a good fit, Ulyot recommends soliciting proposals from five or six firms, using an RFP that clearly states the project's goals.

A school district's comprehensive strategy shift is no less complicated than a political campaign, and explaining the ideas behind it must be handled just as thoroughly. Hiring a firm provides an outside, third party that can translate the district's work to the public and use polling and other methods to better understand the public's priorities and interests. The firm can assign experts to focus on planning and launching a large-scale strategic message campaign. This will take the burden off district employees, who may not have the time or expertise to play this role effectively.

2. Develop an achievable plan

Districts should develop a strategy that can be laid out in terms of achievable goals with clear milestones. For example, Ulyot suggests that rather than just aiming for "improved schools," a district should provide quantifiable student outcomes it wants to

1. The portfolio strategy is a continuous improvement model for districts that aims to dramatically affect student outcomes at scale. The strategy, built around [seven key components](#), creates diverse options for families in disadvantaged neighborhoods by opening new high-performing, autonomous schools; giving all schools control of budgeting and hiring; and holding schools accountable to common performance standards. Learn more at <http://www.crpe.org/portfolio>.

achieve and timelines for doing so. If the district is planning to open or close schools, clear criteria and timelines should be publicized. Stakeholders can easily comprehend the number of schools expected to reach specific outcomes by a specific time. The district should keep the spotlight on this effort and provide information to the public and media as milestones are met or not.

When strategies include identified, achievable goals, leaders will be able to provide the proof of progress required for people to want to stay the course. Early wins can build support for further change.

3. Pay attention to communication pathways

Communications plans are critical. Who should be included? When should different community leaders and constituents be brought in? How is information being conveyed? Those leading education reforms should identify and recruit key stakeholders to offer input on potentially controversial decisions, as well as on the overall strategy. Input and support from a variety of constituents early on will help to sustain the strategy beyond changes in leadership.

Key opinion leaders should be briefed on ideas before they are made public. Key players who are caught off guard may become adversaries, says Ullyot. In 2008, Washington, D.C., city council members learned about then-chancellor Michelle Rhee's plans to close specific schools in their districts only by reading about it in the newspaper; their bitterness about being left out of the loop never abated. Leaders intent on moving forward, however, should make sure that the briefings are just that, and not an invitation to stop the train. Even if Rhee had told them about the closings earlier, the council members would still have tried to prevent them.

It is important to develop communications for each stakeholder group specifically. Every decision is likely to affect parents, students, teachers, school leaders, service providers, alumni, and others in different ways. Even within groups, effects will vary. For instance, parents may have different reactions to changes based on where their children attend school. Therefore, Ullyot says, "it

is important to consider who communicates with each group. For example, community leaders who support the strategy may be more effective at communicating with parents than district staff would be." On the other hand, the superintendent is the best person to bring a message to board members.

Social media provides an excellent opportunity to seek differentiated input regarding the district's strategy and new ideas. Districts should consider using social media tools to communicate directly with different stakeholder groups and to gather feedback and gauge public opinion.

Local media is another key communication pathway. Districts must be proactive about communicating with reporters. They should provide the press with information for stories, invite reporters to visit schools where new initiatives are showing success, and regularly meet with reporters to keep them apprised of the progress of the work. Proactive engagement of the media gives districts the ability to shape the story rather than simply react to it.

4. Anticipate opposition

District leaders need to anticipate counterarguments. Ullyot suggests districts host question-and-answer sessions when they announce changes, predict questions that might come up at that time and later, and be prepared with responses. It would help to read news coverage of other districts that have made similar changes in the past, and to connect with leaders of those districts to discuss successful strategies and potential pitfalls. The more engagement that occurs before changes are set, the easier it is to address stakeholders' concerns up front and prepare people for what comes next.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IS NEVER FINISHED

Large-scale systems changes require an entirely different level of strategy and marketing than do other district initiatives. Those driving the effort must be careful that their passion for reform does not turn people off or shut them out. Some families or community

members may distrust the work, while others may not benefit from it at all. Leaders need to be sensitive to those who resist; their reasons are important to hear and address.

Detractors will often challenge districts in transition, saying they have not achieved enough given all the wrenching change, and that things should go back to the way they were. In these cases, Ulliyot urges district leaders to remind the public that they are working hard within an imperfect system. Even districts that have mayoral control or appointed school boards are still limited by state law, labor rules, and other constraints.

Few districts have figured out how to make progress while attending closely to process. Portfolio districts are known for developing bold plans and embarking on them, often with the conviction that the righteousness of their actions and the eventual improvement of outcomes will be enough to bring people on board. But it's not enough to be right, or even effective; that's not how the public sector works. Though officials get some points for wanting to change things for the better, these count for little when controversy arises. And new initiatives seldom improve outcomes so dramatically that results alone are enough to convince skeptics.

Because of that, district leaders can't afford to neglect public engagement as a key part of their work: they must engage key community leaders seeking change, build a communications strategy early, and gather data to prove their case. They must do a better job of conveying what they are trying to do, why people should support it, and what families and communities can expect to gain. Again and again, the public needs to understand how these changes will help their children.