



February 2015

Principals: The Lead Communicators in the Portfolio Strategy

Paul Hill, Shannon Murtagh

Introduction

A news reporter wants to know what has led to big gains in reading scores at an elementary school. Why funds for a choir program have been redirected to math interventions at a middle school. Why a high school's parking lot isn't plowed. Who should answer these questions?

Traditionally, it's the district—however, perhaps it's time to rethink that. School system leaders often believe they can best avoid controversy by controlling all communication and messaging to the public, but they then put themselves in the position of having to please everyone and defend every decision. Anchoring communication at the school level actually insulates a central office from the politics of reform by making it clear that school leaders are the ones making decisions. School systems using the portfolio strategy—autonomous schools held accountable for performance—might learn that empowered principals can be assets for public engagement.

The Need for Better Communication

As the portfolio strategy grows in an increasing number of cities, focused, planned, and extensive public engagement is a necessary part of the strategy. But the strategy is not just one initiative—it's what holds all of a district's actions together. That's a complicated notion. It's a multi-year effort that involves highly public actions like replacing or closing schools. It takes time to gather evidence about the impact on students and, even when the benefits are clear, voters and opinion leaders need to understand how these benefits are a result of the portfolio strategy. They need to know that the strategy exists, that it is different from the traditional system, and how it is expected to work.

School districts are always announcing new strategies. Casual observers will naturally assume that the portfolio strategy is simply an addition to the current system. Strategy leaders and implementers have to overcome these assumptions.

Portfolio leaders must also anticipate opposition. If the strategy is to survive long enough to make a difference, leaders must be prepared to handle criticism and maintain a positive balance between support and opposition. They must develop new constituencies from the civic, cultural, business, foundation, and higher education communities to counter likely opposition from unions and others who fear change. Leaders must also ensure that students and their families know about the strategy and understand how it benefits them.

How does the “CEO”—the superintendent, chancellor, or CEO—ensure that families are kept informed of the district portfolio strategy, that decisions made reflect the values of the families, and that a diverse coalition will support the strategy going forward? The answer requires a transformation of the way in which communication is handled.

In a traditional district, most communication is episodic—focusing on good news and trouble whenever either arises—and centralized: the superintendent and top district leaders communicate about the schools but school leaders are silent.

In a school system implementing the portfolio strategy, communication must be strategic and multi-centric. Strategic communication means that the CEO must work to tell a coherent and consistent story. Both good and bad results should be tied back to the portfolio strategy. Good results support the changes

tied to strategy implementation and bad results provide an opportunity to demonstrate the real DNA of the portfolio strategy—looking at results and making adjustments to move constantly closer to a system that successfully educates all students.

Multi-centric communication means that, whenever possible, school leaders handle messaging and communication about their own schools. In a traditional school district, communication comes primarily from the central office. Whether the issues are about a centrally mandated decision or individual school events, it is the central office that tends to deliver all the messaging. And, it is the central office that the community tends to go to for answers and solutions. In a portfolio school system, the principal of each school becomes a vital communicator. The CEO is still responsible for building support coalitions and setting expectations for central office staff, but principals are the frontline communicators about their own schools.

Portfolio school systems derive four primary benefits from making principals the lead communicators:

1. Reinforcing autonomy
2. Reinforcing differentiation
3. Reducing opposition
4. Increasing knowledge of the strategy

REINFORCING AUTONOMY

Principals in school systems using the portfolio strategy have autonomy over their schools. They make the choices about who works in the school, how long the school day is, the deployment of resources, and much more. They are in charge of what is happening in their school buildings, and therefore best positioned to communicate to the public. No one in the system better understands why different school-level decisions have been made, and no one can explain it better. Additionally, empowering principals to engage with the public ensures that the central office doesn't inadvertently undercut a principal's autonomy by communicating something contrary to what is occurring at the school level, or promising to "fix" a problem in a way that becomes an autonomy-reducing mandate to the school.

REINFORCING DIFFERENTIATION

One of the primary reasons that school systems using the portfolio strategy provide autonomy to their principals and school choice to families is a belief that the best education option for each student does not look the same. Portfolio leaders understand that students learn differently and therefore will thrive in different learning environments. Providing autonomy to principals drives differentiation of schools and lets families choose from a variety of options to find the best fit for their child. Partnering with principals so that they are lead communicators helps reinforce this differentiation. It acknowledges that different things are happening in each school building and that school communities vary widely. Therefore, the same messaging and engagement won't work for each school and school community. Rather, the messages and engagement should be differentiated; principals are the best way to ensure that this happens.

REDUCING OPPOSITION

Principals will differentiate their communication efforts because they are in much closer contact with families and students than anyone in the central office. Principals know their families' values and concerns. They are the individuals best equipped to communicate about the larger school system strategy and how it supports the decisions being made at the school level. Also, principals are more trusted and liked than central office leaders. Some of the decisions made at the school level won't be popular, but communication coming from the school leader can soften the blow.

When the Cleveland Metropolitan School District first provided autonomy to principals, one principal made the choice to reduce the number of art teachers from two to one in order to hire an additional math teacher who could focus on specific students' issues.¹ The principal communicated her reasoning to school families, who understood the decision. Losing art, music, or any program in schools is never popular. If the central office communicates a decision like this to parents it is typically met with intense opposition—petitions, impassioned speeches at school board meetings, displeased calls and letters to the central office. Sometimes these efforts are even led by the school leaders themselves. But, if a school leader makes this decision and explains to the community why the decision was necessary, it is much less likely to cause a backlash.

This could make principals risk averse. They may dodge hard decisions to avoid delivering tough news. While this is a risk, in a fully implemented

1. Patrick O'Donnell, "[Cleveland principals deciding how to spend their school's budgets as they gain authority under the Cleveland Plan.](#)" *The Plain Dealer*, January 16, 2014.

portfolio strategy, principals are accountable for their school's performance. Responsibility for the “bottom line,” and actions at the school exerts a counter-pressure on principals and a reason to follow through on difficult decisions.

INCREASING KNOWLEDGE OF THE STRATEGY

The portfolio strategy is a fundamental shift in how the district and schools interact and operate. It completely redefines where decision-making lies. Schools make decisions about staffing and instructional priorities while the CEO and board make decisions about the mix of schools the district will support. Moving the district to this strategy quickly and successfully hinges on a deep level of strategic understanding of the strategy in the central office, the principal corps, and among teachers. Putting principals in charge of communication will ensure that they learn about the portfolio strategy, understand it deeply, and can explain it to anyone.

Empowering principals to engage with families about what's occurring in their schools and how school-level problems are solved is a change principals will notice. It will demonstrate that system leaders are serious about school autonomy and accountability.

Conclusion

As principals become the new lead communicators for their own schools, the district CEO communications role is redefined. The central office and the schools will communicate about different things, but their core messages must be complementary. CEOs should work with their principals to develop the best ways to explain the portfolio strategy, and to define how principals fit in to the strategy. CEOs must ensure that no one in the central office is taking actions that undercut a principal's communications role. With this knowledge and protection, principals can more effectively engage their families.

The CEO needs to make sure that when principals adapt a message to their particular communities, the central office doesn't inadvertently reframe or blur it. There are risks in this, as in any communications strategy. But differentiation among schools and with the central office is necessary. District leaders will retain the power to replace principals. A principal who can't be trusted to communicate effectively about his or her school should be replaced, not muzzled.

Lastly, the CEO must ensure that school leaders are given the authority to solve local problems, even if parents go to the central office first. The CEO and other central office staff must develop the habit of sending families to their principals for problem solving. This also reinforces for families that principals really are in charge at the school and that the central office will not (and cannot be used to) circumvent principal decisions.

Developing a multi-centric communications strategy helps school systems effectively engage with families and communities, and it's a natural extension of principal autonomy. Centralized communication doesn't prevent controversy, and school leaders are actually in the best position to explain why reading scores have soared or why the parking lot was unplowed. It's time to let them do it.