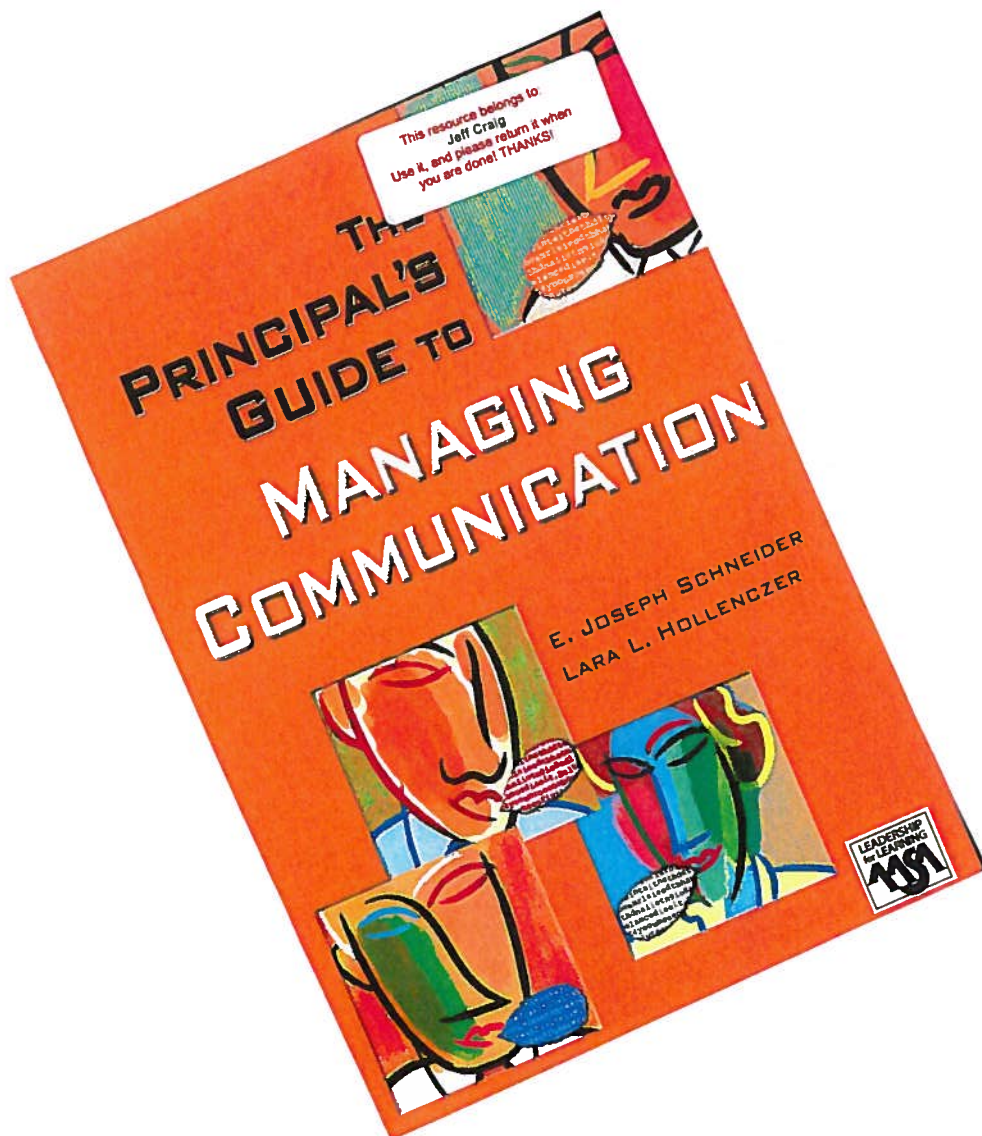


Principals Need to Be Communicating Constantly

This section focuses on the use of electronic communication tools, but some of the tried and true ways of communicating are still very



effective. Principals and the communications team need to constantly communicate. The more communication, the more likely stakeholders will become involved in the school. Communicate with the parents—inform them of issues and get them involved and volunteering—and move them from latent to aware and active. Generally, if a group is informed and knowledgeable, it is more likely to be involved and more likely to pay attention to communication from the school.

How does a principal do that? The trick is to develop many activities and events to encourage involvement. Principals should pack the school calendar with as many events as possible with the goal of getting the parents, as well as other key stakeholders, to the school. Although parents seem like the most obvious public for events, local politicians, business leaders, and even the media are aware of and should be invited to events. The PTA/PTO is an excellent group to tap into and to coordinate events with the school. The events should be publicized with a streaming flow of communication—fliers, brochures, bulletins, and calendars. This is an opportunity for principals to be creative with events that bring key stakeholders to the school on evenings and weekends. Holding events during the day may be fine for some stay-at-home parents, but principals should be cognizant of all the stakeholders' busy schedules.

Other ways to get stakeholders into the school include activities such as parent workshops on topics ranging from health issues to parenting and homework help. A secure parent room or parent center where parents can pick up and drop off their children, as well as meet each other, has proven to be successful in a number of schools.

The school newsletter to parents is probably one of the most important communication tools and an essential element of a principal's communication plan. Principals need to find a way to produce at a minimum one per month, and in addition to the printed version, the newsletter should be available on the Web site and distributed broadly to stakeholders via e-mail. Successful communication through the newsletter is based on several factors: consistency in delivery, clarity of articles, and timeliness of content.

The newsletter needs to be a tool that parents and others, including teachers and students, rely on to arrive the same time each month or each week. For example, one kindergarten teacher sends home a "what's happening this week" every Monday afternoon to keep parents up-to-date on not only the academic focus of the week but also special events. Principals can also find the time to do a weekly newsletter (see Chapter 5).

School Newsletter Articles Need to Be Short

Principals should keep in mind how many stakeholders are reading the newsletter. Parents are probably glancing through them while making dinner. Students may be just scanning them on the school bus. Teachers may add it to a stack of papers to grade and be happy just to get to it in the next couple of days. Therefore, headlines need to be straightforward and clear. The articles need to be short, with the key points in short sentences, “active language,” and without educational jargon. Principals should also make the newsletter a piece that everyone wants to save. It would be helpful if it contained an easy-to-read calendar that could be pinned on a corkboard or stuck to the refrigerator so it could be referenced at a glance.

The following are additional tips on how to develop an effective newsletter:

1. Be informative. A school newsletter’s main purpose should be to inform parents, students, and staff on items that they need and want to hear about.
2. Be succinct. Understand how busy the parents are, and make it easy to scan the newsletter for items of particular interest. Also, make sure the copy is filled with the most pertinent information easy to find.
3. Answer frequently asked questions. Is the school secretary finding that callers are asking the same series of questions? Respond to these questions in the newsletter.
4. Keep design accessible and inviting.
5. Engage readers. Ask for contributions. Request feedback—written or via e-mail, the Web site, or phone.
6. Provide more information. Give them the Web site and other addresses to go for more information.

For all principals, there should never be a shortage of topics to be included in the newsletter, including highlights of all the good things going on at the school. The newsletter should also include a principal’s column.

Carolyn Warner, a veteran educator and communicator, offers some additional thoughts on content in her book *Promoting Your School* (2000, pp. 51–52):

- Introduce various curriculum programs.
- Highlight student achievements.
- Review rules and regulations that are of specific concern.
- Provide homework tips for parents and students.
- Add suggested reading lists.
- List additional resources that are available to parents in the community.
- Summarize test results and provide information on where full reports are available.
- Profile a staff member, or ask him or her to write a “guest” column.
- Provide updates and summaries from PTA, board, and other meetings.
- Include district news.
- Solicit volunteers.

Warner also suggests that principals may want to produce several newsletters: one for each major stakeholder group—a parent newsletter and a teacher and staff newsletter—and one for the community and local businesses. This sounds like a great idea, but there are always time and manpower issues. Therefore, perfect the parent newsletter before moving on to additional publications.

Sending Messages Home Should Be Routine

Sending mailers and letters, as well as flyers, brochures, and personal notes, home with the kids should also be routine. Remember the old advertising adage: When first exposed to a message, the receiver may only take a minimal notice. At second exposure, the audience may pay more attention. It is only the third or fourth time a message is sent that the audience may decide if they really need to take action. Although certain issues may pique the interest of key publics the first time, with topics such as the need for volunteers, openings on the PTA board, and an upcoming fund-raiser, the three-rule minimum does apply.

For example, when a principal is preparing for a parent volunteer orientation, the meeting announcement should be sent home, posted on the Web site, noted on the principal’s voice mail and “hold” feature, and added to the school’s outdoor message sign at least 1 week prior to the meeting. Through these four different communication mediums, the principal will reach target publics probably two or

three times, increasing the likelihood that they received the message, thought about it, and will attend.

Last are handbooks, which should be available in both a printed and an electronic format. At one time, a school handbook included only attendance policies, discipline and code of conduct policies, and dress code guidelines. These are still pertinent topics and need to be included. Emergency preparedness and guidelines are essential, however, and may even deserve their own handbook, as well as a special back-to-school meeting. As explored in Chapters 5 and 6, crises and emergencies pose a unique set of communication issues. It is important not only for the principal to be prepared but also for the teachers, staff, parents, students, and other stakeholders to have a guide before a crisis occurs.

As with all other tactics and techniques, there are pitfalls. The world of desktop publishing and color printers has created a whole host of problems. First, desktop publishing has given the most inartistic the ability to "design." Parents do not expect the newsletter to be professionally designed. What they do expect is an easy-to-read calendar and short notes on important issues. Color printers have provided the ability to use pink and purple in headlines. Color can be a wonderful tool. For the school's communication, keep it simple and professional. Inexpensive clip art makes it easy to add many graphics to even the most straightforward announcements. There is no need for a graphic to be included with every newsletter article and no need for more than one or two on a school program or announcement.

Principals should examine the newsletter and other forms of printed communications. One common mistake is the use of many fonts. Another issue with fonts is the difference between serif and sans serif. Most books are printed with a serif font such as Times or Garamond. Online, in e-mails and on Web sites, sans serif fonts such as Arial and Veranda are used. Generally, the rule of thumb is serif fonts in printed materials and sans serif fonts online. White space or plenty of room on the page is good. Crowding a page with too many things makes it difficult to read. Principals should collect good brochures and fliers from other organizations and borrow some of the best design ideas for school communications.

In general, the principal's communication team should include an art/graphics or journalism teacher or both. These people are an excellent addition to the team, as are other Partners who have experience in graphics and writing.

Consistency is also important. The school needs to use a masthead that has the school's name or logo or both, address and phone number, and Web site and that is used every time the newsletter is

published. The newsletter is just one of the principal's tools that supplement every other communication effort.

Principals Increasingly Are Marketing Their Schools

Although an extensive review of the body of advertising and marketing research is not necessary here, as noted previously, some of the basic principles do underscore the conclusions of the public relations research discussed in Part I and support the "do's" and "don'ts" of traditional communication tactics. Specifically, the concept of branding is something for a principal to keep in mind. In brief, branding is the promise school principals keep to their publics. Whether it is well developed or not, each school has a brand, or more simply an image, in the minds of its stakeholders. Although principals may not be facing the same competitive issues as companies who market consumer products, branding is making its way into education through colleges and universities as well as private primary and secondary schools. In fact, many private schools and local teachers' associations retain a marketing and advertising agency as well as a public relations agency. Principals should take close notice of advertisements in the newspaper, and even radio commercials, for local private schools. What is their message? What is their brand?

What is the branding lesson for public school principals?

- **Consistency:** Consistency in message(s); consistency in the look and feel of the printed and electronic communications; consistency among the many voices from the school.
- **Dynamics:** The need to set the school apart from others.
- **Emotion:** An appeal to the publics' emotions. Emotion sells coffee, lipstick, and shoes. The same appeal works for support for the school.

Of course, there is the old-fashioned face-to-face communication that has not gone out of style. Parents and other partners appreciate principals who take the time to shake hands at back-to-school night, greet parents at the second-grade holiday musical, and watch the football game in the bleachers. Also, principals should not take general visibility in and around the school for granted.

Being visible does not have to be too time-consuming for principals. Even small gestures, such as standing outside the school's front

doors as parents drop off their kids, can make a major impression. Creative visibility solutions include shopping at the neighborhood grocery store, even if the principal does not live in the immediate area.

In addition, the practice of home visits is making a comeback in some areas (Mathews, 2005, p. A07). Whether it is visiting struggling students or new students or making an effort to visit every student's home, the consensus seems to be that a principal's home visit encourages parental involvement and opens up a positive dialogue between the school leader and the family.

Meeting community leaders and developing a relationship with them may prove to be more difficult for principals, and it is probably not their highest priority. If principals have the energy and the time, however, it is best to meet these leaders where they feel most comfortable—at chamber of commerce meetings and mixers. This face-to-face communication will test a principal's networking skills, but it is another way to get out into the community and give others the opportunity to provide feedback.

In addition, for all stakeholders—from latent to active—the school sign outside the school is a prominent communication tool. This sign should be used to its fullest potential by keeping the information current, announcing events and school holidays, and providing friendly messages, such as congratulating the school's top scholars.

For more tips on communication and marketing schools, see Warner (2000).

Good News Will Attract the Media

Communicating with the media requires a unique set of skills, patience and persistence, and is a topic of entire textbooks and handbooks. With so much else to do, media communications is probably not a priority for most principals. Generally, if there are good things happening in the school, the news will reach the media. It is important that principals be prepared to deal with the media during a crisis, which was discussed previously. This discussion provides some general tips and thoughts on basic media relations.

Press releases, news articles, and feature stories are excellent ways to communicate with the school's stakeholders. The newspaper is a communication medium in which a principal cannot control what is written, however. This is just one of the many reasons why developing a relationship with the communications staff at the district level, and getting to know the education reporters in the region, is so critical.

Before embarking on a media blitz, principals should have a public information officer from the district office as a partner, even if the principal will be communicating directly with the media for both good and bad news. In addition, working with the media is an excellent opportunity to include the school's PTA/PTO. Many PTA/PTOs have communications or public relations committees that are tasked with the duty of promoting the positive things going on at the school.

If there is no such committee in place, a principal should help them form one with parent volunteers and, ultimately, new members of the principal's communication team. Parents like to see positive stories about their school, and those with the education and talent are usually more than willing to help. Principals should let this committee be proactive with good news. One of the major complaints of reporters and editors is the timeliness of story ideas. Something that happened 1 week ago is not news. If the school has good news, or an upcoming event (not a past event) announcement, the committee should let the media know as soon as possible. Particularly in smaller communities, school stories are popular. Local papers like photographs, and parents and kids like to see themselves in the paper, including names listed for honor role, clubs, and sport teams. Has the PTA/PTO or school made the investment in a digital camera? Having one on hand, with consent forms, will help the PTA/PTO get good news out and make you the reporter's friend. In addition, make it a habit in your office for key reporters and editors to receive your event calendars. Principals are of course thrilled when a good story runs. When a bad news story runs, however, unless there are factual errors, complaining to a writer or editor does not help. In addition, responding to every editorial may not be necessary, but it should at least be considered. Principals should consider whether a response from a PTA/PTO president or a parent partner may be more effective.

The very basics of dealing with reporters are as follows:

- Be proactive and timely with good news.
- Be responsive with bad news.
- Be honest.
- Respond as quickly as possible.

If you do not know an answer, say so. Do not say, "No comment." Find out the accurate information, and call the reporter back.

Respect reporters' deadlines. Radio, television, and newspaper reporters all work on different deadlines, but all deadlines are typically tight and hectic.

One of the major benefits for principals and schools that develop a cordial relationship with local reporters is that when a crisis does occur, they already understand the school, its staff, and its partners.

For more tips and tactics on dealing with the media, refer to *Good News: How to Get the Best Possible Media Coverage for Your School*, by Gail Conners (2000).

Summary

This chapter addressed the basics of effective communication tactics. By focusing on communication efforts with partners, building a strong communications team, tapping into districtwide resources, and utilizing myriad tools, principals can be effective communicators.

Generally, an effective communicator uses many different tactics and techniques. Newsletters, fliers, and calendars are still appropriate ways to communicate with parents, students, and all partners. The media are also an outlet that a principal needs to be cognizant of and be prepared to respond to; a principal will be better served communicating directly with the school's Partners, however, and should rely on the district's communication team and the PTA/PTO for media relations support.