

## **School Web Site and Email Communication Strategies**

Many busy parents and interested community members appreciate the ease of keeping abreast of school happenings. Parents can learn about hot lunch menus, upcoming special events, annual calendar (in particular, early release days), student handbook information (the paper version often gets misplaced at home), newsletter distribution, school policies, board agendas, and meeting minutes to name a few.

An increasing number of schools are providing password access to the school web site for parents to review their child's grades. Additionally, many teachers establish list-serve email communications with parents to provide ready access to the latest classroom happenings. Parents often request the email addresses of other parents to maintain their own internal communications network.

With a little guidance from a district technology director or citizen skillful in electronic communications, school leaders can begin email outreach between teachers and parents. Electronic grade book web access is a bit more challenging and will need to be guided by a highly skilled professional to set up confidential password access for parents.

## **Public Access Cable Television**

A surprising number of small Vermont communities have the ability to broadcast school board meetings and other school events on public access cable television. Board members have differing opinions on the value of televised board meetings. However, the majority of school leaders recognize the importance of transmitting school board meetings into the homes of taxpayers. Board members often receive feedback from citizens who watch cable broadcasts at all hours of the day and night. School leaders consistently agree that the more people are informed the easier it is to pass school budgets and bond votes.

There are 37 public access cable television stations statewide. See the attached list for the station contact in your area. By FCC edict, local access stations are required to provide programming for public, education and government broadcast purposes. This means there are cameras available for school filming. What school leaders need to do is to request technicians from the station or hire an individual (often an interested high school student) to tape board meetings or other education events. The video tape is then given to the station manager for inclusion in the local program schedule.

## School Newsletters

Most schools prepare and periodically distribute newsletters to parents on a weekly or monthly basis. However, parents only comprise roughly 20% of the voters in any community. A lesser number of schools distribute newsletters to the full postal list.

By developing a collaborative working relationship with your weekly newspaper editor, school leaders may be able to have the school newsletter inserted within each newspaper being distributed to local box holders. Communicate with the editors identified on the attached weekly newspaper list to see if this cost effective distribution strategy will work in your area.

- (Broken down) News and Letter – personally communicate to stakeholders
- Play vital role in school communications
- Powerful personal nature – direct, personal communication with crucial audiences
- Keep people informed – create credibility – power of voice
- Successful newsletters never written for mass audiences
  - Lesson – Don't write for the whole community; appeal to each parent or taxpayer individually – direct conversation between newsletter, school, and reader – Create feeling that the newsletter is “just for me”
- Perception is community members have “no time to read”
- First impressions – cover stories and headlines – make or break your newsletter
- Newsletter has 6-8 seconds or 11 words to catch reader with headline
- Typical 8 page newsletter – headline 80% of decision to read newsletter
  - Headline must draw them in
  - Create reader focused headlines
- Create many hooks – Know your audience!
  - Solicit feedback from your key communicators
  - Identify core emotion
  - School
    - WIFM – “What's In It For Me”
    - Benefits all children
    - Focuses on your child
  - Never Use Acronyms in Headlines
  - Get publications to move beyond the mail box clutter
    - 15-20% open rates
    - School newsletters greater readership
    - Fewer than 1-3 people subscribe to newspapers today
- Decisions to read made in split second and almost always based on cover headlines
  - Weak headlines could kill strong story
  - Strong content inside never seen without strong headline
  - Repeated strong headlines and covers create loyal readers
  - Headline reviews and critiques became standard practices
  - Let draft article sit for a day – 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> line often becomes a better headline
  - Good headlines tell and sell – “Grab readers by their lapels”
    - Tell people enough to make informed choice
    - “Test Scores Hit New Highs: Gains Set At All Levels”
    - Give me headlines that scream!
    - “Plan Seeks to Aid Students With Stronger Program, More Choices”

## Key Communicators Development Guide

### Create Key Communicators Group

Select 20 opinion leaders in your community and provide monthly school information

- Parent leaders
- Staff members
- Senior citizens
- Business leaders
- Citizens

Post names of Key Communicators on web site and in school newsletters

### Successful Initiatives

- Build alliances – empower others – focus on initiatives
- Utilize research to acquire facts
- Pay attention to trend changes

### Alliance building projects

- Focus groups
- Create task force
- Be organized and flexible
- Delegate and empower
- Create buy in... Make it their event
- Understand capacity of volunteers
- Trust them... They will see you as a leader
- Produce pamphlets
  - What my child should know and be able to do
  - Parenting skills
  - Homework support
  - Dealing with drugs and alcohol

### Educating the Public About Public Education – National School Boards Association

Center for Public Education [www.nsba.org/PublicEd](http://www.nsba.org/PublicEd)

Public trusts teachers and administrators more than the press

33 million hits on a Google class size search – need facts

NSBA site

Five Reasons for Local Control of Public Education

School Success Stories

Community Engagement

National Assessment of Education Progress Data

Class Size Research

Polling Data

Core Facts and Talking Points

## Communicating with and Engaging the Public

The Vermont School Boards Association has developed a strategic alliance with the national Study Circles organization to engage students, educators, parents and community members in an effective public engagement strategy. Study Circles convene groups of 8-12 people from different backgrounds and viewpoints to dialogue about key issues and then to make recommendations to school and/or community leaders. Everyone has an equal voice and participants are encouraged to understand each other's view points.

VSBA, working with a New England Study Circles consultant, provides workshops for school and community leaders on how to develop a local or regional Study Circles program. VSBA also helps to deliver small group facilitator training for individuals who are interested in guiding a Study Circle process.

The Study Circles organization is a resource that provides at no cost dialogue guides on the following topics:

- ✓ Education reform
- ✓ Crime and violence
- ✓ Diversity
- ✓ Youth concerns
- ✓ Building strong neighborhoods
- ✓ Neighborhoods supporting families with children
- ✓ Police-community relations
- ✓ Racism and race relations
- ✓ Growth and sprawl
- ✓ Immigration

For more information go to the Study Circles web site at:

[www.studycircles.org](http://www.studycircles.org)

VSBA has recently developed a modified public engagement strategy based on the Study Circles model which we have retitled Study Forums. This new resource is being successfully incorporated within school board governance analyses currently underway in a number of school districts and supervisory unions. Contact the VSBA office for more resources and information.

# Planning: A Joint Venture

*From the Tennessee School Boards Association*

## What To Plan

The board's plan should be the framework of all that happens in the school district. The plan should define the ideal for each segment of the board's operation and project what will be accomplished toward the board goals during each year included in the plan. A timetable should be included with target dates for reaching milestones.

## The Challenge to Local Boards

The need for local school boards to engage in educational planning has never been greater. As boards confront educational reform, a major challenge is to manage reform and not be the victim of it-to direct rather than react. To do this, boards must move from operating only in crisis situations toward systematic planning. Without clearly-defined goals incorporated into well-defined plans, a board can always expect to be responding to one crisis after another.

Success is seldom a matter of luck. If schools are to be exceptionally good, it is imperative that boards consider uncommon goals and uncommon methods of reaching them. Boards should resist the temptation to be overly conservative since boards tend to accomplish the goals which they establish by this process.

A basic principle of this planning procedure is that the board is responsible for establishing the purpose of the plan and the staff is responsible for establishing the methods. The purpose springs from a vision initiated by the board. It includes both the mission statement and the goals.

Method includes objectives for each goal and strategies for achieving each objective. When adopted by the board, it becomes the action plan.

A more detailed discussion of this planning procedure follows:

## Planning Procedures

Who's Responsible?	Planning Activity
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>BOARD</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 48pt;"><b>1</b></p>	<p><b>Make a commitment to plan.</b></p> <p>The school board and superintendent should have a preliminary session on planning. In this session, they should consider the possibility of adopting a mission policy of the school district, set up beliefs of the board of education, and outline a calendar of planning activities. An members of the board must make a commitment to plan. If the board does not make a commitment but gives planning a high priority you cannot expect staff members to consider it a very high priority.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>BOARD</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 48pt;">2</p>	<p><b>Establish a guidance system for planning.</b></p> <p>A guidance system consists of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Beliefs-A list of statements which summarize the board's basic beliefs.</li> <li>B. Vision-A mental model of an idealistic future for your school system.</li> <li>C. A Mission Statement-A statement which describes the ultimate purpose and scope of the school district</li> <li>D. Planning Categories-Key result areas used to record school district goals and objectives and to divide the plan into manageable parts.</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>BOARD</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 48pt;">3</p>	<p><b>Involve the community.</b></p> <p>Plan and conduct a series of meetings where the community is given the opportunity to react to what is happening in the school district. Primarily, the board is seeking suggestions for improvement in the school district, not hearing gripes. Three rules should probably be observed during these community sessions: 1. The persons conducting these meetings are not there to answer questions but to hear information, Therefore, persons conducting the meeting should not defend the school system but simply hear suggestions and complaints and thank people for them. 2. It's okay for participants to complain, but only if they offer a suggestion for improvement. 3. Do not promise that what is suggested will be done. Promise that the board will consider all suggestions.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>STAFF</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 48pt;">4</p>	<p><b>Analyze strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.</b></p> <p>This phase involves the collection and analysis of data about the school district. This will require a review of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, in order to build on strengths, eliminate weaknesses, take advantage of opportunities and avoid threats.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>BOARD</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 48pt;">5</p>	<p><b>Set goals.</b></p> <p>The board should go through, a process of brainstorming in listing all of the potential goals that are suggested. Then, a system of putting a priority on the goals should be used. Each goal should be considered in terms of importance, cost, and the effort required to accomplish the goal. Goals judged important by every member of the board should be included in the long range plan. Other goals maybe added by majority vote, but it is recommended that, except in the most unusual circumstances, only those goals accepted by every member of the board should be included in the plan.</p>

<p><b>STAFF</b></p> <p>6</p>	<p><b>Develop objectives and strategies for each goal.</b></p> <p>The staff should be assigned the responsibility of developing objectives and strategies for each goal. Frequently, each goal is assigned to a committee headed by a staff member. The committee works on measurable objectives and strategies. Objectives are divided into annual objectives and longer range objectives. Each objective should be measurable and include a timeline. Additionally, resources which will be required to implement any objectives should be identified in the proposal made to the board.</p>
<p><b>BOARD</b></p> <p>7</p>	<p><b>Adopt the plan.</b></p> <p>The board considers each objective and strategy in view of the resources necessary to accomplish the objective and the relative importance of each. The board then adopts an annual and long range plan.</p>
<p><b>BOARD/STAFF</b></p> <p>8</p>	<p><b>Promote the plan.</b></p> <p><i>Present the plan to the staff.</i></p> <p>Generally administrators and staff have already been working on the plan, but they should have the opportunity to hear a presentation of the entire plan from the superintendent and/ or the board. It is important that the administrative and supervisory staff be committed to the plan before it is presented to other staff members. In fact, administrative and supervisory staff members usually present the plan to the staff. Most staff members will already have some involvement in developing at least one objective of the plan but this is their opportunity to see the entire plan. An enthusiastic person who is totally in support of the plan should present it.</p> <p><b>Present the plan to the community.</b></p> <p>Community meetings such as PT A meetings, civic clubs, and other groups should be scheduled when possible to consider the school district's plan. School board members should be involved in the presentation of these plans as often as possible. This is a great public relations opportunity for school board members.</p>
<p><b>STAFF/BOARD</b></p> <p>9</p>	<p><b>Evaluate the plan.</b></p> <p>Each objective in the plan is measurable and has a deadline for completion. At the specified time, the plan should be evaluated and 1 report of the success or lack thereof should be presented to the board. As a result of the evaluation, the plan may be modified and the process begun again for a new year.</p>

## **Stakeholder Groups**

The school board should seek out key opinion leaders from the following list of stakeholder groups and involve them in public engagement activities or when developing a school's strategic planning process.

### **External**

Parents  
Taxpayers  
Small Business Owners  
Large Employers  
Labor Union Leaders  
Town Officers  
Social Service Providers  
Senior Citizens  
Low Income Tenants  
Renters/Homeowners  
Non-Profit Directors  
Farmers  
Religious Leaders  
Second Home Owners  
Higher Education Leaders

### **Internal**

Students  
Teachers  
Principal  
Superintendent  
Aides  
Custodians/Secretary  
Parents  
Volunteers

## Identifying 5 Classes of Influentials

When developing a public engagement strategy use the list below to align with individuals in your community who match the roles of “influentials”, For maximum impact, concentrate 80% of your advocacy effort on these key people who community members tend to respect opinions thereof.

Type	Role	Effect on Others
1. Role Models	Act out the desired behavior, show how to do it	Admiration, emulation
2. Opinion Leaders	Influence behavior & opinion by giving (or withholding) social acceptability, providing expertise	Peer pressure, desire to go along; trust
3. Power Leaders	Provide official approval or sanction	Fear based on power to reward or punish
4. Cheerleaders	Add emotion, adrenaline, team spirit; wave the pom-poms	Boost morale & can-do feelings, even in incredulous situations
5. Celebrities	Gain attention for the topic through their visibility	Attraction, awareness

## Strategies To Gain Public Support

1. Be clear who your *customers* are
  - Learn all you can about them
  - Don't think you know, or trust conventional wisdom
  - This may require research...
2. Know who the real *stakeholders* are within that large category of customers
  - Many of them are *unwilling* customers
3. Engage the school family<sup>B</sup> or else
  - It's the only person power at your disposal!
4. Make educating your customers & stakeholders the *number 1 priority*
  - Sounds like heresy, but..

## **Working With the Media**

Frequently it appears to boards that the media are preoccupied with the negative. In reality, the media also do much to promote schools. Local newspapers often carry feature articles about the good things happening in schools; they present valuable information to the public. For example, a local Vermont paper had a great picture and story of "I Love to Read and Write" activities on the same page with an article based on budget information for forthcoming town meeting.

Working effectively with the news media requires an understanding that, even in adversarial situations, boards and media depend on each other. The media need boards and schools as a source of community news, and boards need the media as a means of communicating with their communities.

Newspapers are more likely to report school news than any other news medium; radio and television coverage is less common. Obviously, more extensive coverage of a school board is likely to occur during a crisis.

When there are hot and controversial issues that make the headlines, boards need to know how to deal with the quick-paced spotlight and the stress that goes with it. If this happens to you, look to your resources to assist you in coping.

## Communicating With Legislators

### MAKE SURE YOUR LEGISLATORS KNOW HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT AN ISSUE

- A. Write a short letter that gets to the point, is easy to read, and therefore will likely be read.
- B. Phone as a follow-up to a letter or instead of a letter.
- C. Testify at public hearings and before legislative committees
- D. E-mail - some legislators use the state system
- E. Be cordial and thoughtful when communicating. If a letter ends up being long and angry sounding, use it for venting, but don't send it.
  - 1. Be careful about accusations about "the state" or the universal "you" as it is likely to make legislators defensive.
  - 2. Making your points with specific data; "anecdotes" can be effective.
  - 3. Bringing students to testify can be effective depending on the subject matter.
  - 4. Whether testifying, talking on the phone, or writing a letter, being brief and to the point is most likely to be convincing.
  - 5. If you have several people who want to testify before a committee or at a public hearing either divide up the testimony or have one person testify and then introduce the others who are there to support the position.
- F. Maintain credibility. Check out rumors before reacting, use reliable sources; don't give your legislator a chance to "write you off" because of bad information.

### KEEP INFORMED

- A. Use your professional association as a source.
- B. Check the Legislature's web page: [www.leg.state.vt.us](http://www.leg.state.vt.us). This site includes a legislative directory, weekly schedule of events, the bill tracking system, the full text of bills, acts and resolves, daily postings of journals and calendars, and the Vermont statutes and constitution.
- C. Newspapers may be useful for basic information, but check out the issues raised in the articles (details might be misleading).
- D. Use your Legislators
  - 1. Be patient - they might not know particulars but should be willing to find out.
  - 2. Can have material mailed to you.

### PROPOSING LEGISLATION

- A. Your Legislator should be willing to propose a bill for you; don't be shy about asking
- B. Work with your professional association to support larger issues.

*by William Talbott and Martha Heath*