

## Useful tools for quick communication

Telephones and e-mail are useful tools for quick communication with staff, parents and community members. They don't replace the face-to-face communication you need to build trust in your schools and programs, but these electronic tools, when used appropriately, can help you keep staff, parents and community members up to date on information they need to know.

The following list includes the electronic tools schools are using most frequently with tips to help you check whether your district is using them effectively.

### ➔ **Automated answering systems**

If you have an automatic answering system in your district, have you called it recently to see how well it works?

- Are the choices simple and easy to follow? Is there a way for callers to easily reach a real person for help?
- Are staff members helpful in getting callers to the right office without transferring them from office to office or losing them?
- Are staff members encouraged to get an answer for a caller and then to call that person back promptly?
- If you have a large number of people in your district who don't speak English, does your automated system provide directions in their language and connect them with someone who can speak their language?

If your system is impersonal and difficult to use, if staff, when reached, are not helpful, then your automated system may well telegraph a negative image of you and your district.

These systems are often a citizen's first impression of you and your district. Make sure that image is positive. Make sure your system demonstrates efficiency and easy access to school personnel.

### ➔ **Voice mail: Panacea or pariah?**

Voice mail allows a caller to leave a message when you are not available to answer your phone or when your phone is already in use. Frequently, when you return the call, you reach your caller's voicemail.

For incoming calls, your message should tell callers where you are that day and when they can expect you to return the call. Returning calls within 24 hours should be a district expectation.

One administrator who uses voice mail well starts each day by changing her voice mail message to tell callers, "This is Mary Smith. I'm in my office today. I check my voice mail twice a day, so please leave your name, phone number and a brief message and I will get back to you as soon as I can." If she's away from her office, she changes her message from wherever she is and lets callers know she's gone, when she'll get back to them and what number to call for immediate assistance.

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When returning calls, if you reach voice mail instead of the person you are calling, make sure you leave a succinct response to questions and give a time certain that the person can call again and reach you or another appropriate staff member without encountering voice mail yet again.

➔ **Hotlines**

A hotline is a phone service that someone can call to leave a message or to receive a brief message. A hotline is an effective tool when you have time-sensitive information in a brief format, important messages from the district or details about scheduled events that patrons need to know or may want to attend. Hotlines also are helpful in keeping staff and community members up-to-date in crisis situations or during contentious labor negotiations.

Making effective use of hotlines requires a district commitment to keep information updated on a regular – ideally daily – basis. And hotline phone numbers need to be published regularly through local media, in building and district publications, on the district's Web site, in parent and student handbooks, in local organizations' and businesses' newsletters.

Be creative in making the number available. Consider providing families with refrigerator magnets. Provide churches with notices for church bulletins. Ask grocers to put flyers in grocery bags on a Saturday before school starts to remind residents of your community about the start of school and the hotline number to call for school announcements and news. Include the address for the district Web site too.

➔ **Web sites**

One of the sayings we often hear as children is, "If you can't do something well, don't do it at all." That's good advice for your Web site. The expectation of electronic communication is that it will be instant and current. Maintaining a Web site for most districts is a full-time job for someone. The best district Web sites have a simple, uncluttered design and offer visitors a user-friendly home page that takes them easily to:

- Directories of board members and staff with easy access to sending them e-mail;
- Information about the district, its schools, programs and services;
- Regular news updates, meeting agendas and meeting reports;
- Maps and directions to school sites;
- Job opportunities;
- Calendars of events and school lunch/breakfast menus; and
- Links to individual school Web sites and to other education and community groups and resources.

All of these features take constant monitoring and regular updating. If visitors to your Web site find the same information every time they check your site, they will quickly quit visiting it.

If your hotline and Web site provide a general voice mailbox or e-mail address, be sure there is a procedure in place for checking messages daily and responding with the information requested or by letting the person know how the request for information is being handled. In times of budget crises, difficult labor negotiations or emergencies, these voice mailboxes and e-mail addresses may be jammed. Find ways to respond with more frequent hotline or Web site updates, or consider assigning additional staff to handle responses.

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➔ **E-mail**

E-mail is a great tool when messages are short, accurate and timely and when speed is of the essence. However, e-mail can do more harm than good when it's overused or poorly written and when huge attachments are added. Lengthy e-mail messages and long attachments discourage recipients from reading them and may undermine your communications efforts. E-mail messages also are easily misunderstood, especially when messages deal with sensitive issues. Recipients may incorrectly perceive your message as containing angry tones, abrupt manners and even inappropriate humor. Better to deal with sensitive, confidential issues face to face.

When using e-mail to communicate with staff, remember that not everyone — especially cooks, custodians and bus drivers — has easy access to e-mail. Be sure supervisors distribute printed copies of e-mail messages to these staff members. Schools that are using e-mail effectively for communication with parents collect e-mail addresses with registration information and then ask parents how they prefer to receive notices, newsletters and other school communications. They don't assume that all families with e-mail addresses prefer to receive communication from the school via the Internet.

At the district level, superintendents are developing lists of e-mail addresses for key communicators in their districts and are making communications with these people two-way, making sure these key communicators:

- Get brief, regular updates of school news,
- Are encouraged to e-mail the superintendent with questions or concerns, and
- Are asked to represent others in the community when they respond to a question or issue.

Remember, e-mail, like voice mail, needs a quick response.

Phone, voicemail, hotlines, websites and e-mail — the tools of our electronic age — make communication easier and faster, but they can't replace the face-to-face communication required to build the relationships of trust and support our schools require. These tools support and reflect a district's interpersonal communication efforts and are only as effective as the people and policies that govern their use.