Defining the New Public

Who are they and how do we reach them?

In urban and rural communities throughout the United States the ethnic, cultural, economic and generational make-up of the residents is changing. School districts are dealing with a much more diverse public than they have faced in the past. Their new challenge is finding ways to reach this diverse population.

At a recent school public relations workshop in Seattle, Washington, participants characterized this new, diverse audience as the “New Public.” They agreed that this phenomena represents one of the most demanding communications challenges education is facing today. The workshop was hosted by the Washington School Public Relations Association, Oregon School Public Relations Association and the Seattle School District.

Challenges

During the workshop, school public relations professionals acknowledged a number of communications challenges associated with the “New Public.” They said, in part, that school district community relations departments need to:

- Use cultural-driven communication strategies.
- Create a network of mentors for various segments of the community.
- Collect data at a deeper level than has been done in the past, including developing a profile of every student.
- Use trend analysis techniques to anticipate trends and issues.
- Reduce dependency on the printed word.
- Begin to see diversity as an asset, not as a problem.
- Think big but start small.
- No longer rely on sending information home with children.
- Go where the people are and not expect them to come to a traditional open house.
- Make sure that the system respects and supports the reality that all families, regardless of culture, want something better for their kids and that those families depend on the schools to pave the way for that better life.
- Stop focusing on what’s wrong and start concentrating on what is good and what is possible.

(Over)
Recognize that the number of advocacy groups has increased dramatically, creating new political challenges.

Understand the issue of poverty and how it affects schools.

Learn to listen differently.

Find ways to keep school systems from appearing cold, arrogant and not friendly.

Attract people from diverse backgrounds into the teaching profession.

Communicate in multiple languages.

Acknowledge that in many immigrant cultures the children are teachers for their parents.

Find ways to assure public engagement that addresses the complexity and concerns of the “New Public.”

Increase internal marketing.

Realize that cultural differences affect:
- How we communicate;
- How we decide on what school activities are appropriate;
- How we schedule activities in order to respect cultural holidays;
- How we approach and facilitate conflict;
- Parental involvement; and
- Parent-student conflicts.

**Changing behavior**

Once the challenges were identified, the workshop participants discussed the need for changing the traditional ways of communicating to meet the needs of a changing public. Actions school communicators should consider include:

- Basing communications practices on sound research;
- Providing transportation for parents to and from meetings;
- Providing food and child care at important meetings;
- Meeting parents on their turf;
- Creating an environment in which risk-taking is encouraged;
- Serving as a catalyst to enlist others to help – this is not just an education issue;
- Treating parents as customers, not as kids or clients; and
- Assuring that the community relations department represents all cultures and has assistance from individuals who speak different languages.

**Best practices**

Once the workshop participants’ attention turned to possible ways to reach the “New Public,” they developed the following list of programs and activities for schools to use as idea starters to develop their own programs to communicate with their diverse and changing communities.

- Hire/train bilingual principals and superintendents.

(More)
Find mentors for teachers.

Provide to all staff diversity training that stresses cultural competency and also includes keeping students interested, transforming student discipline and using new curriculum materials.

Implement a “days of respect” program in high schools for students and staff.

Hold a series of professional development courses on the topics of religion, culture and race.

Contact local agencies, public and non-profit, that work with various cultural groups and collaborate with them to pass on information to their clients and constituents. They may also be willing to help you create culturally-relevant materials.

Publicize grants available for diversity issues.

Travel to other countries (Mexico, Spain, Ethiopia, etc.) to recruit teachers.

Arrange for forums that are conducted in the languages of various cultural groups.

Provide English classes for adults.

Translate publications into the languages of the families served by the district.

Keep schools open and available for community activities.

Ask students and staff to learn sign language so that they can communicate with deaf students.

Collect photos of positive things happening in the schools and post them in schools and on school and district Web sites.

In appropriate languages for the families you serve, create video- or audio-tapes that explain how to register a child for school.

Hold a Saturday program for a special population that includes culture and language, tutorial assistance, finding community partners and building trust.

Organize a community diversity task force.

Conduct surveys to ensure that assumptions we make about culturally-different youth are accurate.

Require central office staff to spend time in schools.

Offer foreign language classes to district personnel.

Set-up meetings with representatives of various ethnic groups, such as African-American, Somalian or Latino, on their turf and on their terms.

Create culturally-specific, informal communication groups.

Work closely with clergy of culturally-specific populations.

Establish the expectation that all staff are to provide good customer service and hold employees accountable for aligning their actions to that ethic.

Set-up mentoring programs for staff, teachers, parents and students.
Invest in translation devices for use at board meetings, parent meetings, etc.

Invest in community billboards printed in different languages.

Engage culturally-different students and their families in service projects.

Note: Facilitator Mickey Fearn, principal consultant for the Synapse Group, recorded the workshop information that was the basis for this article. Through him, many insights and best practices came to light.