

Forging Community Alliances to Win Public Support for Schools

Getting Programs Underway

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For any exemplary education practice to thrive requires the support of the community. A major point of friction in our schools is scepticism or downright opposition to new program ideas — and the quest for exemplary practices. A commonly expressed rationale is “they didn’t do it that way when I was in school.” Yet if schools don’t grow and change, they will upset other groups, and community support withers in the face of divisiveness. We know that this is a trust issue: communities support schools when there is a sense of trust and confidence in the people who staff schools. Yet a decade of public and political bashing of education has made it conventional to criticize teachers, administrators, and anyone else connected with schools.

What do we know about earning public trust?

(Particularly in an era of fragmented politics and divided communities, when anything a school or district does is wrong in someone’s eyes — and that someone is likely to be vocal.) Below is a brief survey of practices and strategies:

- Trust arises from building relationships.
- Sending “communications” filled with “facts” is not a way to build relationships; they require face-to-face interaction, and are launched by listening carefully to peoples’ perceptions (and misperceptions), then sharing the “school view” in order to create dialogue.
- Dialogue with every member of the community is impossible. Key groups

— those whose positive behaviours will provide real support for schools — need to be targeted and schools need the discipline to focus their limited resources of time, personnel, and money on them.

- The sociological concept of opinion leaders tells us that groups don’t spontaneously make decisions; rather decisions are made by opinion leaders. These are the people we need to reach.

Who must build these vital relationships?

Every member of the school family has a role:

- The key role model for community relations must be the building principal — because the great majority of citizens relate to a specific school or schools, not to an amorphous “district.” The principal thus has responsibility for the school’s external relations and he or she must personify the institution to its community.
- Teachers are the natural contact with one essential group of stakeholders, the parents. Perhaps their greatest contribution here is to help motivate parents to become beacons of support to their neighbours and friends — many of whom will be in that hard-to-reach majority public, the “empty nesters.”
- Persuasive voices on the school’s behalf are the non-teaching staff — custodians, bus drivers, school secretaries, cafeteria or lunch helpers. Surveys show that these “average citizens” within the school are trusted voices, mainly because they are not seen as “management” and are assumed to be more objective.
- Volunteers have similar credibility.
- Directors, superintendents, and cen-

tral office staff have a targeted role: reaching those opinion leaders who are district-wide in their scope or interest — major business leaders, public officials, social pacesetters, clergy of district-wide parishes.

- Assistance is probably available from key parents, such as officers of booster clubs, parent-teachers organizations, and others whose support is demonstrated by helpful activities.
- Business leaders who exhibit a constructive concern for school improvement can rapidly move support for schools forward as well. (These business leaders do not act as if what schools require is their assumedly superior management skills.)
- Senior level students also have a potential contribution to make. Imagine what a fine civics lesson it would be for students to work with the community to foster understanding of contemporary education.

Getting a program underway

Just asking these folks to get out and win community support won’t accomplish much. We’ve been doing that for years. What we need is a systematic program that targets particular stakeholder groups with specific assignments.

A central office public/community relations officer or staff is important — but not to build the relationships. Their task is to be strategists, mentors and trainers, creators of planning ideas and materials. To earn trust, relationships must be with the frontline groups previously described.

A mechanism that has worked well is the school community relations team. Made up of the broadest possible spectrum of volunteers from the school family, this team plans and carries out a relationship-building program for the school. Typically they report to the principal, who may or may not be a member. The team carries out its programs by enlisting volunteers from the frontline groups. Projects, key messages, formal, or informal research — these and other assignments are designed by the team, with assistance as needed from central public relations staff.

Myriad variations are possible, of course. But this straightforward strategy has proven itself in many locations. This is one way to get moving:

1. Collect a team.
2. Identify the key groups in the school area.
3. Find out who the true opinion leaders are, or at least some of them who can then help you identify others.
4. Design ways to build one-on-one relationships with the opinion leaders in a way that (a) listens carefully to their views, (b) shares some "school views" that they can pass along to those who trust their opinions, and (c) facilitates easy access between the school contact person and the opinion leader so that when issues come along, it's natural to be in touch.

Encouraging words and a dose of reality

In education we have the ability, the experience, the knowledge to do this vital job extremely well. What we have failed to do is make the time to do it available. We also misunderstand who our *customers* are. Most educators seem to believe students, or perhaps parents, are their customers, but they are not. A customer is the one who can say yes or no, who signs on the dotted line to make the deal, who pays for the goods: the customers of schools are the citizens, the voters, the taxpayers. They literally own the school system. Students are in school because the law says they must be.

In the present environment, our cus-

tomers need education as much as or more than our students. Indeed, if we don't educate them about the great potential of excellent schools in our incredibly changing universe, we will lose all influence over the very schools we have been hired to operate.

Ontario takes an important first step

Forming School Councils fits well with the strategy outlined in this article. These *advisory* bodies, precisely because they are formal entities mandated by the provincial government, provide a new avenue for engaging parents and community leaders in school planning and decision-making.

If well-assembled, oriented, and focussed, I believe councils offer a fresh start at:

1. *Involving more parents in the education of their children* — Of all the initiatives that can raise learning standards, experts agree this is the *sine qua non*. Efforts have certainly been made in the past, but it just may be that school councils — which must be chaired by a parent and composed of a majority of parents — will be a believable voice to send out this call afresh. This is at least partly because councils will be in place at every school and have some clout, as opposed to the important but spotty record of booster groups like PTA's and similar parental bodies.

One hopes most councils will adopt parental involvement as a major goal.

2. *Motivating the supporters of public schools to form a new coalition* — The first assignment will be restoring perspective to the debate on changes in education. A decade of bashing schools has taken its toll in lowering morale. By bringing representatives of the teachers, school staff, students (in higher grades), parents, and community together in an alliance that includes the principal, councils have a bright opportunity to unite a too-often-fragmented education community.

If some effort is not made in this direction, winning support for public schools may not be possible. One hesitates to contemplate what might replace them...

3. *Aiding the re-engineering of school administration and support systems* — Restructuring is inevitable given the predictions of available funding, and the wave of new managerial paradigms sweeping business and other sectors. When teachers, staff, and parents are truly empowered, command-and-control "supervisors" (whatever their new titles) are no longer required. This frees resources to go back into schools and classrooms and shifts the emphasis onto serving the frontline principal-teachers-staff teams. It also removes a host of bureaucratic barriers to creative initiatives by these professionals who deliver education to students.

The real revolution in managing organizations lies in shifting the focus of the enterprise to the team leader of the basic business unit — in this case, the principal in each available school.

4. *Making schools once again the centre of the community, as they once were* — Perhaps doing this, we will rekindle the sense of community and of civility so quickly draining from many peoples' lives.

Schools may be the only social institution capable of the task.

These are high expectations. But I do not believe they are unattainable. Indeed, what other new, collaborative initiative have we had in recent times with which to tackle these critical issues?

School Support Strategy

1. Go direct:

Go around the critics and gatekeepers directly to the important stakeholders

2. To Key Publics:

... those who are interested, can give supportive behaviours now, or could stop needed action by opposition

3. Via Opinion Leaders:

Publics don't just spontaneously act; they are stimulated by the movers and shakers we call Opinion Leaders

4. Using Members of the School Family:

Involve teachers, bus drivers, cutodians, secretaries, parents, even students in customer relations activities; ambassador programs, school PR teams; put them in charge of building local relationships that earn supportive behaviours

5. On a School-by-School Basis:

People relate to "their" school(s), not districts and central offices