

Tell Your Story

If you don't,
who will?

Three districts tell how they built
strong relationships with their communities | Joe Quick

Superintendents in most Wisconsin school districts wear many hats, with a variety of duties and responsibilities. After 20 years of state-imposed revenue limit cuts, few districts have the financial ability to have a professional communicator on staff. Despite that reality, there is still much that can be — and must be — done.

Richard Zimman, Ripon district administrator for the last nine years, and 26 as a school administrator, readily admits to no academic training related to communications. But he said it was clear when he took the Ripon position “the Board sensed the community wanted even more public visibility and communication” from the new superintendent.

Ripon is a typical rural school district of 117 square miles in 11 municipalities with 1,800 students. Zimman says attending the annual Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) conference opened his eyes to the many things he could do without extra staff and additional resources. He also credits a CESA 6 “communications audit” — complete with community focus

groups and staff interviews — to provide a clear picture of strengths and weaknesses of the current effort and offered suggestions for future improvement.

“One of the best things we discovered was that our newsletter is considered to be the most trusted, credible source of information about the school



district. That's huge! The audit showed people feel they know what's going on in the district,” Zimman said.

In the first few months on the job a veteran superintendent asked Zimman what type of superintendent he was going to be. Curious, he asked the superintendent to elaborate and he laid out three superintendent possibilities: a business focus on funding and revenue; curriculum focus (generally embraced by superintendents who came through teaching ranks); or a public relations/community leader presence. Zimman knew the third option was his calling.

“That stuck with me all these years. My job as the CEO is to weave it all together. Someone has to do it (public engagement/communications). You're never going to have a referendum pass without public

Dozens of photos like this one are posted to Ripon’s district’s website and Facebook page so parents and community members can see the great work that is taking place in the district’s classrooms.



The Ripon Area School District holds a grandparent day to get older members of the community engaged with the schools.



Richard Zimman, superintendent of the Ripon Area School District, holds regular hours at a local cafe to hear from and talk with community members.

outreach and communications,” Zimman maintains.

So what's in Zimman's communications quiver? He writes a monthly column in the weekly newspaper (a request he made when making the rounds in the community shortly after being hired). He does a radio interview previewing each board meeting and then a follow-up to recap the board's action. He also issues an internal e-news bulletin to staff following board meetings.

At every board meeting a student, staff member or community member are recognized for accomplishments, support for community's schools, or a notable activity. A school calendar is produced annually and provided to community members. The district has redesigned its website twice in the last several years to make it more user-friendly.

Zimman uses Twitter and Facebook, which virtually cost nothing but reach many. He also says the board realizes the importance and

need for public outreach and communications.

“The Board is committed to community outreach,” Zimman says. “We want to be as transparent as possible and stay in touch with the community.”

When the local public access channel quit taping meetings, the board pushed to have the meetings recorded and then made available to the public via podcast. Today, there's a link on the district site with board proceedings, documents, minutes and the podcasts.

“An important way to connect to the community is by asking people to serve on task forces and citizen advisory committees,” Zimman said. He also schedules quarterly “community coffees” at local coffeehouses in town — connecting with businesspeople and offering community members a chance to talk about issues of concern. “(Communication has) to be a two-way street — you've got to be listening.”

And Zimman wears one more hat — chief photographer. “I carry my camera with me everywhere I go. Parents like to see pictures of their kids and pictures can be used to showcase the district.” There are 20,000 pictures of Ripon students on the district's Facebook site and photos are used in publications and on the website.

■ STEVENS POINT: Regaining Public Support

In Stevens Point, following two failed referenda in the fall of 2009 and spring of 2010 and the subsequent \$8 million in budget cuts, the district communications position was eliminated. Attila Weninger, the new superintendent hired in August of 2010, realized there was no solid link to the community, and he knew something had to change.

Board member Renae Sheibley characterized the period as the low-ebb of public support for the district. In the process of finding the

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new superintendent, the search firm coordinated public outreach efforts to discover what community members were looking for in a new superintendent.

"At the end of the process, we made sure (the board) had clear goals and objectives. We were also able to identify what the community was looking for in a leader," Sheibley said.

Lisa Falduto is a parent who serves on the governing board at a district charter school. After meeting with the new superintendent, she agreed to volunteer to work with the district's 12 schools and try to spread the good news about schools. Working with each school principal, she set out to identify a volunteer in each school. Several are parents, but she also works with a retired middle school English teacher, a former Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) coordinator and a talented middle schooler (working closely with the principal).



Students in the Stevens Point Area School District visit elderly community members.

Falduto is emphatic when she says, "This (model) could never replace having a professional, but this is a great supplement. It's not designed to replace a communications person." Falduto said the model's focus is on grassroots efforts from people across the community, not just the district office.

The volunteers meet as a group

at least twice annually to discuss ideas, and compare notes on what efforts/events worked well. To help the volunteers, Falduto worked with the UW-Stevens Point communications department to produce a short training video. Volunteers write news releases for events and take pictures in the school they are assigned.

Building the Foundation for Community Outreach

■ CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE

One of the critical functions in any school district regardless of size is communicating to a wide range of people about what is happening in the community's schools. And while the message needs to be consistent and in easy-to-understand language, the way you communicate to different groups is important. You might not use Twitter to connect with grandparents, but your local radio station be the perfect vehicle for succinct information about something happening in your district.

■ INCLUDE STAFF

It is important to consider both external and internal communications. Your closest allies should be your staff, but if not kept in the loop, they could be a potential detriment to the district's reputation. Brief, periodic electronic messages on emerging district issues will help staff feel they are part of the solution and that their input is important to the district's success. The NSBA "Telling Your Story" guide maintains, "Effective school boards actively engage both employees and the public in their decision-making processes, use data well, and align resources, including professional development."

■ ESTABLISH TRUST

Communication is an important quality essential for effective leadership. But at the root of successful communication is trust. Without trust, your message falls on deaf ears. Research from Barry Posner and James Kouzes shows, "people want leaders who are honest, forward-looking, inspiring and competent. Credibility is the single most important asset a leader has, and it should be protected and nurtured at all costs. Personal credibility is the foundation on which leaders stand. We call this the First Law of Leadership — If you don't believe in the messenger, you won't believe the message."

So, as you think about a communications plan for your district, be mindful of the credibility/leadership issue. Without the community's trust and support, the best communicator in the world won't sway public opinion. As you inventory your district's assets, ponder the collegiality, openness and civility of your board meetings and workshops. In an era where referendums often have a direct impact on the quality of your educational program and student options, trust is a most precious commodity. □



Volunteers for the Stevens Point Area School District take photos such as the one above of positive projects taking place in the schools and then publish them in the local newspaper.

"We have different volunteers every year," Falduto says. "We like having a diverse group; our goal wasn't to only have parents doing this."

One of the biggest benefits of the effort has been the local daily paper's willingness to create a weekly Friday

feature — "What's New in Schools" — and the volunteers consistently get stories published.

Long-term, board member Sheibley says "absolutely" that the goal is to have a person working on public outreach full-time, noting the

School board members have one mission:
to provide the best education possible for all children.

Yet, negative messages about school boards and public education abound in the media, which tends to cover stories of board dysfunction or controversy or frame public schools as 'failing.' That's because we've let others tell our story and define the agenda for public schools.

Simply doing a good job is no longer good enough. We have to do a good job, and tell parents and the public about it on a daily basis. **”**

— from *Telling Your Story: A Communications Guide for School Boards*, National School Boards Association, 2012

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job duties for the superintendent's administrative assistant is 50 percent public relations. She also believes the board's willingness to be introspective and do a self-evaluation helped to shape public perception. "We've built up trust." Finally, she credits Weninger's community outreach efforts as the new superintendent as an important factor in building that trust.

"We don't fret or talk or argue about money and funding anymore," Sheibley says of the couple of years' effort. "We aren't in a crisis state about anything. We have a large, broad, specific set of goals and objectives that are being tackled, and the community is well aware of that. We have shown the community that their district is being led and managed well, and that kids are at the center of our decision making."

WHITE LAKE: Working Together

A story from the White Lake School District shows what can happen when a district is engaged with its local community. Located in Langlade County, east of Antigo, the White Lake School District was the recipient of a generous donation of hard maple logs for a new gymnasium floor. The district won a \$3.5 million referendum to build a community recreation center. Once the referendum was approved, community members stepped up and began donating the lumber for the new gymnasium floor.

Recognizing the generous donation, the district also wanted to make sure this story was told and spread throughout the community, which, in turn, led to more donations.

In addition to posting photos of the project's progress on the school website, the school newspaper, widely read by parents and students



Students enjoying the new basketball court in White Lake made of donated lumber.

alike, ran articles on the project. The story spread through local media, with the area's daily newspaper — the *Antigo Daily Journal* — picking up and following the story closely.

According to the *Antigo Daily Journal*, community members donated 90 cords of valuable, hard maple logs for the gymnasium floor,

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

t's clear there are many ways to engage the public to build support for the community's schools. Of primary importance is that every board realize the critical need to develop a comprehensive public communication and outreach plan, and update it periodically. Public outreach and communications can affect several areas of board policy.

Policies should address the role of volunteers. Should background checks be required? What limitations should be placed on volunteers? Do you have a way to honor/thank school volunteers? And other considerations.

Boards generally allow public comments at meetings. Should speakers be allowed to discuss any topic, or only items on the agenda? Does the board have a policy on public outreach and gathering public input? Is there a policy that details how community members are selected for advisory committees?

When using the images of students, occasionally there are parents who do not want images of their children used publicly for any purpose. Does the district have a policy addressing student privacy concerns? Is there a board policy that speaks to individual members' role and responsibilities related to public information (e.g., the board president speaks for the entire board)? Is there a policy that

speaks to the efforts and strategies the school board should embrace to communicate with the public?

In the modern age, there are several electronic tools available to get information to the public. Does the district have a "user" policy for students/staff using district computers? Does the policy address use of social media on school time and by staff/students?

As you examine your communications and community outreach efforts, be sure to spend some time examining what policies you need in place to be consistent, proactive and genuine in your efforts. Trust and transparency are essential tools in your communications efforts — without those community assets, selling anything to the public will be difficult.

The NSBA's "Telling Your Story" reveals some key points. "School boards need to convey they are on the same team as the educators they employ. If we want civil debates in this country, your meetings are a good place to start. If the board doesn't look good, the district can't look good. It really is that simple...Communications involves listening and engaging your parents, your business leaders and your community. Discussing the board's policy-making role, and knowing the effect our decisions will have is extremely important." □



Pictured above are some of the White Lake community members that donated 90 cords of wood to the school district.

a symbol of pride likely unheard of in any other public school project.

The district's building committee played a big part in communicating the original need of the referendum to the community. And, once the referendum was passed, the committee was crucial in managing the donations that came in. Dan Wickersheim, who served on the district's

building committee, coordinated the effort, getting permission from the school board, working with a very receptive staff from Robbins Sports Surfaces, soliciting donations and arranging for loggers and trucks.

"One simple little idea ended up being a pretty good project," Wickersheim said. At first, organizers hoped they would get a few dozen

cords of wood, enough perhaps to allay some of the costs. But it quickly mushroomed.

"As the word got out, we had people giving everything from just a few trees to full truckloads," Wickersheim said. "That tells you the community is really behind it."

By the time the last load was delivered, 30 to 40 landowners had contributed a total of 90 cords of hard maple. Several dozen more volunteers donated their equipment, time and labor.

"I don't know of another community willing to do this," engineer Doc Smith of EDS Builders, the project's general contractor, said.

"It's going to be a beautiful floor and when people see it, they will say it's our own floor, it's from White Lake." ■

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