

ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY

TO BUILD Student Opportunities

Tracy Habisch-Ahlin

Community engagement is more than a “feel good” strategy. Students benefit from a vibrant, engaged community that can bring valuable resources to the classroom each day. At the same time, community members who feel valued and engaged in meaningful ways are more likely to support schools in those times when social and financial capital is needed.

Over 10 years ago, the Hudson School District embarked on a comprehensive communication plan following a failed referendum. It was clear the district needed to build its community relations if a future referendum were to pass.

Community engagement has been the centerpiece of the Hudson School District’s communication plan. The school district has worked to build a network of community stakeholders who can leverage their social capital to help spread good news about the district. This network includes business owners, retired citizens, civic leaders and parents. This group receives ongoing regular communications about the district’s successes and information about potential challenges. Members have also been called upon to provide feedback on important initiatives.

More traditional community task



forces have been brought together to help create the Hudson School District’s strategic vision, the Hudson High School’s Learning for the Future Initiative, and long-term facilities planning. While traditional in format, the process in each case involved extensive in-depth learning for task force members — this wasn’t your typical Saturday gathering to hammer out a plan. Each one of these task forces spent six months or more studying best practices, learning about current school district needs and challenges, and developing an implementation plan.

Reaching beyond those who are

familiar with the school district is the most challenging. Two years ago, the district started using the “World Café” model of engagement to involve more people in the school district’s conversation and planning for facility needs in grades 6-12. These community conversations provided the board of education with valuable guidance in determining what the community believed was important to student learning and what they were likely to support.

The community engagement strategies have helped to build community support and interest in

“Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success.”

— Henry Ford

getting more involved. For instance, Hudson High School’s Learning for the Future Initiative, which involves community members along with school leaders, has established a bold vision that redefines how high schools go about the business of educating students with the end goal to prepare each student for post-secondary success and challenge them to become informed, caring contributors who can meet the demands and global challenges of today.

A year ago, Hudson High School began a career speaker series that has brought a wide range of community business representatives and leaders into the school. The weekly speakers provide students with a glimpse into a specific field of study, educational expectations to obtain career goals and career opportunities. The speakers also provide students with a valuable connection to an adult mentor in their career field of interest.

Speakers have presented on career topics as diverse as a local chocolatier and small business owner to an F-16 fighter pilot who leads a global computer software development company. In fact, after hearing the fighter pilot speak about software development, a high school student approached him after the presentation to ask more questions. As a result, the high school student

went on a personal tour of the company and then pursued an internship. This student has since gained valuable real world connections to people in his field of interest and work experience all before graduating from high school.

Students need to be adaptable and nimble in today’s fast-paced changing world. The same is true for school districts. Online news and social media have created a demand for instant information and responses.

“Back in the day,” school districts provided minimal information to stakeholders regarding the state of

school affairs. School administrators can lament the good old days when the community trusted their word.

Take the time now, before a crisis or referendum drives your plan. Communications is about relationship building and most importantly it is about supporting the work that needs to be done each and every day for each and every student. ■

Tracy Habisch-Ahlin is communications/community services coordinator for the Hudson School District and a member of the board of directors for the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA). For more information about WSPRA, visit wspra.org.

WSPRA Can Help

The Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) provides Wisconsin administrators and school leaders across the state a network of communications and public relations experts to assist in starting or enhancing school district communication/community engagement planning. For information on upcoming conferences or trainings, communications materials and regional resources, visit WSPRA.org. □

Is your school board in-sync on community engagement?

The WASB/School Perceptions Annual Board Development Tool can help school board evaluate their processes and procedures, including community engagement efforts. This online survey tool allows board members to rate their work on 12 different areas on their own time when their schedule allows. For more information, visit wasb.org. Select “Board Governance” and then “Annual Board Development Tool.”



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