



Communicating About Our Schools

Why it's important that we drive the conversation

In times of change or crisis, the media often drives the conversation around public education.

People in our communities want complete and accurate information about our schools and will use the media sources they trust most. Today, trusted media includes social media — yes, Facebook and Twitter are considered trusted sources as are traditional news outlets, which may or may not provide information that is complete and/or accurate.

News and information about local schools and education is followed by 58 percent of American adults, according to a study by the Pew Research Center. The demographic groups that most follow local news about education include parents of minor children, women, adults between the ages of 30-49, and households earning \$30,000-\$50,000. The internet and newspa-

pers are the two most relied upon sources for information about local schools. Those who turn to the newspaper are more likely to be 40 or older and longtime residents of the community. Those who rely on the internet are more likely to be parents of minor children, women, Latinos, and college graduates.

As school districts, we need to be the number one trusted source for information about our schools! Building trust within our communities is most successful when school board members make commitments to effectively communicate and then follow through on those commitments. With regard to school board communications, consensus creates clarity. Lack of consensus creates confusion. News media outlets will naturally attempt to fill in the “gaps” when there is confusion and often try to tell our stories from their vantage points.

With a solid communications program in place, districts can build the trust, confidence, and support they need to become the best source for reliable information. A communications program that supports and encourages two-way communication allows us to begin building rich relationships that engage the whole community and lead to more ambassadors of public education to help us spread the good news!

Every district can improve and enrich their communications efforts.

This past year, the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA), Cooperative Educational Services Agency 6 (CESA 6), and Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators (WASDA) joined forces to survey school districts across Wisconsin about their communication practices and challenges. Districts rated the effectiveness of their current communication practices with several stakeholder groups, including:

► STAFF

80% rated it as Great or Good

12% rated it as Fair or Poor

► PARENTS

73% rated it as Great or Good

18% rated it as Fair or Poor

► COMMUNITY

61% rated it as Great or Good

30% rated it as Fair or Poor

The most obvious takeaway from this question is that school districts need to communicate with parents and community members at least as well as they are communicating with staff. On average, about 20 percent of community members have children in school. Our ability to communicate with and engage the 80 percent without children in school needs to be an important part of our communication strategy to ensure their continued support of public education.

Know the value of good commu-

JOIN THE CAMPAIGN

Efforts from the **WASB** and **NSBA** highlight public education success stories

The WASB has created the **Stand Up for Education** campaign to help local school districts spread the word about their students' successes and how they benefit their communities. This free resource is available at wasb.org — select the “Stand Up for Public Education” button on the left-hand side of the website. Districts are invited to submit their success stories.

Additionally, the National School Boards Association (NSBA), in partnership with its state associations, has launched www.standup4publicschools.org, an all-new national campaign to highlight the success of public education. The campaign features advertisements with celebrity advocates and public school graduates to tell their stories of public education.

Sal Khan, founder of the not-for-profit Khan Academy, is the campaign's first celebrity advocate. “Magic” Johnson and Montel Williams will be involved in future messages. The campaign message is simple: “Who I am today began with public education,” and “Today's public schools are better than ever.” More districts across the state using these types of resources will help spread the message about public education for the benefit of all districts! **Check out the campaign at <http://standup4publicschools.org/>.**

Know the value of good communication and invest in it.

nication and invest in it.

Many school districts vie for students in the same ways businesses vie for customers. With an emphasis on marketing, branding, and social media, we are looking for ways to differentiate ourselves from other school districts.

It's more important than ever in today's competitive climate to be different, unique, better! It is out of necessity that school districts have had to become competitive with private schools — and with each other. Investing in communications at the highest level to which your district is able is absolutely necessary to compete in this new arena. Communication is truly an investment, not an expense.

It's time we started tooting our own horns!

Unlike schools, businesses capitalize on their successes by commu-

nicating about them through marketing, advertising, public relations, and social media channels. Schools need to begin seeing their accomplishments as talking points for communications to parents and the greater community.

The first and most important tool for establishing a good communications program is finding someone to champion it within your district. Whether you hire a school communications professional or service — or tap a staff member with excellent marketing and communication skills to dedicate a few hours per week to communications, your investment in becoming the number one trusted source for information about your schools begins there.

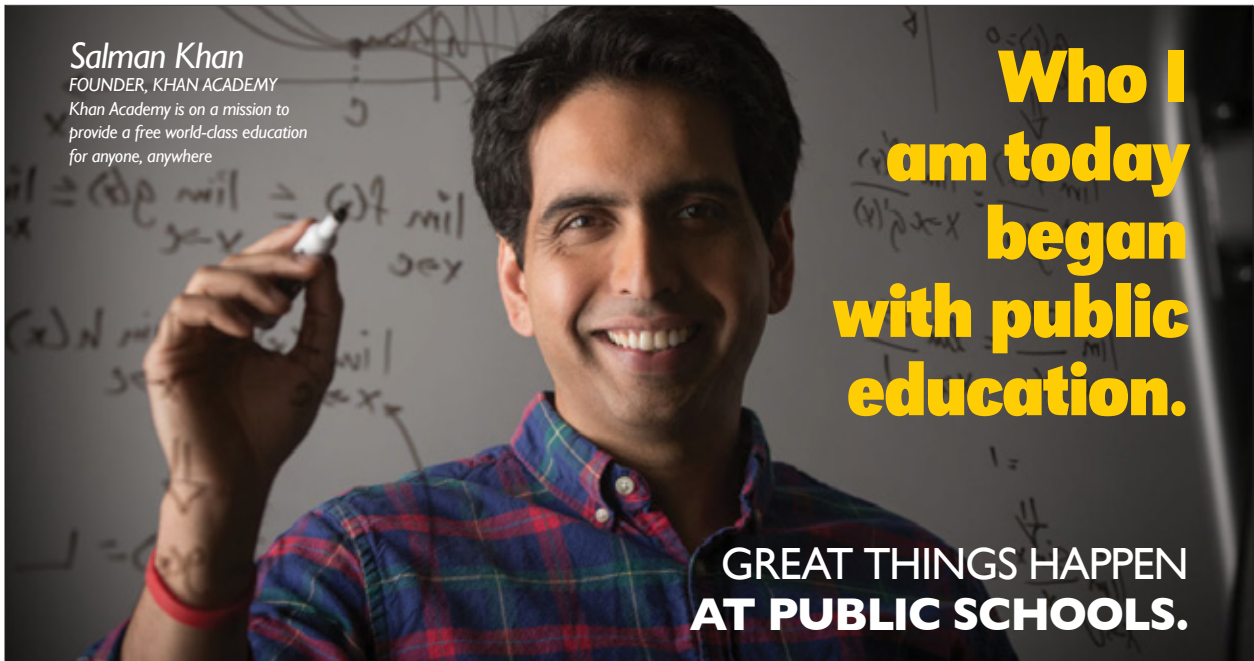
According to the Statewide Communications Survey, in districts without a communications professional on staff, the person who most

often takes that role is the district administrator/superintendent (90 percent). While superintendents play a critical role in district communications, having another person dedicated to it — even for a few hours a week to start — is necessary to ensure your district's success in the future.

The Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) is another valuable resource available to all Wisconsin school districts. WSPRA is the communications association for Wisconsin school districts offering professional development and expertise in school communications. For more information about WSPRA visit wspra.org. ■

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Salman Khan
FOUNDER, KHAN ACADEMY
Khan Academy is on a mission to provide a free world-class education for anyone, anywhere

Who I am today began with public education.

GREAT THINGS HAPPEN AT PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

Learn more at www.standup4publicschools.org

nsba
National School Boards Association

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