

Telling Their Story

School communicators help share our schools' many good stories and much more

SESSION *Building a Solid Communications Presence from the Ground Up*

Presenters Howard-Suamico: Brian Nicol, communications coordinator; Damian LaCroix, district administrator; Mineral Point: Joelle Doye, director of communications; Luke Francois, district administrator

The field of school communications is growing in Wisconsin. According to a survey conducted by the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA), about 50 school districts in the state had a communications professional in 2013. That number has now grown to more than 85 districts and continues to increase.

Brian Nicol, communication coordinator for the Howard-Suamico School District, and Joelle Doye, director of communications for the Mineral Point Unified School District, described their roles and urged school leaders to expand their communications presence.

Nicol and Doye agreed that one of their top priorities as school



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communicators is to tell their districts' stories.

"We've seen teachers and administrators take for granted the good stories in their districts," Nicol said. "You almost become numb to it."

As a former journalist, Doye regularly wrote stories on the local district but understood she was only scratching the surface.

"I told education stories all the time as a journalist, but I was able to tell only a fraction of those stories," she said. "We have so many wonderful things in our district to celebrate."

In many districts, communication responsibilities are put on the plate of the superintendent who is already busy. In Mineral Point, before Doye was hired, the school board told Luke Francois, district administrator, that the district needed to be more transparent and communicate more often. Francois spent a year increasing communication efforts and went back to the board who told him the district still needed more communications work.

"I spent a year working on our communications, I didn't even make

a dent," Francois said. "I learned that I couldn't be superintendent and communications director."

Doye was first hired as half time and then moved up to full time. Despite Mineral Point being a smaller district, Francois said that doesn't mean they don't need a communications person, "Even more so as a small district, we need to tell our story."

In Howard-Suamico, before a communications person was hired, Damian LaCroix, district administrator, said he would get requests from media and have to turn them down because he was busy with other responsibilities.

"More often than not I was passing on these opportunities or ignoring them entirely," he said. "I knew we were missing a big opportunity to tell our story. And if we don't tell our story, someone tells it for us."

When Nicol began as the district's communications coordinator,

he was surprised to discover a number of people within the district making communication efforts on behalf of the district. Nicol coordinated these efforts and developed a higher-level communications strategy for the district. Nicol was also surprised to find how much internal communications within the district was appreciated and needed. For example. The simple act of creating a basic newsletter for the district's principals helped improve trust and collaboration in the district.

In Mineral Point, Doye has helped the district expand and coordinate its communication efforts. Doye said she views her role as being another face for the district in the community. Because of her role, the district has been able to do things like organize and hold forums for school board candidates, "coffee with community" events, and open houses in the schools. Internally, Doye has developed efforts and ways to recognize staff members and has involved students in the district's communication work — the district's athletics Twitter account is entirely student run.

Nicol and Doye have brought a lot to their districts and helped them tell their stories. However, LaCroix said a lot of school leaders still question if they can hire a communications person.

"A lot of school leaders ask, 'Can we afford to do this?'" LaCroix said. "I think that's the wrong question. I think the right statement is you can't afford not to do this." ■



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