

# Communications

*Making teachers the center of effective dialogue between school and home*

## It Starts in the Classroom

Effective communication between schools, parents, and the community has long been a key to improving student achievement. And in today's education climate, as public schools fend off outside challenges and work to implement the No Child Left Behind Act, the need is greater than ever for communication that works.

In many districts, that means dropping our reliance on tried-and-true methods that no longer are effective. With news from around the world available at the click of a mouse, parents want communication that is both instant and interactive. And they want the information to come from the source—the teacher.

A cornerstone of Kansas' Blue Valley School District has always been the partnership between home and school in the education of students. To enhance that partnership, our district and our teachers association

developed a plan to help teachers manage the variety of communications tools at their disposal. It is a plan that—like effective communications—works.

### **Building on existing tools**

Blue Valley's staff uses a variety of technology—an interactive voice mail system, e-mail, websites, classroom telephones, and an online grading and attendance system—to communicate with parents. While these tools are helpful, they can encroach on a teacher's available time—

time that could be better spent on instruction.

In spring 2000, the Blue Valley chapter of the National Education Association and the school district started discussing ways to decrease the amount of time that teachers were spending on issues outside instruction.

One way to save time, the groups agreed, was to help teachers set and manage expectations for communications, rather than letting others do so. If this was effective, teachers could also market themselves, their classrooms, their buildings, and the district in such a way that public education could be showcased in a favorable light.

Both groups recognized that most teachers have not had the training necessary to be effective communicators and that few know how to market their efforts in the classroom. So we decided to provide that training, with the goal of having each teacher write an individual communications plan.

Three schools that feed into one another—Harmony Elementary, Harmony Middle, and Blue Valley Northwest High School—were selected to participate in a pilot program. In 2001-02, the principals and five teachers from each school took part in four staff development sessions on teacher communications.

The first session included an overview of the project, general communication perceptions and strategies, and the applications to schools and teachers. The second session took a look at the bigger picture of public education and communications for teachers as professionals in the world today.

For the third session, we held a full-day workshop titled *You've Got the Power!* by Brian Woodland, director of



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communication services for the Peel District School Board in Canada. Woodland discussed how teachers can market their schools while creating a professional image for themselves.

The last session was a discussion of how the information could be applied to the teachers' communication plans. The group decided that each teacher would create a plan that would be presented at Back-to-School Night at the beginning of the 2003-04 school year.

"The first contact between a teacher and parents sets the tone for all future interactions," says Pam Bakke, principal at Harmony Elementary, one of the participating schools. "Having a thoughtful, well-prepared communication plan in place establishes a sense of openness and partnership, both key to successful relationships."

### **Making plans for the future**

Bakke's comments rang true when the 15 teachers participating in the communications project presented their plans to parents that fall. After the meeting, the plans were copied and shared with all teachers at the three schools, and another in-service discussion was held about the project's future. Not surprisingly, given the reactions of parents and staff, the schools decided to expand the program to include all teachers.

The Blue Valley NEA received a grant from the national organization to bring Woodland back to repeat his earlier presentation for the school staffs. From the grant funds, each teachers also received a copy of Bill Banach's *The ABCs of Teacher Marketing* to use as a resource. The three principals wrote their own school communications plans and shared them with their staffs following Woodland's presentation.

Today, teacher communications plans are in place in several schools, and the district and teachers association continue to work together to expand the project to all of Blue Valley's 30 campuses. The district and the Blue Valley NEA also make presentations to new teachers and provide them with a template of a communications plan.

In three or four years—with the help of

building principals and district administrators and with the support of the teachers association—we believe the concept will be used throughout the district. We are gathering feedback from the new teachers, principals, and union representatives. At parent conferences and other events, we also ask community members to tell us how the plans are working.

We also believe all school districts and all K-12 teachers can use this idea to improve communications from school to home. In fact, others are already catching on to the idea. Because of this project, the National School Public Relations Association is creating a teacher communications kit that can be sold to various districts, teachers, or communications professionals.

The kit "will allow teachers to begin enhancing their communications with their parents immediately," says Rich Bagin, NSPRA's executive director. "The classroom is still where the action is, but effective communications has to be part of that action in our current educational climate."

Obviously, we agree. In today's world, the saying "perception is reality" has never been more true. Because there are so many choices in K-12 education today, public school districts and teachers must begin to market themselves effectively. And we know from experience that how educators manage their communications is a critical first step.

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