Fact Sheet #8 - Performance Standard 8: Communication and Community Relations

COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The leader fosters the success of all students by communicating and collaborating effectively with stakeholders.

What does *communication and community relations* mean?

In general terms, communication and community relations "consists of staff members' personal relations with colleagues, students, parents, and the larger community."[1]

What does research say about communication and community relations?

Communicating clearly and establishing strong relations with the community are critical school leader responsibilities. Increasingly, leaders find themselves not only responsible to faculty, staff and students but also responsible to parents, policy makers, and the larger community. Effective leaders unite these various stakeholders into a cohesive group moving toward the same quality goal - educating children and raising student performance.[2]

One of the ways they do this is through relationship building and effective communications. Effective leaders understand they do not act in a vacuum; they realize the importance of bringing stakeholders into the mix in a collaborative decision-making model. Moreover, they reach out to stakeholders on a continual basis.[3]

Effective Communication. Effective school leaders foster communication with, and between all school constituents on an ongoing basis.[4] They realize they do not have all the answers. They are good listeners and value the opportunity to hear alternate views on topics.

Today's technologies offer an array of communication possibilities and opportunities.[5] Porterfield and Carnes advocate the use of both traditional and new media to open the lines of communication to build parent and community trust. They offer five suggestions for improving communications: [6]

(1) Make communications planning a top priority.

Communication planning should be a consideration whenever new programs are designed, test dates changed, or rules revised. Questions leaders should ask themselves are: (a) Who should know about these changes? and (b) How do we assure they know? The answers to these questions ensure that all the affected parties are identified and a plan for communicating changes is in place. In other words, the authors advocate school leaders, "get out ahead of the story, put your frame around it, and plan ahead."[7]

(2) Leave the office and network with others.

Networking builds relationships by increasing mutual understanding. It can include being available to news agencies, attending committee meetings of special groups (e.g. special education and gifted education), breakfasting with PTA officers, and meeting with faculty liaison groups. This demonstrates that the leader values these groups and is anxious to listen to their viewpoints and issues of concern.

(3) Be aware of the different audiences served.

School leaders serve varied constituencies. They have different interests and concerns. Do not lump all parents into one category; they are not monolithic. Ensure that employees are the first to hear of changes, they hear the whole story, and they understand fully the

ramifications. Then enlist their support to market the changes to parents and community members.

(4) Invite naysayers to work with you.

Look for those who find fault. Enlist them in efforts to realize the vision. Listen to their arguments and try to appreciate their views. When critics are invited in and become familiar with the school environment, relationships are built and new understandings are often forged. This is a way to become a team rather than adversaries.

(5) Be strategic with available technology.

Become familiar with how the school community receives its information. Parents under 50 oftentimes get news from online sources rather than printed newspapers. Survey parents to find out and then focus communication efforts in these areas.

Communicating with Families. It behooves all school leaders to involve parents in the school community. Principals who reach out to involve parents and community members are more successful than others.[8] These principals articulate the school vision to parents.

In a series of focus groups and a nationally representative survey of 1,006 parents of current and recent high school students from urban, suburban, and rural communities, Bridgeland et al. note that among other findings: (1) high-performing schools do a better job of communicating with parents, (2) high-performing schools are more likely to be perceived as encouraging parental involvement, (3) parents of students in low-performing schools are much less likely than their peers to talk with their children's teachers, and (4) high-performing schools are more likely than low-performing schools to notify and engage parents if their child is having performance issues at school.[9]

A review of existing literature on parental involvement found that some types of involvement benefit the school directly:

- telling parents that their involvement and support greatly enhances their children's school progress;

- fostering parent involvement from the time that students first enter school;

- teaching parents that they are role models for reading behavior;

- developing parent programs that are focused on instruction;

- working to engage parents of disadvantaged students; and,

- emphasizing that parents are partners of the school and that the school values their involvement.[10]

Communicating with the Larger Community. School leaders serve as advocates of their schools. As such, it is their responsibility to "communicate a positive image of their school."[11] Support from mass media sources is important; therefore, leaders should develop positive relationships with various media outlets. According to a study by Brooking Institution, Americans want news coverage of their public schools. This means school leaders must "learn how to navigate the new digital ecosystem."[12] Some of the suggestions include: developing relationships with journalists, creating in-house news networks focusing on positive school outcomes, and connecting local stories to national studies and trends. Reaching out to the media strengthens school vision and develops relationships undergirded by shared purpose and mutual support.[13]

Schools are part of a larger community network. Their effectiveness is in part influenced by these other agencies. School leaders can garner resources, enlist support, and form relationships that are mutually beneficial.

Forming partnerships can assist in furthering the school vision to the larger community and can directly benefit students and teachers.

In a study of partnering benefits, two Ontario secondary schools heavily involved in community partnerships served as the sample. Conclusions drawn about partnering benefits include: (a) educators met the needs of their students and programs that could not be addressed in the school; (b) partnering provided material, financial, and social support; (c) principals obtained district resources unavailable to other schools; and (d) the schools' reputations within the communities were raised. Partnering with outside agencies can benefit students, teachers, programs, and participating agencies.[14]

Sample Performance Indicators for the Professional Knowledge of Leaders

- Plans for and solicits staff, parent, and stakeholder input to promote effective decision-making and communication when appropriate.
- Disseminates information to staff, parents, and other stakeholders in a timely manner through multiple channels and sources.
- Involves students, parents, staff and other stakeholders in a collaborative effort to establish positive relationships.
- Maintains visibility and accessibility to students, parents, staff, and other stakeholders.
- Speaks and writes in an explicit and professional manner to students, parents, staff, and other stakeholders.
- Provides a variety of opportunities for parent and family involvement in school activities.
- Collaborates and networks with colleagues and stakeholders to effectively utilize the resources and expertise available in the local community.

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[2] Lashway, L. (2003) *Role of the school leader.* Eugene, OR: College of Education, University of Oregon: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, U.S. Department of Education.
[3] Cotton, K. (2003). *Principals and student achievement: What the research says.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
[4] Leithwood, K. A., & Riehl, C. (2003). *What do we already know about successful school leadership?* Washington, DC: AERA Division A Task Force on Developing Educational Leadership.
[5] Porterfield, K., & Carnes, M. (2010). Tools of the trade. *Principal*, 89(4), 28-30,. Retrieved from EBSCO*host*.
[6] Porterfield, & Carnes, 2010, p. 34.
[7] Neely, E. (2005). Communicating with parents: It works both ways. *Leadership*, 34(5), 24-27. Retrieved from EBSCO*host*.
[8] Stronge, & Catano, 2006; Cotton, 2003.
[9] Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio, J. J., Streeter, R. T., Mason, J. R., & Civic, E. (2008). One dream, two realities: Perspectives of parents on America's high schools. *Civic Enterprises*, Retrieved from EBSCO*host*.
[10] Cotton, & Wikelund, 1989, from Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008, p. 114-115.
[11] Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008, p. 117.
[12] Carr, N. (2011). How schools can get better media coverage in the digital news ecosystem. *eSchool News*, 14(5), 35. Retrieved from EBSCO*host*.
[13] Leithwood, & Riehl, 2003.
[14] Hands C. (2010). Why collaborate? The differing reasons for secondary school educators' establishment of school-community partnerships. *School Effectiveness & School Improvement, 21*(2), 189-207.

Leader Self-Assessment Checklist
Performance Standard 8: Communications and Community Relations

Quality		Level IV	Level III	Level II	Level I
Effective Communication	Ensures two-way, open communications with faculty and staff.				
	Listens to suggestions of faculty and staff.				
	Adopts suggestions of faculty and staff, when appropriate.				
	Makes communication planning a top priority.				
Communications with Parents and Families	Emphasizes the partnership between parents and the school community.				
	Involves parents in the school community.				
	Develops parent programs focused on instruction.				
	Works to engage parents of disadvantaged students who may not be active participants.				
	Uses both traditional and new media to open the lines of communication to build parent trust.				
Communication with Larger Community	Establishes relationships with the larger community that are mutually beneficial.				
	Uses both traditional and new media to open the lines of communication to build community trust.				
	Builds a positive relationship with the media.				