

Tips on Internal Back-to-School Communications

As school and district leaders plan back-to-school communications, they often focus on “external” stakeholders, such as the families they serve, the media and the greater community. They might not spend as much time thinking about “internal” stakeholders—their staff and volunteers. But internal communications are key in maintaining and improving the public’s perception of a school or district.

Why engage in internal communications?

“Whether they work in the cafeteria or the classroom, school district employees are perceived by the public as being experts of schools, and as having ‘inside’ information. And since perception is reality, it is in our best interest to make sure employees have accurate, reliable, and up-to-date information.”

So says school public relations professional Jim Cummings, APR, in a chapter on internal communications in [School Public Relations: Building Confidence in Education](#). Cummings notes that research shows teachers are among the most trusted people in society. It also shows that school support workers—such as custodians, food service workers, secretaries and bus drivers, among others—are “some of the most believed sources of information in our communities.”

But in many places, these staff are an untapped communications resource. By providing good, up-to-date information to them, schools and districts give employees the ability to serve as public relations ambassadors to the community, allowing them to speak with authority and dispel rumors before they start.

In addition, well-informed employees are typically happier, which may impact retention and other staffing issues. Plus, as Cummings points out, “a disgruntled group of employees can do more damage to your school district than a week’s worth of bad publicity in the newspaper.”

Who should be included in internal communications?

All those associated with a school building or district—teachers, school counselors, food service workers, custodians, principals, bus drivers or others—interact with students and families on a daily basis. Leadership should include ALL staff in internal communications.

What strategies can help strengthen back-to-school internal communications?

Leaders can take advantage of the back-to-school season to help staff understand their role as ambassadors to the community and to coordinate a message that supports the school or district by:

- **Offering communications training at a staff meeting.** Directly address the fact that all staff have responsibility in communications. Share your back-to-school message and ask others to frame their work using the same language. Stress the important role staff play in “myth busting” and the need to relay accurate information to the community, and provide strategies to help them do so.
- **Sending an all-staff letter** sharing your message to the community and asking them to support it, offering specific examples of how to do so. Reiterate the important role they play in school public relations. *Need an example of what this could look like? Download our [staff letter template](#).*

- **Sending sample social media posts**, providing staff with messages that they can voluntarily cut-and-paste or personalize for Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or the other platforms your community uses. Include brief tips on how to best use social media in back-to-school communications. Without such samples and information, some staff might not be sure what is appropriate. *Need examples? Access our [sample social media posts](#) and [tips on using social media](#).*
- **Sharing any changes that are impacting the school or district**, including new initiatives or programs, updated policies (local, state or national) and other such issues. Ideally, this would take place at an all-staff meeting, but it could also be done in writing.
- **Making sure all staff receive copies of key documents** that are distributed to students and families. Highlight key changes from last year in a cover letter, such as handbooks, newsletters, brochures, calendars, schedules, dress codes, discipline policies, menus and other materials.

How can you strengthen internal communications all year?

Use the back-to-school season to set a tone for strong internal communications for the year, keeping in mind that such communications should be “planned, systemic and focused,” according to Cummings. Among other suggestions, Cummings encourages internal communications that:

- **Are part of a written policy** that establishes an infrastructure to ensure timely and consistent delivery of information to internal stakeholders (which could include, among other things: an e-mail distribution list; an internal newsletter/e-newsletter; regular blog posts or podcasts; and an emergency communications plan clarifying where staff get information in a crisis).
- **Are accessible to all employees**, including those not easily engaged (such as part-time staff or substitutes).
- **Provide employees with accurate, reliable and timely information**, ensuring the entire staff is informed of important issues and doesn't learn what's going on from the morning news.
- **Are proactive in providing staff with the skills, information and resources they need to effectively serve as ambassadors**, which includes educating all employees on academic issues (even if they don't relate to their job responsibilities) and confronting issues in the community or with staff as they arise.
- **Promote open, two-way dialogue**, including through:
 - Meeting with staff in ways that ensure rank or pay scale are not barriers for communication;
 - Conducting anonymous staff surveys to get feedback on issues related to employees (like new health insurance or evaluation policies) as well as the community in general (such as what they are hearing about how discipline policy is being administered, immigration concerns are impacting students and families, or other issues bubbling up in their day-to-day interactions), making sure to report the results and letting staff know the follow-up;
 - Using focus groups to get insights on key issues the school or district will be addressing;
 - Including a contact name, phone number and e-mail address in all communications so staff know who to go to with questions or for more information.

Interested in learning more? The [National School Public Relations Association](#) (NSPRA, a Learning First Alliance member) offers resources on both internal and external communications.