

# When a Student Speaks, Who Should Listen?

By Robert Ruder



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**G**adi Paskoff just completed his freshman year of high school. He's an honor student, accomplished musician, and sports fanatic. He is also a staff writer for *Freestyle*, a section in the *Lancaster Intelligencer Journal/New Era's* Saturday edition.

Paskoff hit a homerun with his June 20 article, "Learning Should Be More than Technology." Reflecting on his first year of high school, Paskoff questions why his school needs to be outfitted with advanced

technology when neighboring school districts save taxpayer dollars by purchasing used and outdated textbooks or by receiving cast-off texts from more affluent school districts within the region.

Paskoff makes his position even more compelling as he notes the presence of interactive electronic whiteboards in many classrooms and the availability of computers for almost every student.

During the final phase of a remodeling project within the school, he

noticed plasma televisions on the walls of the cafeteria and the workout room. Those screens were linked to a larger plasma screen in the school's entrance; its purpose was to keep the school's population apprised of school activities. His assessment of the installation of the plasma televisions was "that the school was trying to spend all the money it raised for the recent building renovation project."

Not dismissing the need and convenience of state-of-the-art technology, Paskoff finds himself bogged down in his perception of the disparities between school districts that have the resources to fund cutting-edge technology and those that can do so either on a smaller scale or not at all.

Paskoff raises interesting and provocative points that merit the attention of school officials. Perhaps most pressing is the need to keep the diverse populations found within a school community informed about construction projects that are scheduled in the school district.

A secondary concern is the need to share with the community's stakeholders the disposition of outdated or tattered textbooks and obsolete technology.

The third point—but not the last for opinionated, inquisitive, and compassionate citizens like Paskoff—is the need for school officials to share the state-regulated formulas used for construction projects, the effect of state aid on capital improvement projects, and how state monies

are dispersed among the school districts within a state.

Since the primary responsibility of school districts is to provide education for all students, capitalizing on these teachable opportunities enables school officials to put theory into practice. How to successfully realize these goals is site specific and depends on many variables within both the school community and the greater community.

### **Communicating with Diverse Populations**

In most school districts, approving a budget, adding staff, accepting proposals for constructing new buildings or renovating existing ones, and other important fiscal items are included on a school district's monthly meeting agenda and are approved with minimal discussion, unless there is a hotly contested agenda item. School boards and district administrators work diligently to accomplish their tasks and carefully and efficiently monitor the district's fiscal status.

## **Capitalizing on these teachable opportunities enables school officials to put theory into practice.**

Unless the process for communicating with constituents in a timely and factual manner is in place, information may be misconstrued. In a Web-based age with Internet accessibility, crafting communications designed for each population should be a standard function of a school district. Communicating with the

community through newsletters and e-mails is a priority. Determining the frequency of distribution is influenced by an array of factors, including budgetary considerations and the expectations of the community's stakeholders.

In a scenario such as that described by Paskoff, apprising students and staff within a school of the scope of a major remodeling project paves the way for greater acceptance of the project and validates the importance of sharing information with the school's populations.

How information is shared is again site specific in that one communication model will not fit all schools and districts. Dedicating time to explain the scope of the project through an assembly program, via a television broadcast, or electronically with weekly updates may eliminate some of the questions and concerns Paskoff poses.

### **Sharing Funding Sources**

Using in-house communications to share how capital improvement funds are realized and how those monies are allocated will help staff and students better understand the financial gymnastics associated with funding a school district's operations. State or federal monies, as well as the prudent investments, orchestrated by the school district's chief financial officer, should also be explained. Easy-to-follow budget reports or presentations should be included in the overarching communications package.

### **Disposing of Obsolete Material and Equipment**

How school districts dispose of outdated material and obsolete equipment is often governed by state guidelines. Explaining the details of the disposal process to community members, staff, and students may effectively eliminate misconceptions and give them a better understanding

of the disposition of outdated or surplus material and equipment.

### **Communicate, Communicate**

At a time when school officials are under increased scrutiny on how taxpayer dollars are spent, providing the community with accurate information in an objective manner may go a long way toward building relationships that are based on trust and facts.

Transparency, a current buzzword within politics, may be applicable to school officials and districts in trying economic times. Constituents want to see what they are getting for their tax dollars. They want to know the process for disposing of outdated and surplus materials. They want to hold district and building administrators accountable for the education of their children and the expenditures associated with the efficient functioning of a school district.

## **Constituents want to see what they are getting for their tax dollars.**

Through effective communications, taxpayers, staff, and students can gain a comprehensive look at the overall administrative, educational, and fiscal functioning of their school district.

Effective communications will answer many of the questions that Gadi Paskoff asked in his article. If this happens, young Paskoff will have succeeded in prompting school districts to improve their skills as communicators with the diverse constituencies they serve.

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