

Improving Internal Communications

As a school leader, you know that communications is a key part of your role, not just with parents and board officials, but with the people you see on a daily basis – your staff. Whether there are 10, 50 or 200 staff members in your school, you have a ready-made public relations team at your disposal. Making sure these people are informed about your school's operations will help to ensure that you are all “singing from the same song book” publicly. Think of your staff as a team – every member has an important role to play.

Your school's team has a number of important members: teachers, office staff, custodians, education assistants, bus drivers, hall monitors, cafeteria workers and other support staff. If you can create an environment where surprises are kept to a minimum, the stress level amongst your staff will be greatly reduced. When everyone is “in the loop” about routines, expectations or emergent issues, it is more likely that a common message will be conveyed to your school community. Here are some ways to establish effective internal communications routines with your staff:

- For most parents, the school secretary is their first point of contact with the school – the first person they talk to on the phone or meet in person. Make sure this person is kept informed of important decisions so they can help parents and community members with their questions or concerns. The secretary should have easy access to the school newsletter for referral or for distribution to parents who have questions.
- Develop and implement a protocol for staff (and student helpers) to answer the phone, including a routine for establishing a “call-back” to answer specific questions.
- A staff manual of routines and procedures is a very useful tool. Topics could include summaries of board policies (how to call in an absence, how to report child abuse) as well as school-based routines (supervision posts, library routines). From time to time, staff may need a reminder about an expectation; being able to refer to a section in a published manual may reduce the possibility that an individual will take the reminder personally. Use the first staff meeting of the year to draw everyone's attention to the expectations covered in the manual. And try to conduct an annual review of the manual – with a staff representative – to allow everyone to have input into a smooth-running operation.
- Many issues from parents arise at school council meetings. Following these meetings, share the highlights and the discussions that took place with your staff. You can prepare a short memo or distribute the minutes of the meeting.
- When there is news to tell, whether it is good or bad, your staff should hear it from you first. Provide them with the information they need to answer the “why” questions that they may receive from parents. By sharing the reasoning behind decisions, you can reduce the opportunity for idle speculation and gossip.

- Regardless of the size of the staff, a short newsletter will get information out to everyone at the same time. Draft a weekly report that can be delivered through internal mailboxes or through department heads. The newsletter can highlight upcoming events, regular routines, or emergent issues.

- Any change introduced in school routines or procedures necessitates careful planning and staff input. Change is inherently stressful, but the stress can be largely reduced with sufficient discussion. The earlier the staff is involved in the process and the more they can offer input, the more likely it is that they will support the change.

- Let your staff know that you are available to listen to their concerns. Follow up with time and attention at regular meetings, special meetings to address particular issues, or private meetings with individual staff members where necessary. Invite staff to suggest solutions or directions, but don't promise anything that you can't deliver.

- Follow a standard format for staff meetings. Distribute the agenda for each meeting a few days in advance. This will allow people to know what will be discussed, prepare questions, and offer well-thought out suggestions. It will also help the meeting run more efficiently. Staff meetings should include all personnel and their areas of responsibility.

- Include "New Business" as an agenda item. If there is no time to discuss the issues at the staff meeting where they arose, address them later in another forum such as the next regular meeting, an emergent meeting or in the staff newsletter.

- Devote a section of the staff newsletter, as well as a section of a staff room bulletin board, to information on professional development workshops, seminars or journal articles. The unions will often send this information to the school steward who will post it on the union bulletin board.

- If your staff is agreeable, highlight their accomplishments – both personal and professional – in your school newsletter.

- In the event of a tragedy, immediately seek support from your board's tragic events response team. It is crucial that all staff be carefully prepared by you to respond to student, parent, and community questions and concerns. If the tragedy attracts media attention, make sure one school representative (usually the principal) is prepared to deal with the media.