

center on **reinventing** public education



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# **Strategic Communications for Portfolio School District Reform**

*Sam Sperry*

*crpe working paper # 2010\_3*

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# THE PORTFOLIO SCHOOL DISTRICTS PROJECT

Portfolio management is an emerging strategy in public education, one in which school districts manage a portfolio of diverse schools that are provided in many ways—including through traditional district operation, charter operators, and nonprofit organizations—and hold all schools accountable for performance. In 2009, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) launched the Portfolio School Districts Project to help state and local leaders understand practical issues related to the design and implementation of the portfolio school district strategy, and to support portfolio school districts in learning from one another.

## A Different Vision of the School District

Traditional School Districts	Portfolio School Districts
Schools as permanent investments	Schools as contingent on performance
“One best system” of schooling	Differentiated system of schools
Government as sole provider	Diverse groups provide schools

## Analysis of Portfolio District Practices

To understand how these broad ideas play out in practice, CRPE is studying an array of districts (Chicago, Denver, Hartford, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, D.C.) that are implementing the portfolio strategy. The ongoing analysis looks at what these districts are doing on important fronts, including how they attract and retain talent, support school improvement, manage accountability, and re-balance their portfolios by opening and closing schools when needed. The work compares different localities’ approaches and adapts relevant lessons from outside sources such as foreign education systems and business.

### The Portfolio Network

Participating districts currently include Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Hartford, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, New Haven, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, Rochester, and Washington, D.C.

### Connecting Portfolio Districts

In addition to fieldwork and reports from the study districts, CRPE has built a network of districts interested in portfolio management. This network brings together local leaders—mayors, foundation officers, superintendents, and school board members—who have adopted or are considering a portfolio management strategy. Like the strategy itself, the network is a problem-solving effort. Each city is constantly encountering barriers and developing solutions that others can learn from.

## CRPE sponsors the following tools for supporting portfolio districts:

- **Semi-annual meetings of the portfolio network.** The majority of participants are involved in day-to-day portfolio implementation, resulting in content-rich and highly informative meetings.
- **Portfolio online community.** Outside of the network meetings, members collaborate and participate in online discussions and share resources around emerging issues.
- **Portfolio web-based handbook of problems and promising solutions.** Built around the needs of member districts, the handbook is a growing resource available to anyone interested in school and district performance management. It includes special analyses done by CRPE and synthesized best practice materials from member districts. (Under development)

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The Portfolio School Districts Project is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Joyce Foundation.

**TO VIEW REPORTS FROM THIS PROJECT, VISIT [WWW.CRPE.ORG](http://WWW.CRPE.ORG).**

## INTRODUCTION

A senior communications official with the Louisiana Recovery School District described her work in New Orleans as constantly “putting out fires” in the continuing effort to rebuild and reform public schools there post-Katrina.

Up north in New York City, her communications counterpart said “conflict” characterized his work in the Big Apple’s drive to systematically improve public education.

Out West in Denver, the lead communications officer indicated that portfolio school district reform there required consistent, attentive communications outreach and careful listening—especially amid all the shouting and upset over change.

Communications officials in public education are well aware of the daily challenges they face when their institutions undertake school reform. They know that effective communication is both art and science. Despite their understanding of the “do’s and don’ts” of best communications practices, they also know the issues they must deal with are at once political and typically fraught with controversy.

This paper identifies key aspects of effective, strategic communications policies and practices for officials undertaking school reform by adopting the portfolio district model. Much of the material discussed is drawn from extensive interviews with senior communications staff in New York, Denver, and New Orleans. Their experiences are folded into a discussion of strategic communications fundamentals that may, or may not, be familiar to seasoned education executives and leaders.

The idea for a “portfolio school district” is relatively new. It grew out of research work, by the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of

Washington Bothell, into various school-reform ventures that individually did not yield the expected results.

The label ‘portfolio school district’ is a broad term based on a simple set of ideas: a district that provides schools in many ways—including traditional direct operation, semi-autonomous schools created by the district, and chartering or contracting to independent parties—but holds all schools, no matter how they are run, accountable for performance. In a portfolio district, schools are not assumed to be permanent, but contingent: schools in which students do not learn enough to prepare for higher education and remunerative careers are transformed or replaced. A portfolio district is built for continuous improvement via expansion and imitation of the highest-performing schools, closure and replacement of the lowest-performing, and constant search for new ideas.”<sup>1</sup>

This approach to improving public education, therefore, is much less prescriptive and much more flexible. At its heart are two elemental ideas: continuous improvement and accountability—for all concerned.

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul Hill et al., *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*, Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 2009, 1.

## **MESSAGING: “YOU’RE ONLY AS GOOD AS THE STORY YOU HAVE TO TELL.”**

If a picture is worth a thousand words, those eleven words suggest at least a couple of hundred pictures. For developing and effectively communicating a good story for school reform is necessary for the venture’s success, and it requires a clear and concise core message.

People will want to know why the change. Despite its true complexity, the answer must be easily grasped. Something as simple as **“Our kids deserve a better education—all our kids”** will help define the reform and set the tone. It’s a sound bite all right. And it positions the reform effort on the side of the kids. It places the kids first in priority.

This is not to relegate the other elements of reform initiatives. Raising graduation rates, improving teacher quality and student performance, increasing efficiency in school operations... the list of reform goals is long and important. Each community will have its own list and order of priority.

### **The Value Proposition**

Yet the driver, the value proposition at the heart of this venture, should be **a better education for each student**. This anchors the reform effort as aiming first and foremost to benefit the students—not the adults—who are of immediate concern to parents and family, and in the bargain society at large.

Most people will come down on the side of better schools. But that abstract rationale may prove less persuasive than specific results demonstrating that reform has increased graduation rates by 50 percent, for example, or raised math scores by 36 percent.

The best story will be one that allows people—both parents and the community at large—to put a face on the numbers. If the graduation rate at “Washington High School” has jumped from 48 percent to 76 percent over three years, the reform has a great story to tell. The kids in this turn-around story will offer widespread appeal, by making it personal and far more real than mere statistics.

When the positive core messaging of portfolio district reform is based upon improving education for the kids, it also provides a high-ground defensive position when the predictable conflicts arise and/or when the venture does not deliver expected results.

### **Long Term: A Test of Patience**

School reform is not easy, and it is long term. This likely will test the patience of parents and community leaders, and furnish ammunition to reform opponents. Fair enough. But, to sustain the reform effort amid controversy, the policies and specific initiatives (such as school closures) will need to rely on messaging that reflects values imbedded in the schools’ mission, which is to educate students effectively. From this value-messaging platform the other message components can be advanced.

You’re only as good as your story means that for reform to succeed in the near and long term, there must be a credible and appealing story to tell. By definition, this requires a level of honesty and candor that may challenge some reform leaders tempted to overreach for the positive. For when “spin” is overdone, people in the audience will spot it. The messaging will suffer diminished credibility. And reform opponents will be given openings to discredit the reformers and their programs.

New York’s communications staff keeps track of success stories for the times when news coverage of school reform is negative: **“We keep a few of them in the drawer**

**so that when some bad news hits the media, we've got some material to counter the negative play,"** observed the public information officer. **"They can't ignore a story about a kid who was failing and now is pulling down a B+ grade average and headed for college."**



## MESSENGERS

A senior communications officer with “a great story to tell” remembered an occasion when the right message was delivered by the wrong messenger.

Turning around this high school had been hard and controversial. But graduation rates were up significantly. Test scores were up significantly. A failed high school had been shut down, replaced, and the new school had begun to deliver significant improvements.

But when it came time to call attention to this success, a very prominent elected school official wanted to tell the story and had the political clout to get the lead at the microphone.

**“This guy was smart but when he stood up to speak, he just sucked the air out of the room,”** said the official. **“We knew if we let him take the lead in this it would kill us. We had to find another way.”**

There are two kinds of messengers: those who can, and those who can't. Even in this age of new media (of Facebook, bloggers, and texting), it is imperative to deploy smart, likable, and facile communicators. This is critical to the success of effective portfolio reform communications.<sup>2</sup>

Communications pros know that “likability” is an essential ingredient for effective message delivery. President Barack Obama exemplifies this point. People may

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<sup>2</sup> Excellent role models are found in the communities noted earlier in this paper. Leaders like Superintendent Paul Vallas of the New Orleans Recovery School District, Chancellor Joel Klein of the New York City schools, and Superintendent Tom Boasberg of Denver consistently and effectively deliver the key messages of their reform policies and programs.

disagree with what he says. Still, they will listen to him because they like him. (The same was true of the late President Ronald Reagan.)

Command of the subject matter is another key ingredient. Appealing body language (smiling, looking people in the eye, erect posture whether standing or sitting), speaking to people directly in everyday language, answering questions directly—all go into a spokesman’s effectiveness. No less important is the leader who knows when *not to speak*.

Television interviews especially can be damaging. One good example is CBS News anchor Katie Couric’s 2008 interview with then-Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, the Republican candidate for Vice President. The camera doesn’t lie. It shows only what it sees. Governor Palin did not have command of her material. She tried unsuccessfully to “tap dance” around some of Couric’s impeccably fair questions. The result for all to see was that Palin was not ready for prime time. Subsequent polling showed her approval ratings fell off significantly.

### **A Good Listener**

Another essential ingredient for the effective communicator is a good grasp of his or her audience. Being a good listener, displaying a sense of humor, and showing some genuine humility enriches and enhances the odds that the communicator’s message will get a fair hearing from the audience—of one, or one hundred.

Media training can be helpful for leaders who are not naturally media savvy. Even so, training cannot overcome all an individual’s communications deficiencies. Skilled print and broadcast reporters will exploit weak interviewees and such events can damage a school reform initiative. There really is no substitute for skilled and appealing personalities to be the faces and voices of portfolio school district reform.

Just as a baseball team cannot win games if its players do not score any runs, a portfolio district reform venture, which is certain to spark controversy, will likely flop if its leaders are not effective at persuading people to undertake and stick with it. To help reform leaders with effective communications, they will need good staff.

## COMMUNICATIONS STAFF

The best leaders typically hire against type: that is, they retain a staff who help compensate for their deficiencies. A first-rate communications staff is necessary for success in a portfolio district reform venture—especially if its top leaders are weak communicators.

The best senior communications staff will have at least some experience in news media. They will be good writers, quick on their feet, and in close touch with the important media—new and old—in their communities.

Moreover, senior communications officers should be effective at two-way communications. That is, they must not only take the lead in shaping and projecting the reform effort’s out-going communications. They also must be good as a listening post by being in daily touch with media and key community leaders and the school constituency. This “tuned-in” communications staff thus can provide effective feedback to reform leaders.

### **The Devil’s Advocate: Will This Play in Peoria?**

The effective senior communications officer is more than just a good listener. In providing feedback to the superintendent, she or he often must report the “bad news.” This leads at times to playing the role of devil’s advocate, when a high-level internal discussion, or argument, requires aligning a policy or operational decision with an effective communications strategy.

In these circumstances, it can fall to the senior communications officer to challenge other staff who advocate for a given policy or decision that the communications officer sees as at best risky and perhaps damaging to the larger reform venture:

- Is it believable?

- How will the story “land” or be received in the community?
- Is the timing right?
- How can we effectively counter certain criticism?
- Is the proposed action consistent with earlier actions?

Such internal conflicts are typical and occur in all organizations where leadership encourages open discussions and is not threatened by conflict. Hard choices can give rise to sharp internal disagreements: for example, when closing a now-failed high school with a long and once-glorious history and influential alumni, or challenging the position of a powerful teachers union. The “right policy” is one thing; executing that policy to achieve the desired results is quite another. Effective communication is central to that success.

This means the senior communications officer and the superintendent must have a happy “marriage.” Essential to this is that the communications officer must report directly to the superintendent. Anything less is a recipe for trouble. They must sustain a relationship that allows for conflict and resolution so that the larger mission is served by both a policy or operating decision and the appropriate communications strategy.

When consistently done right, good policy and good operating decisions are informed by good communications strategy. This requires that the senior communications officer is always “in the room” when critical decisions are being discussed and made. There can be no secrets between the superintendent and the senior communications officer. As with any successful marriage, their mutual confidence must be complete.

To be effective communicators, then, portfolio reform leaders require communications staff who perform well beyond the routine activities of drafting communications materials, prepping for news conferences and interviews, and

identifying opportunities to project messages that reinforce the reform agenda. They need a staff of good listeners who remain in-touch with the media, the education community, and the community at large.

The importance of new media only raises the ante for capable communications staff. The speed and timing of information transfer is lightning quick, and the 24-hour news cycle requires an alertness and sensitivity to the power of information, both favorable and not. Because the Internet conveys information so fast, an effective communications operation must be able to work successfully with emails, texting, bloggers, Facebook, Twitter, and any other tool that employs the pace of the Internet.

## KNOW THY AUDIENCE

When we all were first taught composition circa the fifth grade, our teachers drilled into us the importance of knowing the people to whom we would be writing, or speaking. The same idea is central to successful marketing and communications: companies do best when they well understand their markets and customers. School districts that undertake a portfolio reform venture need to understand their diverse communities in all their guises.

Effective communications for a reform program, therefore, must be attuned to the several audiences that comprise the community. The communications staff plays a key role in this. But other staff as well need to understand who their “customers” are, their needs and aspirations.

### **Being Accessible**

Large urban districts commonly include several immigrant and ethnically diverse populations. These present communications challenges of language, trust, and modes of receiving information that will require special outreach.

New York set up a translation and interpretation center. Denver established a community outreach office. These and other initiatives aim to build lines of communication and relationships with families often disadvantaged by language and/or ethnic minority status.

Communications officials in New York, Denver, and New Orleans all stressed the importance of community engagement. In communications terms, that means consistent, proactive efforts to involve the community to bring its constituent parts along with the reform. Examples include:

- New York Chancellor Joel Klein established 32 education councils to consult on his portfolio reform programs;
- in Denver, at the request of the school district, former Mayors Federico Pena and Wellington Webb formed “A-Plus Denver” to help reform the city’s public schools;
- two years before hurricane Katrina destroyed much of New Orleans, the State of Louisiana took over the district and began a reform effort; but New Orleans’ communications effort is understaffed and constantly stretched thin.

### **Internal and External Audiences**

Proactive communications, especially in the case of controversial portfolio school district reform, means reaching several audiences, often almost simultaneously. Timing is critical. Informing key internal and external audiences who “need to know” because they are key stakeholders in reform can spell the difference between success and failure.

A not uncommon oversight by large institutions can be a failure to communicate with their internal audiences, starting with employees. For school district reform, the internal audiences would include at minimum school board members, teachers and staff, parents and students, and Parent-Teacher Organizations.

### **Website for Employees**

Denver Public Schools (DPS) employees, including teachers initially skeptical of reforms, comprise a key audience because they are on the front line of reform. The district office wisely set up a website for DPS employees, who are first to receive public announcements on reform matters. The issue here is less that all the employees will be in lockstep with the district than it is sustaining the effort to make sure they receive accurate information—*first!*



Although too many large institutions overlook the importance of keeping their rank-and-file employees well informed during periods of change, those who achieve more success reduce angst and rancor by letting them know directly. It keeps the employees in the loop and makes them feel part of what is going on.

In all three school districts contacted for this project, communications officers stressed the importance of proactive, consistent, and innovative ways to reach poorer families whose students too often experience difficulty in public schools, and who are a major part of the focus of portfolio district reform initiatives. Language difficulties, the lack of access to the Internet, single parents working two jobs, parents with little education or those who are intimidated by what can be the labyrinth of procedures, say for closing and opening new schools, are but some of the problems confronting school reform communicators.

### **After Dinner, In the Park**

One communications officer told of how she met after dinner in a park with mothers of a particular ethnic minority. They were fearful of going to official meetings, did not really understand what was going on there, and needed the reassurance of someone of their age and color to speak with on a personal basis. This “retail” method of projecting the portfolio reform message is not practical in all cases. But when appropriate, it can be very effective.

Because portfolio school district reform likely will occur in larger, more urban communities, the number of key external audiences is likely to be socio-economically complex. Local officials, key state legislators, business and civic leaders, and other “influentials” such as editorial writers and responsible bloggers are important constituents of the external audience and can be effective channels to this larger community as well as to some of its component segments.

## Suspicious Parents

It can also be effective to identify and communicate with key leaders in immigrant and low-income communities. Often parents in these groups, who are uncomfortable with or outright suspicious of bureaucracy and public authorities, will turn to these leaders (pastors, business owners) for leadership and counsel on school and other civic matters.

Most reform messaging strategies and tactics will be on a “wholesale” basis, where large numbers of people are involved. But with wholesale communications, it remains important to make sure that certain key leaders get personal treatment and are not caught off guard: school board members, a key union leader or Parent Teacher Association officer, maybe the mayor or ranking state officials. **“The rule here is that some people important to the effort need to hear the news personally,”** a school communications officer observed. **“It’s a lot easier to take a few minutes to call them now than to deal at length down the line with their upset if they got the message third hand.”**

Ultimately, by effectively communicating with internal and external audiences, school reform leaders are communicating with the general public. And these are not only “taxpayers” who help finance public schools. They also are citizens who want good schools as institutions that strengthen the community by successfully educating the next generation.

## RESEARCH

In this time of economic uncertainty, depressed public revenues, and reductions in school budgets, it may not be prudent to spend education dollars on research into a school district's constituency. Market research, however, can be an effective tool for informing policy choices and operating decisions, and in the bargain enlighten how best to communicate with audiences. Yet, given the potential for conflict, understanding how constituencies (customers, supporters, and opponents) think about a given initiative can be a wise decision.

Businesses conduct research both to learn more about customers and their markets. They also survey their own employees when contemplating changes. Often the research delves into how effective an institution's communications initiatives and tools are and how they can be improved.

An alternative to spending school money on research may be funding by independent groups that support reform. But to be credible, the research must adhere to the highest standards in design and execution.

Apart from survey work, community outreach may be another way to conduct "research" of a less formal kind. In Hartford, Connecticut, the new superintendent conducted an extensive listening tour with school board members to find out what parents and citizens thought about improving the city's schools. This proved to be time well spent. Hartford's citizens thus helped inform the district's reform program.

## MEDIA RELATIONS

Good relations with media are *always* important in a democracy. Public educators know this but don't always enjoy good relations with reporters and editors.

The recipe for bad relations begins when people forget or fail to grasp that most journalists view their role as one of providing independent oversight of the affairs of government and matters of public interest. This is the legitimate franchise of "the fourth estate" guaranteed by the First Amendment. Ignoring media—including the blogosphere and social media—is nothing more than a guarantee for trouble. Moreover, thoughtful, skilled, and honest attention to media can produce good results. Those results may come in the form of fair and thorough coverage and commentary. They may be no more than successful damage control. In no case should leaders expect that media will serve as their public relations arm.

### The Strategic Difference

Our purpose here is not to offer a primer on fundamental media relations. Most school districts already have one or more communications officers at the senior level who are well versed in the rudiments of media relations. Not all, however, are successful at strategic communications.

**"You need someone who can handle the firestorm,"** said a former senior New York City schools official. **"Someone besides the chancellor who works on the most controversial issues and who can address them calmly and with a focus on the big picture."**

The strategic point here is that when a controversy is boiling up, it is not always necessary to have the district leader out front. The really effective communications officer will have at the ready one or two people who are on top of the issue, who can

speaking authoritatively and yet keep the focus on the bigger picture of a better education through reform.

### **Your Story—Their Report**

**“You must be prepared for the media to view differently the story you have to tell,”** said the former district leader, and related the following event: The district decided to establish a new Summer Success Academy to replace the long-existing and ineffective summer (remediation) school program that automatically allowed teachers with seniority, whose contract gave them “retention rights” over the jobs, to teach the classes and make extra money. The new academy would hire teachers on the basis of merit, not their length of service.

School officials saw this as an education story about improving the quality and results of summer school. But the *New York Times* reporter covering the story saw it as a labor-management dispute.

The district went ahead with the academy. The union filed a grievance. The academy became an educational success, and by the time the grievance was resolved several months later, the issue was effectively moot.

From a strategic communications point of view, the district took the side of the *students* gaining a better summer-school education, whereas the union took the side of the *adults*, its teacher members whose benefits were at risk. From a positioning standpoint, the district held the high ground.

Transforming a school district to the portfolio model will produce heated conflicts, whether the issue is

- closing and opening new schools,

- a change of work rules for teachers that impose higher standards of accountability,
- giving more authority to school principals but also more strictly holding them accountable,
- longer days for instruction, tougher curricula, and ending social promotions, or
- transportation.

The list is a long one. So it is a given then that senior staff be able to function effectively under the pressures of change and maintain their focus on the basic goal: providing students with a better education.

One important ingredient for success is the ability to anticipate conflict and to be ready for it. An effective outreach program is one in which leadership and staff will not only convey reform messages but, in the process, listen carefully and generate feedback. This is part of a coherent communications strategy whose messaging is shaped, in part, by responses from the community. But its success relies on good listeners who can understand what is being said—and the silences too—and report back what is percolating up.

### **School Report Cards**

Both New York City and Denver employ a type of report card for schools. By posting the performance results for each school and class online and in other formats, people can see how well a school is doing. As long as the standards for measuring results are fair, such reports establish a baseline for the discussion. They don't guarantee agreement. They provide a starting point and a focus for acknowledging successes and identifying areas for improvement.

Report cards for schools are a good media relations tool because they communicate openness. But the reports must not be engineered to hide critical pieces of information. This means school reform leaders must adopt an ethic of openness and recognize that disclosure carries the risk of sometimes putting “bad news” on display—as when a school that replaced one that was closed fails to live up to expectations. When leaders play “hide the ball,” they not only risk being caught in the specific circumstance, they also put their credibility, and typically the validity of the reform venture, at risk. Once the media “catches you in a lie” they will probe for other failings that, when discovered and publicized, will over time weaken an individual’s or an initiative’s effectiveness.

Just as cats are wont to prowl, when reporters believe they are being lied to, they will pursue the matter to the end.

## NO MAGIC WANDS

Effective strategic communications is hard work that never ends. There are no magic tricks to employ. There are, however, some people who get it right. Call them “Merlins,” who succeed because they play it smart and straight.

In his book *Hardball*, Chris Matthews offers much wisdom and many instructive anecdotes to illustrate how good communicators can turn weaknesses into strength. In his chapter entitled “Hang a Lantern on Your Problem,” Matthews recalls a vignette when an effective communicator turned a potential problem into an advantage.

In a 1984 presidential debate between President Reagan and former Vice President Walter Mondale, a reporter asked the aging president whether he still had the energy and quick judgment to deal with a problem like the Cuban Missile crisis that had tested the late President John F. Kennedy. Without missing a beat, Reagan responded in feigned seriousness that “I will not make my age an issue in this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience.”<sup>3</sup>

Delivered by one with years of acting experience, the president’s line came off as spontaneous and drew laughs all around—even from Mondale.

Of course, the line was rehearsed. So what? It scored points because Reagan’s campaign staff had anticipated that the president’s age would come up as an issue. It did. But it also died in that one widely televised moment.

### Obama’s Lantern

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<sup>3</sup> See Chris Matthews, *Hardball*, Simon & Shuster, Touchstone Edition (paperback), 1999, 158.



Candidate Barrack Obama faced the tough challenge of race when the pastor of his church in Chicago made some offensive and apparently racist remarks. Unlike Reagan, who employed humor to defuse the issue of his age, Obama took the serious issue of race head on and delivered an inspiring speech. He defused the issue and won over many voters who had been unsure of him up to that point in the 2008 campaign.

Anticipating and preparing in advance to communicate about issues that are likely to arise during a school reform effort is a much better method to ensure success than sitting back and hoping that the tough questions will not get asked.

Admitting a mistake, admitting the obvious, stepping up to the challenge of a difficult problem—these “habits of character” can appeal to the better angels of people’s nature. Yes, school reformers must be confident of their purposes and plans for making change. But no individual is always right. No plan is entirely perfect. Surely when something does not go right, meeting it head on is probably a good rule of thumb to follow, however difficult.

The story portfolio school district reformers can and should tell is that people in public education can do much better and that changes are meant to provide our kids with a much better education. That means changes for many adults: educators, parents, public officials, labor and civic leaders. Keeping the focus on better schools for kids is a stronger message than preserving the status quo to which adults have become attached.

Like baseball, it looks easy. But baseball is hard and effective communications for school reform is hard, too. For leaders of portfolio school district reform, understanding this is a very good beginning.

## **ADDENDUM**

### **TOOLS: Some useful (and some not so useful)**

#### **Consultants**

Large school districts with complex, socio-economically diverse populations will sometimes require the services of specialized professionals. Two points should be kept in mind when using consultants for communications.

First, communications consultants should be hired for discreet jobs with clearly defined services and work products, and for set periods of time. Portfolio district reforms are complicated and controversial. Therefore, they require communications staff that can do most of the work but not necessarily all of it. Examples of work appropriate for consultants might be:

- helping to plan and execute the details for conducting community outreach activities such as school and community forums, listening tours, and school sign-up sessions
- conducting surveys to identify constituent preferences, employee sentiments, and reactions to proposed changes and ideas for improving their schools
- developing a website, or conducting a review and critique of existing websites to identify improvements
- designing print materials and other items as logos, art-work, and help with organizing and distribution
- providing media training for key senior personnel, including school board members
- critiquing a district's current communications activities and how they might become more efficient and effective

Second, outside consultants should not be used in any public role representing the district. The rule of thumb here is that district officials conduct district business.

Consultants should remain in the background. It is important for the district's leadership to constantly demonstrate ownership and control of communications activities and messages. When asking a neighborhood to accept closure of a school or families to accept a longer school day, the people responsible should hold the microphone.

When closing poor-performing schools and opening new ones, New York City school officials made effective use of consultants to help plan and organize community meetings. But school officials ran the meetings and were the faces and voices of the sessions.

### **The Internet**

Websites. We assume all districts will have a website with the standard pages and links necessary for the conduct of routine business. Each school also should have its own website.

A common failing of too many websites is they are overloaded and, therefore, cluttered, confusing, too often out of date, and hard to navigate. These problems diminish the website's ability to be an effective communications tool. Websites need regular if not daily attention by a savvy communicator—preferably someone on staff.

From a strategic standpoint, the district's official website should be the locus and best source of accurate information on its activities, most especially portfolio reforms. It can be especially effective for communicating with a district's internal audience as well, by establishing and maintaining a separate website for district employees, accessible only to them. As mentioned earlier, Denver Public Schools uses an internal website to reach its employees with news so that they do not hear of developments via the radio, television, or newspaper. Moreover, such a website is

ideal for posting official policy and real facts as the up-to-date antidote to rumors and other types of falsehoods that too regularly infect the talk and chatter among employees.

Email. It is dumbfounding how much email is abused by smart people who send messages they should not. Just ask the lawyers for Microsoft.

Maintaining email discretion and discipline is difficult on a good day—but this should be promoted regularly. At the firm I worked at, we had a rule of not putting anything in an email that we did not want on the front page of the newspaper, or the evening newscast. With YouTube and Facebook now in play, such organizational discipline is even more important.

Social media. Speaking of YouTube and Facebook, we recommend NOT using these or other social media for any official communications. Leave official communications to official websites. Educators are citizens and are free to use social media for personal use. The conduct of official business, however, is best left to officially sponsored modes of communication. This is because an innocent stumble by an education leader can lead to unanticipated and embarrassing fallout. We recommend fidelity to the Falstaff Rule: practice “discretion as the better part of valor!”

Texting and Twittering. For people who must, a good rule educators should follow is to text and tweet only factual, objective information. Examples would be the location of a meeting, when and where a news conference will be, when the school closure list will be posted on the website, and the like. No opinions, interpretations, no discourses on issues, and certainly no unflattering characterizations of anyone. If people have legitimate need for clarification and comment, it is best to provide those in settings and situations wherein you have control and are not making off-the-cuff, on-the-run statements.

## **Good Writing**

It is ironic that good writing should be a topic when discussing strategic communications to professional educators and communicators. But—alas—having visited the topic of the Internet and its utility in communication, the point must be made that official communications on school district reform must be well written. The high-speed tools of email, texting, and twitting— and a propensity to “be cool” on YouTube and Facebook—militate against clear, appealing, and coherent writing. This is another reason to discourage their use on official matters—excluding, of course, the emailing of official attachments and other like materials.

When hiring communications staff, samples of writing from applicants should be required. And applicants should be required to take and do well on a writing-skills test. This should include administrative staff who can usefully double as proofreaders.

## **Printed Materials**

The importance of the Internet coupled with the arrival of such portable wireless devices such as the Kindle and iPhone have not eliminated the need for printed materials. School reform activities can make good use of attractive posters, information sheets (multi-lingual when indicated) to hand out at school and community meetings, genuine snail-mail letters, and brochures; all can have a role to purvey messages. These must be consistent with online materials and in most cases should also be available online.

Print remains important for many reasons. But one overlooked more and more is that some people’s style for learning and absorbing information is through print, if only to reinforce what they hear spoken or read online.

## **About the Author**

Sam R. Sperry is a senior communications advisor at the Center on Reinventing Public Education. His career in journalism, government, and business includes service as Policy Director for former Washington State Governor Gary Locke, as a senior editor at the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, and as a communications consultant for major clients in both government and private business. He taught Political Science as an adjunct professor at Seattle University and holds an M.S. in Public Affairs from the University of Oregon.