

Dealing with critics

There's a new twist to dealing with critics these days. True, if something happens at the school that students, parents or community members don't like or don't think is right, the community grapevine will carry the news, community members are likely to come to school board meetings to voice their concerns, and local news media will investigate the controversy. But the Internet has changed the manner and the speed with which criticism can spread.

Newspaper articles that appear on-line most likely include features that allow readers to comment, often anonymously. E-mail exchanges often are widely circulated or wind up on someone's blog. Even text messaging, especially among students and their parents, can escalate a controversial and/or embarrassing situation and leave school district personnel in a quandary about how best to respond.

If the situation is the result of a board or administrative decision, should you defend your decision, explain the decision-making process, discredit the critics or ignore them?

By the time this negative communication is underway, it generally is too late to issue explanations. Information and explanations should have already been shared with staff and included on the Web site and in district publications. In addition, the district can help counter misinformation through members of its Key Communicator network or a community task force or committee. Alert these influential community members electronically and provide them with talking points to use in responding to e-mails, adding accurate information to a blog, or circulating e-mail to a newspaper comment line.

Factual information provided by trusted third parties may help as long as that communication doesn't escalate into arguing, either on-line or in a public meeting. Arguing gives credibility to the critics' inaccurate information and may cause others who haven't been paying attention to begin to think there must be something unacceptable going on. And, it almost always catches the media's attention.

Arguing also can easily escalate a situation in which participants become angry, and reacting with anger is never the right response. When public officials lose their tempers, the critics win, even when they are spreading false or inaccurate information.

Depending on the situation and the critics' reputations, ignoring them may be the best policy. If you refuse to put fuel on the fire they start, it will eventually go out.

But since the Internet is changing some of the rules for responding, you may want to consider the following more direct approach:

- ➔ Respond directly with respect. Acknowledge the critical comments right away, engage in the conversation at least initially to clarify the critics' concerns and points of view, but make it clear that the decision won't be reversed and explain why. If the critics have good points or legitimate concerns, acknowledge them and, if possible, let the critics know how their concerns will be addressed.
- ➔ Immediately try to redirect critics' energy into something related to the issue but more positive. If the concern is with facilities or district resources, offer critics the

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opportunity to join a task force or committee to study the issues and recommend solutions. If the concern is about boundary or curriculum changes, suggest opportunities for them to work with the schools to make the changes successful or to volunteer for school programs so they see for themselves how students are learning. Critics who are genuinely interested in their children's education or the community's well-being will jump at the chance to be a part of something real. It also shows that you respect their opinions and concerns.

- ➔ Tell the board and administrative staff to take a deep breath, and keep all staff well informed. Remind the board and your administrative colleagues that you should all be pleased that community members are interested in schools and that they are willing to organize to ask the tough questions and make sure the district is accountable. If you consider these critics as genuinely interested in the school program and are not just "critics du jour", their criticism can be a great opportunity to find more ways to allow community members to have a voice and role in running their schools.

Contributed by: Jeanne Magner, APR, communications consultant