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Partnership Corner



From left, Lori Perlow, Public Information Officer
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The Strategic Duo: Why Your Comms Lead is Your Most Vital Ally

In the modern superintendency, you aren't just an educator. You are a CEO, a civic leader, and the face of a 24/7 news cycle. In this environment, the gap between a successful initiative and a public relations disaster often comes down to one factor: the strength of the partnership between the superintendent and the communications professional.

As practitioners, we have seen that when communication is treated as a tactical afterthought, districts struggle. When it is treated as a core leadership function, the entire organization thrives. Being proactive instead of reactive is not just a good idea, it needs to be what we strive for every day.

The most successful superintendents don't just ask their comms lead to announce a plan; they ask them to help build it. By having your strategist at the "design table" for initiatives—like redistricting - you gain a partner who identifies the pitfall before they become public outcries. If the district doesn't own its narrative, the community will.

When a crisis hits, there is no time for a formal briefing. You need a partner who understands your values and your "voice" so well that they can act as your proxy. This level of trust allows for a unified, calm response in the moment, and allows you to own the narrative.

Most of what we do is public information so it's important to have someone that is assisting to educate the public on what is happening in your schools as they are a central

part of the community. Recently, we all talked about budgets and fiscal transparency. Budgeting isn't just about spreadsheets. Our role is to move the conversation from "tax impact" to "student opportunity." By humanizing the numbers and explaining them with clarity, we build a reservoir of trust that is vital.

We recognize that not every district has the budget for a full-time communications professional on staff. In many smaller or rural systems, these duties are often "tucked in" to the portfolios of assistant superintendents or building principals.

However, the function of strategic communication remains non-negotiable. Whether you have a dedicated pro, a shared service through a regional agency, a shared position across two districts, or a staff member wearing multiple hats, that individual must be empowered as a strategic advisor, not just a proofreader. The goal is the same: ensuring the person managing your message has the context of your vision.

Effective communication is the district's early warning system. By keeping up with the pulse of your school community, we identify simmering frustrations before they boil over. We also need to prioritize internal communication first. Your staff are your primary brand ambassadors. If they are the first to know, they can become your most powerful allies.

The most effective superintendent-communications relationship is built on radical candor. You need one person in your inner circle who can tell you when a message isn't landing or when a policy move might trigger a backlash. That person must also be a part of your cabinet, hearing information firsthand, not after something has happened so he or she can be proactive with messaging.

This isn't just about looking good, it's about effective leadership. When the superintendent and the communications lead are in lockstep, you inspire a community. We aren't just your megaphones. We are your strategists. Let's lead together.