

School Administrators Association of New York State

Vanguard

FALL 2017
Vol. 46 No. 3

Exploring
Educational
Leadership



TELLING OUR STORY:

THE SUCCESS OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

**STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
TO TELL YOUR STORY**

**REAL ENGAGEMENT IS THE SECRET
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Contents

Silencing the
Negative Drumbeat:
Using Strategic
Communications
to Tell Your Story | 5
by Kim M. Smithgall



Real Engagement | 11
Is the Secret for
Schools of Excellence
by Pat Fontana



"50 Myths and Lies | 17
That Threaten Our Public Schools"
by Paul Grondahl

COLUMNS

President's Message | 1

Guest Columnist | 3
Nancy Zimpher,
SUNY Chancellor Emeritus

FYI | 21

Trade Talk | 44



Tell Your Story | 25
by Brian A. Bailey, EdD

The Success of | 29
Public Schools
by Ira Pernick

Social Media: | 33
Perception Builder
by Tony Sinanis

The Power of Reflection | 37
at a Student Retreat
by Susan Ciminelli

Vanguard

FALL
2017

Vol. 46 No. 3

Pactices
from practitioners

This magazine is published
three times a year by the
**School Administrators Association
of New York State**

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Latham, New York 12110

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A message from

Dr. Paul Fanuele

SAANYS President
2016-2017



The Success of Public Schools

Public schools continue to educate students in profound ways. Although some headlines like to contradict the positive contributions of public educators, there are a plethora of instructional programs and people that make a difference. For example, educators are implementing Google's 80/20 innovation projects, integrating emerging technologies, re-examining outdated grading practices, and decreasing lecture time while increasing engagement. This edition of *Vanguard* highlights the importance of public education and its positive impact on our youth. Below I will highlight a program that is special to me and has had a major impact on our school.

The Heroic Story of Charlie Johnson

The year is 1953 and two recent Arlington High School graduates bump into each other while serving in the U.S. Army. Charlie Johnson ('51) and Don Dingee ('50) share high school war stories but will soon swap these stories for real life-altering war stories. The two friends eventually find themselves side by side in the most important battle of the Korean War, the Battle of Outpost Harry. Charlie, Don, and another soldier, Robert Hooker, fight heroically just after midnight on June 12, 1953. All three are injured and help each other survive as best they can as they work to hold Outpost Harry at all costs. Don's forearm is hurt and his foot is severely injured. The three need to move quickly in order to survive. Charlie uses both Don's and his belt to make a towrope and drags Don 150 yards to safety while also guiding Robert. During this journey, Charlie would fight off the enemy with weapons he found on the way. Once Don and Robert were in a safe location, Charlie continued to fight, single-handedly saving at least eight wounded soldiers before eventually losing his life on the battlefield.

This made-for-Hollywood story is true as is the sadness of losing Charlie that lingers to this day. However, his heroic story and willingness to give his life in order to serve his country, his fellow soldiers, and his classmate remain an inspiration today. Arlington High School (Dutchess County) is a much larger high school than it was in the 1950s. It is now comprised of approximately 3,000 students and located in the mid-Hudson Valley in Dutchess County. Over the years we have worked hard at making our school seem smaller and less impersonal to our students by creating a house system and creating small school committees that organize events and activities that create positive connections for our students. We have the good fortune of having Charlie Johnson as one of our graduates and we have benefited greatly from his exemplary character traits and heroism on the battlefield in Korea.

The Charlie Johnson Moment Award/Program

The seed that was germinated and nurtured by the Charlie Johnson Legacy Committee a decade or so ago has blossomed into a homegrown character education program of which we are quite proud. Each year our faculty and staff are solicited to submit nominations of students deserving of the Charlie Johnson Moment Award, an award that we consider a very high honor. Through this award, AHS recognizes students who demonstrate one or more of the outstanding qualities that Charlie possessed and that adorn the sculpture of Charlie saving his classmate at our Wall of Remembrance: loyalty, brotherhood, selflessness, courage, compassion, responsibility, patriotism, and integrity. Honorees are recognized in the spring at our annual Memorial Day Tribute and concert to which area veterans, political leaders, school district officials, and other dignitaries are invited. Don Dingee himself regularly attended this event to remember his friend and classmate, until 2016 when he sadly passed away.

Moreover, the name Charlie Johnson is well known in our student body and lauded as an important icon of both our local and national history. As the executive principal, I established a School Climate Team comprised of students, teachers, parents, and administrators with a focus on three pillars: assessment/evaluation, education, and recognition. In Charlie's name we hold up and recognize students who have contributed in a distinctive way or devoted themselves to selfless, voluntary service to their community, an important aspect of our mission at Arlington. These students have produced and sustained achievement that has required moral courage, vision, and the ability to make tough choices and they have demonstrated perseverance and hard work, perhaps against the odds.

Proud and Dedicated Educators

Arlington High School - and indeed our nation - is blessed to have had our own Charlie Johnson's life so selflessly and honorably devoted to the perpetuation of its ideals. One can see the importance of these ideals to our community by viewing student-created public service announcements (PSAs) that have been played during our televised daily announcements and posted on our website.

This program is dear to me and many others in our school. Two educators among the many stand out as being the backbone of this program, House Principal Richard Carroll and health educator Nicole Benedetto. Mr. Carroll states, "We consider ourselves very fortunate to have

continued

The Success of Public Schools

continued

Charlie Johnson among our graduates. His story is not only an important example of high character for our students, but also serves as a way to connect our school to the community at large, particularly our veterans, alumni, and their families."

Mrs. Benedetto echoes the importance of this program by stating, "I believe this committee highlights the fantastic community spirit that's already instilled in our student body. It also focuses on the student who makes a difference every day without having to and how they have made a difference in our community by their actions, rather than their words. I am proud to be part of such a great committee that allows students to lead and be role models to not only our student body but our community as well."

It is programs like this and the fantastic educators who dedicate countless hours to implement them that make public schools so successful. I am proud of our school and what we have to offer our students and community.

Side Notes and Recognition

PTSA Recognition - The Taconic Region of the PTSA awarded the Arlington High School PTSA the Outstanding Unit Program Award in 2017 for its partnership with Arlington High School in the Charlie Johnson Moment Award program.

"Charlie Johnson, local Korean War Hero," written by Anthony Farmer, appeared in the June 19, 2001 issue of the *Poughkeepsie Journal*
http://www.ophsa.org/Memorials/Charles_Johnson.htm

"Fitness Center dedicated to Arlington Grad, War Hero"
<http://www.poughkeepsiejournal.com/story/news/local/2014/08/29/fitness-center-dedicated-arlington-grad-war-hero/14805751/>

A message from

Dr. Paul Fanuele

SAANYS President
2016-2017



Photo of Charlie Johnson

Eight Characteristics of Charlie Johnson

- 1) Courage
- 2) Integrity
- 3) Selflessness
- 4) Patriotism
- 5) Loyalty
- 6) Compassion
- 7) Responsibility
- 8) Brotherhood



Photo of Don Dingee (directly behind the statue of Charlie pulling him to safety) and others who are instrumental in our program.



Gary Sinise as Don Dingee



Dennis Haysbert as Charlie Johnson

PBS Special

Gary Sinise and Dennis Haysbert portray Don Dingee and Charlie Johnson. Broadcasted on PBS's Annual "Concert on the Green" Memorial Day 2010, on the Congressional lawn in Washington, D.C., this program featured Charlie Johnson, who died at Outpost Harry, a horrific battle of the Korean War. On the following Memorial Day in 2011, Charlie Johnson is prominently depicted again in yet another PBS presentation, "Hold At All Costs."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXB4QgN5hvs>

A message from

Nancy L. Zimpher

Chancellor Emeritus of the State University of New York



The data is both compelling and troublesome:

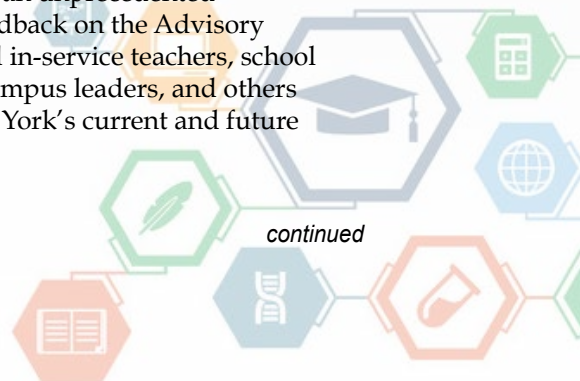
- Enrollment in teacher preparation programs nationally declined by 31 percent in just four years, from 2010 to 2014. In New York State, enrollment has dropped by even more, 40 percent, over the same time period.
- The diversity of the teacher workforce has stagnated: 82 percent of teachers identify as white, and that figure hasn't changed significantly over the past 15 years. In contrast, it is projected that students of color will comprise 56 percent of the student population by 2024.
- Roughly 40 percent of novice teachers leave the classroom within the first five years.
- Teacher attrition rates are 50 percent higher in high-poverty schools than in wealthier schools.

As a life-long educator, when I became Chancellor of the State University of New York I knew it was my responsibility to make an impact. SUNY's 16 educator preparation programs graduate 5,000 educators each year. We train 25 percent of New York's teachers. We teach the teachers, so we owned this challenge.

In the summer of 2014, with the support of a grant made under the federal Race to the Top program and administered by the New York State Education Department, SUNY set out to develop bold policy that would transform teacher and school-leader preparation in New York to better meet the needs of our state and our society. We formed the TeachNY Advisory Council that began engaging state and national education leaders and researchers and identifying specific challenges and best practices for educator preparation. We had an unwavering focus on developing meaningful, actionable recommendations for SUNY and for New York State.

My first step was to make sure that K-12 was at the table at every stage in policy development. I asked the Commissioner of New York's State Education Department, MaryEllen Elia, to join me as my TeachNY co-chair. The higher ed - lower ed partnership is too uncommon nationally, and we avoided that pitfall here. Together, we launched an unprecedented statewide tour to promote the teaching profession and to solicit feedback on the Advisory Council's recommendations. We met with more than 1,000 pre- and in-service teachers, school leaders, education and arts and sciences faculty, aspiring faculty, campus leaders, and others to collaboratively chart a course forward to meet the needs of New York's current and future educators and students.

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A message from

Nancy L. Zimpher

Chancellor Emeritus of the State University of New York

continued

Together, we assembled the TeachNY Statewide Roundtable, a distinguished panel of state and national thought leaders that generated critical conversation, out of which was to emerge consensus (not necessarily unanimity) on specific recommendations to offer. Beyond attracting the best and brightest from across the state and nation, the TeachNY Statewide Roundtable represented a range of perspectives that challenge each other rather than speak in a singular voice. Roundtable members were carefully selected to represent public and private higher education, P-12 teachers and administrators, school boards, labor, faculty, college presidents, provosts, and students.

Kevin Casey, executive director of SAANYS, has been an important voice on both the TeachNY Advisory Council and the TeachNY Statewide Roundtable. It is my hope that the work we have done together gives inspiration to the important efforts SAANYS undertakes to promote teachers. This is the essence of collective impact, working together to lift up the teaching profession.

The recurring charge to the Roundtable from the very start and throughout its work has been to join SUNY in thinking boldly about transformative policy, focusing on the classrooms and students of tomorrow. We meet regularly, and have focused our efforts on three things.

First, we want to better define teacher supply and teacher demand issues. In partnership with the Rockefeller Institute of Government, some incredible work already has been accomplished and additional impactful research is underway. In partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers and the College Football Playoff Foundation, the Rockefeller Institute of Government piloted its teacher shortage research framework in South Dakota and has spun that effort into a deeper-dive analysis in New York State. We have a vision to share this intelligent and actionable data-gathering and analysis effort with other states across the nation.

Second, we want to find workable ways to recruit more and better candidates into the profession. We want to tap the full potential of organizations such as Teach.org, an effort supported by the nation's top teacher associations and the US Department of Education, and backed by influential partners such as Microsoft, to provide useful, personalized support that helps teacher candidates maximize and better refine their talents as they begin their journey to become classroom educators.

Third, we need to better celebrate teaching as a profession. Through the Teacher Leadership Project, funded in part by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, TeachNY is hosting statewide convenings of education organizations and networks from across New York State that provide a variety of supports to teachers. By sharing our successes and, where possible, our resources, TeachNY will join in efforts that help provide an attractive, high-profile picture to the public about all that teaching is, all that it does, and all that it can become.

While attracting and retaining excellent teachers and leaders everywhere in New York is a challenge, TeachNY is uniquely positioned to address the challenge at an unmatched scale. SUNY and the State Education Department have the capacity to reach into communities to expand relationships and further develop the partnerships that deliver the collective impact that results in meaningful, lasting change. There will always be more work to do. But I am heartened by the continued participation, the enthusiasm, and the progress we all have made thus far. Let's keep it going.

From 2009 to 2017, Dr. Zimpher served as the twelfth chancellor of The State University of New York, the nation's largest comprehensive system of public higher education. Prior to SUNY, she served as president of the University of Cincinnati, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and executive dean of the Professional Colleges and dean of the College of Education at The Ohio State University. She is a senior fellow at the Rockefeller Institute of Government and chancellor emeritus of The State University of New York.

STORYTELLING
IS THE BEST
MARKETING!

SILENCING THE NEGATIVE DRUMBEAT

Using Strategic Communications to Tell Your Story

By Kim M. Smithgall

“American schools are failing!”

“New York has the highest per pupil spending in the nation and ranks 37th in the nation for high school completion.”

The news media is full of headlines and articles bemoaning the state of education today, both nationally and around the state. This steady stream of education bashing – most often from politicians and reformers – is disheartening to teachers and school leaders alike...and many educators feel it's one factor leading to teacher shortages.



THE GREAT PERCEPTION GAP

Even with the steady stream of negative press coverage, when people are asked about their schools, the perceptions seem to be quite different. In the September 2017 Phi Delta Kappan (PDK) "Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," 49 percent of Americans gave their local public schools a grade of A or B. And one in seven Americans gave their school an A, the highest percentage in more than 40 years of PDK surveys.

When parents' results were separated out, the attitudes about local public schools were even more positive, with 62 percent giving their schools an A or B.

Joshua P. Starr, CEO of PDK and a former school superintendent, wrote in the PDK report that the advantage of the poll is that it reveals the feelings of "the silent majority."

"This year, as in many recent years, the poll showed a wide gap between what the most strident policy makers and reformers are advocating and what the American public actually wants and believes," Starr commented. "School and district leaders are in a unique position to help close that gap."

DEFINE AND SHARE THE NARRATIVE

In New York, education leaders and school communications professionals are using a broad variety of approaches to highlight today's classrooms...and, in effect, close the perception gap. And while the activities vary from district to district, the most effective strategies have a few characteristics in common – namely, they're intentional, strategic, proactive and ultimately focused on building relationships.

Tony Sinanis advises making sure your mission drives your message. He was recently named superintendent of Hastings-on-Hudson Union Free School District and is the former principal of Cantiague Elementary School in Jericho. He is also a social media powerhouse, author of two blogs and co-author (with Joseph

Sanfelippo) of the book, *The Power of Branding: Telling Your School's Story*.

The "branding" Sinanis discusses grew out of a desire to reinforce his school's values and to engage families. "There's something to be said for creating a narrative that's rooted in fact and becomes the manifestation of your mission or vision," he explained. "At Cantiague, we were very conscious and intentional about what we shared. The stories weren't about spotlighting adorable kids or amazing teachers. It went so far beyond that to 'this is the learning that's happening here and this is why we're doing this.' In my mind, it comes down to being intentional about everything you share, thinking about why you're sharing and how it contributes to the bigger narrative."

It doesn't have to be difficult or time-consuming. For example, when tweeting out a photo of students working together in class, Sinanis would simply spend a few extra seconds to add a caption that reinforced his school's ongoing commitment to small-group instruction.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

For the more than 50 public information specialists in Capital Region BOCES' Communications Service who serve school districts throughout New York, defining the educational narrative begins with developing comprehensive communications plans that are aligned with the client school districts' goals.

"If you think back to the basics, public relations is, by definition, deliberate and strategic. So, I use the communications plan as a road map," said Alyssa Pagano, who is assigned to Liberty Central School District. "For a long journey, you're not going to get to your destination without a map...and without a communications

plan, you're more likely to get off target."

This foundational planning is working well for many other districts, too. "At Broadalbin-Perth, we're in the midst of a long-term strategic plan called 'Innovate,' said Michele Kelley, the district's communications professional. "So, much of what we do when we're telling stories about what is happening in our classrooms or in our clubs ties back to that strategic plan, meaning stakeholders are constantly reminded what the district is working toward."

Kelley gave an example of covering an activity that will be taking place in a marine biology class, which is a new middle school elective. "The Broadalbin-Perth students will be setting up a Google Hangout [video chat] with professionals from The Turtle Hospital in Florida," she said. "I could just go in and cover it as a cool story about kids using Google Hangouts, but I'm using this as an opportunity to reinforce the strategic plan by stressing how we're expanding opportunities for students in innovative ways. It's also an opportunity to talk about the greater trends of STEM [science, technology, engineering and math] education and why our students need to be learning



this kind of stuff. This is taking what could be a one-off, cute picture and tying it back to the district's strategic plan. And by explaining the importance of the STEM aspect, we're giving the bigger picture 'so what' of the story, as well."

Garden City Union Free School District takes a similar approach with its multifaceted communications, including asking Coordinator of Public Information Catherine Knight to provide insights and training to teachers.

"Catherine and our assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction gave presentations at faculty meetings to stress taking a thematic approach to newsletters or any communications," explained Garden City Middle School Principal Peter Osroff. "For instance, we're always stressing the middle-level philosophy, which is addressing the academic and social-emotional needs of students. So that's a constant theme we ask teachers to incorporate in their communications, along with addressing district goals at the building level."

EMBRACE ALL OF YOUR STORYTELLERS

These types of communications-related discussions and trainings are a good



reminder that district staff members are an important part of your storytelling team. Whereas principals are often cheerleaders-in-chief, staff members can be ambassadors in the larger community.

"There has to be communications at all levels of the school," Osroff commented. "The more you have teachers doing updates and the more communication that's happening at the classroom level, the more the school as a whole starts getting a reputation for outstanding communications."

And don't forget about support staff. Secretaries, teacher aides and bus drivers are influential voices in the community and if they're well informed about district initiatives and happenings, they, too, will be ambassadors for the truth.

Garden City has tapped into students as storytellers, too - and, as the ultimate school district "customer," their authentic voices are powerful. In one series of student videos, graduates (all volunteers) return to the district and give their perspectives on their time in high school and whether they were well prepared for college.

"Basically, we asked the students how we did as a school," Knight explained. "It's been a wonderful experience. We've done the videos every two years with students attending different types of schools - public and private colleges, in-state, out-of-state, etc."

The idea for the videos grew out of challenging circumstances.

The district was losing up to 20 percent of its students to private schools once those pupils finished middle school. The private schools were using strong marketing campaigns that sometimes included misleading information about Garden City High School's ability to adequately prepare graduates for college.

"We used the student videos as a communications tool to combat the rumors and to tell the authentic story," Knight said.

And the strategy has worked

well. "The videos have been the major contributing factor to the fact that we now have only 11 percent of students going to other high schools. These videos really kick-started an educational campaign that allows the community to know about the great things going on at the high school," said Garden City High School Principal Nanine McLaughlin, adding that the school was recently named a Blue Ribbon School.

Garden City Middle School students also act as storytellers to ease the transition for elementary school students entering middle school. "We have a video orientation created by the kids," Osroff said. "So, instead of having adults giving these students a tour of the school, our sixth-grade students explain on video what a typical day is like. The video is posted on our website and fifth-graders are able to watch it with their parents. They're hearing from sixth-graders what the first day will be like, what they might want to wear. The sixth-graders introduce them to adults in the building and do a sort of period-by-period walk-through of a school day. It's been hugely popular; both parents and students have told us that the video has made the transition to middle school so much easier."

LISTEN UP! COMMUNICATIONS IS A TWO-WAY STREET

Videos, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, email, websites, print... the list goes on and on. With so many options for telling the story, how do educators choose the right tools?

"The first rule is to know your community; ask what the best mechanism is for communicating and listen to the stakeholders," said Deborah Bush-Suflita, director of communications and public relations at Capital Region BOCES.

"In Liberty, Facebook has worked very well because we can share news so quickly," Pagano said. "And now staff members are seeing the benefits and they're sharing their own classroom activities and triumphs on the district Facebook page."

In Garden City, the community has come to expect most information to be on the district website or to

be delivered via email. District stakeholders have also indicated they are open to many other forms of communications as well, including Facebook, Twitter, classroom newsletters, building-level newsletters, and Google Classroom. Of all the tools, though, the district's introduction of social media seems to have had the biggest effect on stakeholder interactions.

With so many tools available, it's also vital to communicate about the communications. "Whatever the preferred mode of communication is for teachers, we make sure that they go over that with parents at every single back-to-school night," said McLaughlin.

For Sinanis, social media and blogging worked well when he was a principal in Jericho. In his new position, the community isn't as comfortable with social media and Sinanis respects that.

"I'm looking at branding and communication in a different perspective now," he said. "I'm the new guy, the unfamiliar face. My job right now is to get to know the people and understand their values and to make sure they feel heard and respected. It's not my job to come in and try to create a story or force Twitter on the district."

REQUESTING FEEDBACK

In Broadalbin-Perth, Kelley has found a particularly effective mechanism for soliciting feedback on the district's communications efforts. "My favorite tool that we use every year is an exit survey at the annual budget vote," she explained. "Sometimes we ask specific questions about communications, but we always have one generic question about whether voters feel they get good, sound information from the district. It's one of those questions where, on its own, it doesn't really tell us a lot. But, because we ask it every year in the same way at the same time to essentially the same group of people, the results give us trend data.

Sinanis's listening/feedback regime includes intentionally carving out time to go to classrooms to interact with students and observe

what's happening, along with soliciting feedback directly. "I have a focus group with high school students. I call it 'Talking with Tony,'" he said.

Okay, so "Talking with Tony" might elicit some chuckles, but the two-way communication - the feedback loop - is highly effective in building trust and in building relationships.

"Communication is two-way and we do our best when it includes active listening, as well," Bush-Suflita said.

BE PROACTIVE - EVEN WITH THE BAD NEWS

And, as uncomfortable as it may seem, that communication should be occurring both when the news is good and when it's bad or could raise the ire of stakeholders.

"Communicating on the difficult issues is really important," Bush-Suflita pointed out. "We all like to say that we're the first and best source of information when it's good news. But if the public doesn't hear from you on the sensitive topics, then you're training them that they can't trust you to tell the whole story. There's that old saying, 'He who names it, frames it' and I think that's true in any situation."

A recent experience in Liberty serves to prove the point. Near the end of the summer (when sports practices were in full swing), the district had to close down all of its athletic facilities because irrigation problems were making the fields unsafe.

"Now, this is a community that is very invested in and supportive of its athletic program. We made a decision to immediately announce the closure on Facebook, even though we didn't have a solution yet. I have to admit, we all held our breath in anticipation of what the response might be," Pagano said. "But it was awesome. Parents thanked us for letting them know so quickly and offered supportive words and encouragement."

On bigger issues - budget cuts or school closings, for example - the ramifications of choosing not to share information could be disastrous.

"Silence breeds mistrust," Bush-Suflita stressed. "A planned, professional two-way communications program won't eliminate all of the difficult situations that abound in public education, but it can help you navigate them more skillfully so you don't get mired in controversy or lose the confidence of your community."

Sinanis echoed the comment. "By being transparent, you build social capital," he said. "And when you build social capital, people will follow you through change and through difficult situations."

IT'S ABOUT THE KIDS

Near the end of his book on branding, Sinanis offers his perspective on making a conscious decision to tell a school's story:

"It means we have to be confident in our choices. It means that we have to show that with every success, there were at least three failures. It means that we are comfortable flattening the walls of our school and proud of the brand we are marketing. In the end, when we give families insight into how and why we do things (which is central to branding and telling one's story), we switch gears from family involvement to true family engagement."

Multiple research studies show that this family engagement leads, in turn, to improved student performance in school (and perhaps some different news headlines?).

At the end of the day, though, the communications tools used to garner that engagement don't matter as much as the reason we're communicating in the first place: It's about the kids...and there's nothing more important than that...

KIM M. SMITHGALL is an award-winning communications specialist and freelance writer, designer, and photographer.

Social Media Bits and Pieces

“Social media is where people are consuming information,” said Deborah Bush-Sufflita, director of communications and public relations at Capital Region BOCES. “Not being on social media is like walking into a room full of people with your hands over your ears. Just because you’re not listening doesn’t mean they’re not talking.”

In fact, research from the Pew Research Center and other sources shows that half of the world’s 7.476 billion people are on the internet and up to 79 percent of those accessing the internet are also actively using social media. And the numbers keep growing.

Facebook remains the most popular social media tool, with 1.18 billion daily users. Twitter and the photo-sharing sites Instagram and Snapchat are widely used as well, along with video-based YouTube. To help with your efforts in this ever-changing world of communications, below are some social media “bits and pieces.”

- Social media campaigns are a great way to encourage interactions with your stakeholders. Ask families to send in “first day of school” photos; post these throughout the first several days of the new school year. You can also use campaigns that are themed around specific district events, such as homecoming or spirit weeks. Use photos supplied by families during these campaigns as an ever-changing array of Facebook profile pictures.
- Want to know the fastest way for a principal to amass a huge Twitter following (including students)? Garden City High School Principal Nanine McLaughlin can clue you in. “One of the most important things students want to know is when school is closed so they can sleep in,” McLaughlin mused. “We have an automated phone system that sounds out texts, but that can take some time. I started tweeting out the school closings and let me tell you, my Twitter followers grew exponentially!”
- Cross-pollinate your social media communications. For example, include your school website address in tweets and Facebook postings to drive traffic to your website. On the flip side, make sure social media icons are visible “above the fold” on your website home page.
- Consider how you’ll use social media if a crisis hits your district. You can even prepare posts ahead of time for different crisis situations so they’re ready to go.
- Add context to your posts and make sure posts align with the district mission or goals. “I could just tweet out a photo of our great new classroom furniture,” said education leader Tony Sinanis. “But, it’s much more impactful if we explain that we got these new desks because we believe in flexible learning spaces because research says that kids learn better if they’re able to move around.”
- A picture is worth a thousand words. Social media posts that include photos, videos, or graphics are ranked higher and are seen by more people than posts that are text-only.
- Turn the tables! “When I’m at events like an honor roll breakfast or graduation, I love taking photos of the students,” said Public Information Specialist Alyssa Pagano. “But then I turn and take photos of the parents and families in the audience. Their reactions are priceless! And when these are posted to Facebook, the response is amazing.”
- Many scheduling tools are available that allow you to schedule your posts ahead of time. Hootsuite is one of the more popular ones.
- Social media platforms have tools that allow you to analyze your impacts. “We consistently review the analytics for our website and social media platforms,” said Broadalbin-Perth Central School District’s Michele Kelley. “The analytics can tell us which web pages and posts are getting the most hits and how long people are spending there. They also tell us when people are most often looking at our materials, so we know the best day of the week and hour of the day to be scheduling posts.”
- Remember the marketing adage, “If you want to catch fish, fish where the fish are.” If parents and grandparents are the target audience you’re trying to reach, Facebook is your best bet. If it’s students, Instagram or Snapchat is more likely to be the best option. Stay apprised of new social media tools and who’s using them!

And if you haven’t entered this new frontier of communications, you’re missing huge opportunities to engage with stakeholders. You can start small as being a passive observer. For example, create a Twitter or Instagram account and simply follow your favorite school districts or education gurus to see how they use these tools. It’s a perfect way to gain insights and ideas for your own social media efforts.



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REAL ENGAGEMENT IS THE SECRET FOR

Schools of Excellence

By Pat Fontana



A school that involves parents in their children's education may have them sign up to volunteer for an event or send home a note each week about the students' progress. A school that engages those parents, the students' extended families, and the community, to interact with teachers and staff, to share in initiatives, and to realize the benefits together, is a school that earns the distinction of "excellence" in the eyes of everyone involved, most notably the National PTA.

To New York State's PTA executive director, Kyle Belokopitsky, engagement and collaboration are not just buzzwords. They are the true reasons that students in the public school system succeed.

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Belokopitsky gets very excited when talking about the impact that schools, families, and communities can have on a child’s education. As she sees it, it “takes everyone in the school community to see that a child succeeds.”

Belokopitsky is equally excited when talking about the seven schools in New York that were named 2017-2019 National PTA Schools of Excellence. This is a top honor, she noted, and is a “very prestigious award.” Across the country, less than 150 schools earned the honor and it is quite an accomplishment for the state that seven of those schools are in New York.

The National PTA sets standards that these schools must meet as part of a yearlong action plan. All of the standards are focused on collaboration and engagement, with the end goal being the success of every child (emphasis on *every*).

Standards include:

- Welcoming all families into the school community
- Communicating effectively
- Supporting student success
- Speaking up for every child
- Sharing power
- Collaborating with community

Maple East Elementary School

Maple East Elementary School in Williamsville has actually won the award this year for the second time in a row. Principal Cathy Mihalic is thrilled that her school was recognized for the 2015-2017 honor and continues to be honored by the 2017-2019 award. Mihalic says that the school’s emphasis on character education, evident throughout the school and spilling out into the community, plays a huge part in her students’ success. Even Maple East’s mascot, Moxie the Mountain Lion, is tied to character education!

Mihalic has been in the education

field for 28 years, starting out as a kindergarten teacher and spending the last nine years as principal at Maple East. She sees her school as a “warm, welcoming place” where teachers, students, staff, families, and the community all come together to help students succeed.

When asked to describe how she gets parents involved, she says that a big part of it is the community. They “love the school.” She adds that “our teachers really reach out to all families on a pretty personal basis, creating working relationships whenever possible.” She also attributes much of the school’s success to the staff, noting that “everyone is very positive and engaging.”

With just over 600 students, communication is truly one of Maple East’s keys to keeping families involved. Electronic communication has helped Mihalic and her team reach out to families, to keep them informed and engaged. Each day she sends out at least one message using Twitter, a relatively new tool for her, and the school website is kept up to date with important news for students, families, teachers, and staff.

She also takes advantage of a district-wide tool called Williamsville Information Tracking System (WITS) that enables her to send emails to a grade level, a class, or the entire parent population of the school. The parent portal on WITS gives parents a view into their children’s grades and assignments, keeping them active in their child’s work and progress.

The Maple East PTA also takes steps to communicate regularly with the school’s families, including publishing and distributing a monthly newsletter in conjunction with the school’s staff and teachers. Another effective communication piece is the Maple East Minute, an email that goes out every Monday to the PTA about events going on that week.

The PTA takes the lead in a number of engaging activities throughout the year. Mihalic is happy to note that 100 percent of the school’s teachers have joined the PTA, which runs a number of family-focused events at the school. A welcome back event in mid-September features a book fair

and an ice cream social, with teachers and staff serving families who attend, in an effort to make them feel welcome as an integral part of the school. In October, PTA decorations abound at fall fun night, attended by hundreds of students and family members.

A multicultural school with a number of different languages represented, Maple East works very closely with families of students whose first language is not English. Their ESOL teachers get to know each family during the year and reach out whenever they need to in order to help the families, using a telephonic interpreter service to hold meetings with parents who may need interpretation into their native language.

Maple East is very enthusiastic and proud of its fine arts emphasis. Almost all students play an instrument by the fourth grade. Last year, Mihalic notes, they held a huge event with food trucks that featured a jazz band that their music director participates in and that included some of the students who learned how to perform with the band.

Community outreach for Maple East is as close as the hospital next door to the school. They have an ongoing partnership with Millard Fillmore Suburban Hospital as well as with Canterbury Woods, a nearby facility for seniors. The school chorus performs at both sites a couple of times a year.

The Maple East fourth-graders interview their senior partners at Canterbury Woods and then give a presentation about what they’ve learned from their elder counterparts. Students also team up with residents who act as classroom “grandparents.” True family and community engagement abounds at Maple East.

Across the state, two schools in the town of Ballston Spa were also honored as 2017-2019 National PTA Schools of Excellence. Gordon Creek Elementary and Ballston Spa Middle School both earned the designation by demonstrating their commitment to meeting and exceeding the PTA standards.

Ballston Spa Middle School

Pam Motler is beginning her

seventh year as the principal of Ballston Spa Middle School, after 20 years in the field of education. With just under 1,000 students spread across three grades, Motler has been challenged with both the younger students' (and their parents') transition into the school as well as a need to make the school feel a bit smaller for all students.

Middle school can be challenging for students, families, teachers, and staff. Students want to be more independent but can get lost, virtually and logistically, in a bigger school. Families want to hang on to the elementary school days, but realize their older middle school student may not feel the same way. The school's teachers and administration want to see everyone succeed.

At Ballston Spa Middle School, they have accomplished just that. To lessen the impact of the largeness of middle school, the sixth- and seventh-graders are grouped into teams. There are three teams in each grade level and the teams are organized by four core content areas. Motler adds that "teaming gives a smaller feel to a large building with many kids." In eighth grade, the students are "de-teamed" to prepare them to move on to the next phase in their lives, the even larger high school.

Motler and her team recognize that middle school parents "need to know they are still welcome at school." Even though there are no more "class moms," teachers "are very open to getting help from parents."

Another challenge in a middle school is the turnover, with a completely new group of families every 36 months. However, the PTA does a "fantastic job of passing the torch to the next officers in seamless transitions every year."

Motler notes that beyond the dances and activity nights, the school relies on the PTA and parents to have active membership on its Building Leader Team (BLT). For each of the team's priority areas, which include character education and making the school greener, there is a subcommittee that includes parent representation. These parents will then act as liaisons to share information with

other parents regarding the school community and all of its initiatives.

Communication and outreach are common threads in the middle school's goal of involving families and communities in the various aspects of the students' education. Teachers reach out to families through newsletters and team emails. The PTA has a presence at every school event.

The community is involved in school activities primarily through the parents, who enjoy sharing their expertise with classes and clubs. Sea Perch, the school's robotics club, gets valuable guidance and advice from parents who are engineers. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute sends "ambassadors" to the school's science classes. Middle school can be a huge transition for everyone involved. Families and members of the community feel welcome at Ballston Spa Middle School and that makes a huge difference to the teachers, the staff, the students, and the parents themselves.

Gordon Creek Elementary School

Also in Ballston Spa, Principal Celeste Keane reflects on the recognition of being a 2017-2019 National PTA School of Excellence, saying the "accomplishment means a lot to us." She and her team at Gordon Creek Elementary are thrilled that their efforts to connect families, students, and community have proven successful for their school and, most importantly, for their students.

Keane has been principal at Gordon Creek and its 520 students since November 2015. In that time, she has seen a lot of activity on the part of the PTA and the teachers, focused on making families feel welcomed and engaged.

The school makes full use of social media options to reach out to parents, sending out emails through a system-wide email blast, posting on Twitter, maintaining a Facebook page, and keeping the school's website up to date. Keane is also creating a newsletter this year, in conjunction with the PTA, that will be sent out to all families.

"Their goal is to make sure all families at the school, regardless of language or culture, understand what resources are available so they can access the appropriate services for their children."

Gordon Creek's staff is "very active" on Twitter and families are constantly encouraged to follow the feed to get the latest notices and news. This year, district technology coaches will actually be training parents on how to use Twitter, so they can stay in touch.

Last year, the school identified a need for a clear, defined way to reach out to families whose first language is not English. They developed a strategy that now includes translated mailings and signage, to make the school a more inviting place for all families. Their goal is to make sure all families at the school, regardless of language or culture, understand what resources are available so they can access the appropriate services for their children. The PTA at Gordon Creek has a relatively new slate of officers and they have already accomplished a lot, out of "love for the kids and the school," says Keane. One of their most creative endeavors was buying T-shirts for students in every grade level, with each grade being assigned a different color. Tie-dye shirts for the staff display all of the colors, representing the entire school. Students and staff proudly wear their shirts on school trips and to special events.

A back-to-school barbecue kicks off every school year with an open house for students and families. The school's teachers prepare and serve the food for all the participants, which this year included 500 students and family members.

An innovative "junior PTA" includes students in grades three to five who meet once a month with the adult PTA to talk about ways to improve school community. The students enjoy creating decorations for different holidays and initiating and coordinating fundraisers.

Community involvement at Gor-

don Creek runs in both directions. The school has a longstanding relationship with the local rotary and works with them on donating supplies and backpacks. They also reach out to local veterans who participate and share in their annual Memorial Day celebrations.

There is a school banking program, made possible by a parent who works for a local bank. The Penny Harvest Fund for fall raised a couple of thousand dollars and the bank also donated backpacks to the school.

Keane says, "As a school community we are always looking for ways to give back," and it shows in the school's outreach efforts. There are two giving tree efforts, one run by the PTA and the other by the building social worker. The building program is specifically for students in the school. The PTA program touches children in the community at large.

Students are active in making the community a better place as well. They collect toiletries and essentials that the staff boxes up and takes to Code Blue, a Saratoga County homeless shelter. The school also has a

strong relationship with the local food pantry and hosts several food drives throughout the year to replenish their resources.

Last year the school's teachers' union provided free books to approximately 2,000 students in the district. This year they are investigating a sponsor for a backpack program for Gordon Creek students. There are also a number of district programs that benefit families of Gordon Creek students who, once identified as struggling with poverty or homelessness, may receive winter coats, gift cards, and other assistance.

Eliminating the barriers help students - and their families - focus and succeed. Keane believes firmly that these district-wide, community-based events and activities are "the beginning of getting families active and involved."

NYS PTA executive director Belokopitsky also believes that there is "nothing more important than real family engagement in learning." She expands on the differences between being involved and being engaged by saying that involvement is "volunteer-

ing, bringing in school supplies, and attending sporting events" but engagement is a "two-way collaboration, a real shared power over how you are supporting kids in a school building." She goes on to say that "real engagement" is what a school of excellence looks for in its collaboration, communication, and outreach with families and community. These National PTA Schools of Excellence have certainly found their way to that engagement.

PAT FONTANA is a business writer and communications trainer, with a background in corporate training and community college instruction. Her business, WordsWorking, focuses on improving workplace communications, concentrating on the fundamentals of human interactions.

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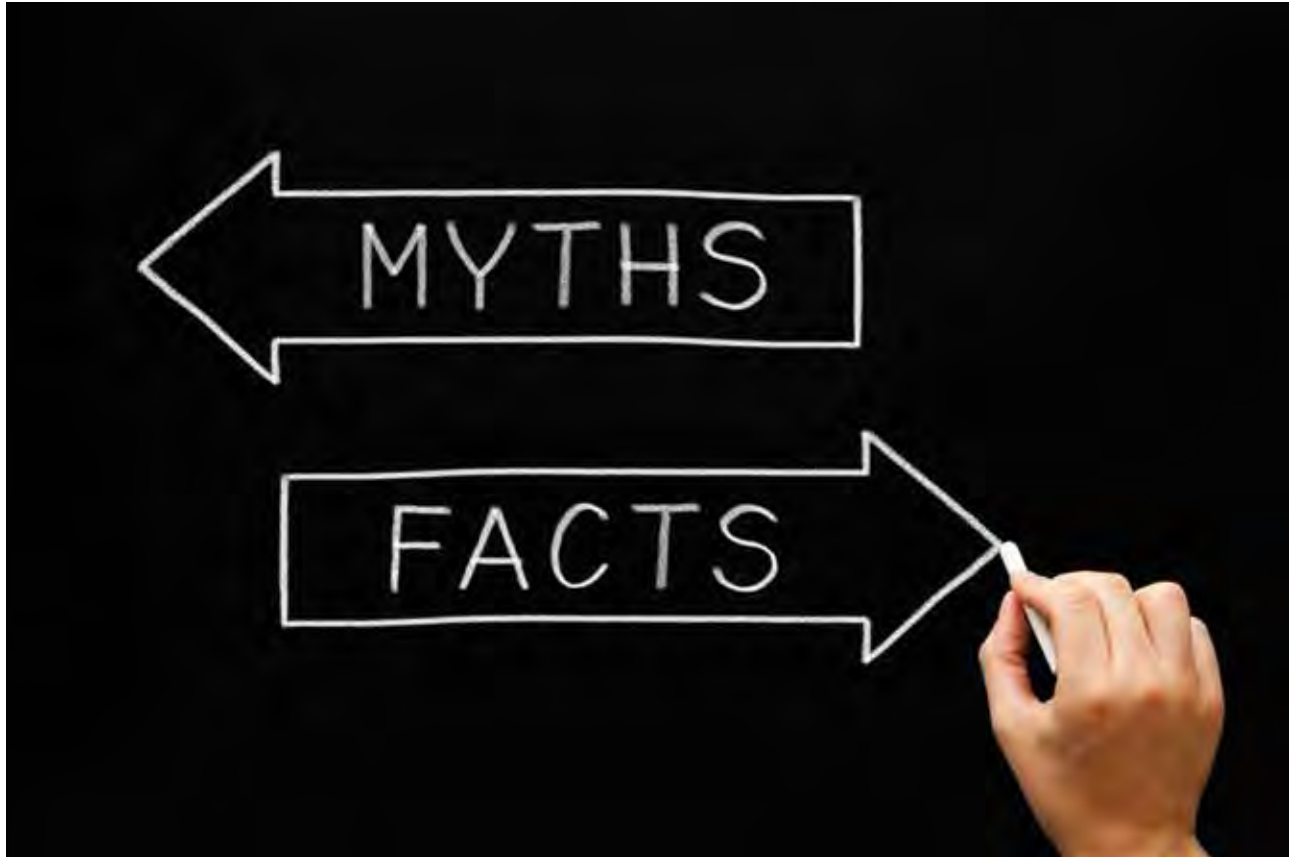
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DAVID BERLINER ON

“50 Myths and Lies That Threaten America’s Public Schools”

By Paul Grondahl



David C. Berliner is an educational myth buster with a raspy, nasal accent courtesy of the Bronx. When he gets passionate about refuting what he considers an affront to public education – which is often – he speaks in blunt, profane language. He’s an iconoclast, whose clear-eyed assessment of public schools is gleaned from decades of sifting data for his books and research, visiting dozens of schools across the country, and tracking the latest scholarship as a past president of the American Educational Research Association and the Division of Educational Psychology of the American Psychological Association.

Berliner is Regents Professor of Education Emeritus at Arizona State University and he's been a faculty member at the University of Arizona, University of Massachusetts, and Stanford University. He has also taught at universities in Canada, Australia, and several European countries.

"If we raise the poverty rate to 25 percent, which includes 13 million American kids, the U.S. students are still among the highest scoring students in the world."

"The nation is caught up in a furious battle trying to figure out why not all our schools are working well and I'm explaining how remarkably good our schools are," Berliner said by phone from his home in Tempe, Arizona. "The reality is that almost all of our schools that are not doing well are schools where poverty is endemic. I am also pointing out that there's an awful lot of BS out there when it comes to educational policy that is based on myths and lies." He considers it his job to serve as a BS detector and to wade through a swamp of falsehoods, faulty logic, and flat-out misinformation and to call out the hogwash, bunk, and hokum perpetuated by what he sees as a Machiavellian mix of political special interests and corporate opportunists.

Berliner delivered the keynote address at the SAANYS annual conference on October 18, where he encouraged his allies - principals and building supervisors - in their ongoing efforts for excellence in public schools and he aimed his fierce brand of truth-telling at the special interest myth-perpetuating targets in his most recent book, *50 Myths and Lies About Public Schools* (Teachers College Press, 2014), co-authored with Gene V. Glass, a research professor at the University of Colorado Boulder's School of Education and a senior researcher at the National Education Policy Center.

The purpose of the *50 Myths and Lies* book was to launch a thousand conversations, which it has done, not to mention generating brisk sales and bringing Berliner invitations to speak from Montana to Texas. It has also stoked passions and spurred

spirited arguments across the blogosphere, at school board meetings, and in newspaper editorial pages.

Among the myths the book busts are these:

- International tests show that the United States has a second-rate education system.

"It is a bald-faced lie," Berliner said. "I have irrefutable data that shows if you attend a public school where poverty rates were below 10 percent and you combine reading, math, and science scores, the U.S. is the top nation in the world. If we raise the poverty rate to 25 percent, which includes 13 million American kids, the U.S. students are still among the highest scoring students in the world. Even where poverty rates were 25-50 percent, U.S. students scored above the international average."

- Teachers are the most important influence in a child's education.

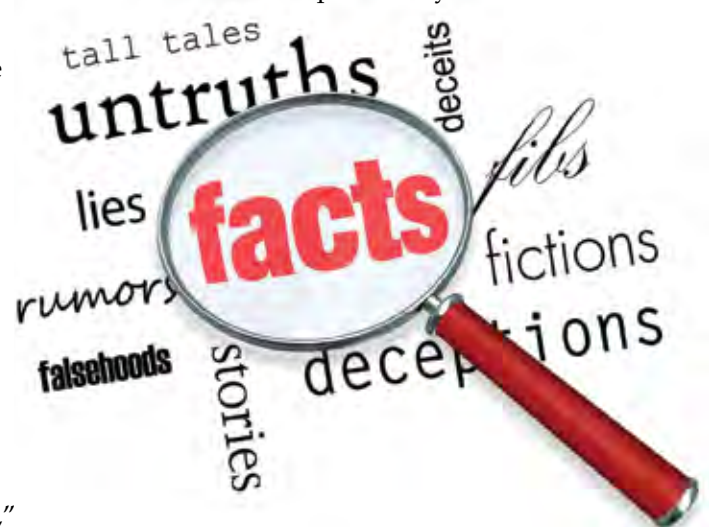
"New York and a lot of other states are using systems and standardized achievement test scores to evaluate teachers that are sensitive to social class, neighborhood quality of life and family income, but not to teachers,"

"I have irrefutable data that shows if you attend a public school where poverty rates were below 10 percent and you combine reading, math, and science scores, the U.S. is the top nation in the world."

Berliner said. "It is almost impossible to move those metrics by instruction alone. In only rare instances does a teacher or a school break the pattern. I have extensive data that clearly shows about 60 percent of test scores' variation is determined by out-of-school factors and only 10 percent on the teacher. Teachers do make a big difference on individual kids. Good teachers change lives and influence students, but they do not significantly change the metrics."

- Firing the bottom 5 to 8 percent of teachers will move the U.S. to the top of international science and math rankings.

"Economist Eric Hanushek has been touting this idea for years, but there's absolutely no evidence it would have that effect," Berliner said. "Microsoft tried firing the bottom 5 percent of its employees and it just alienated people, drove the place crazy, and created a lot



of paranoia and stress without measurably improving the company's results. Microsoft ended up ending the practice because it was a horrible system that created many problems.

- Schools need to increase STEM courses to make our students more competitive and to guarantee that they find jobs.

"There are 11 million Americans with STEM degrees who are not working in a STEM field," Berliner said. "Each year we produce 100,000 more people with STEM degrees than there are STEM jobs. There is no national shortage of STEM graduates. I get really crazy over all the STEM BS."

- Holding a child back who is not doing well academically is good for the child.

"Holding kids back if they are not reading well in third grade, which Arizona and Florida passed, is a stupid policy," Berliner said. "We have a lot of data that shows that holding a child back is a mistake that significantly increases the child's chance of dropping out of school. Those students not reading well by third grade require attention, not retention. Tutoring is cheaper and more humane than flunking a child."

MYTH

Berliner's type of aggressive debunking has earned him enemies and he's no stranger to controversy. His 1996 book, *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools*, co-authored with Bruce J. Biddle, raised public outrage over their arguments that legislators, as well as Presidents Ronald Reagan, George

H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush, manufactured an assault on American public schools based on misleading data that spawned misguided reforms. The real problems in our schools run much deeper and are caused by fundamental societal and economic failures, they argued. The themes explored in *The Manufactured Crisis* are extended and broadened in *50 Myths and Lies*.

"We have a long history of anti-intellectualism that runs really deep in the American psyche that comes and goes in waves," Berliner said. "It just takes a few declines in test scores to bring it all to the surface again and we pin it all on the teachers. Our poor schools are not working because of poverty in those neighborhoods, not because of poor teachers. It's a misattribution. I've studied and written about public versus private schools for a long time. When you adjust for social class and poverty, in every case the public schools do better than the privates. Don't give me the BS that private schools are better. They're skimming kids and it's only higher social class, not a better school."

Berliner has a simple formula for improving schools: address the underlying social problems and invest in failing neighborhoods if you want the quality of the public schools there to rise.

"My bottom line message to administrators and school boards is

that if you expect to improve education without improving



"My bottom line message to administrators and school boards is that if you expect to improve education without improving communities, it cannot be done."

communities, it cannot be done," Berliner said. "Administrators who have schools with many low-achieving kids have to figure out how to get them jobs and how to find more money for drug prevention, adult education, and effective social programs for their communities. They need to increase funding for breakfast and lunch programs because poor kids can't learn if they're hungry. If school administrators do not engage the community and they just work on what goes on inside the school, they will never achieve the academic success they dream of for their students."

In the past six months or so, Berliner has actually become more of an optimist when it comes to the contentious education debate. "I thought we had lost the battle and I was losing faith, but the things I've seen recently are encouraging. Nearly 200,000 students opted out of standardized tests in New York. People are saying we've had enough testing, just teach our kids some useful things that will help them learn and grow. Teachers are fighting back in the state of Washington and striking for more pay because of additional requirements being demanded of them. I see these things happening all over the country. I say it's about time and I like to think our books are playing a part."

Reprinted from the Fall 2015 *Vanguard*.

PAUL GRONDAHL is an award-winning reporter at the *Albany Times Union* and director of the New York State Writers Institute. A paperback edition of his political biography, *Mayor Corning: Albany Icon, Albany Enigma*, was published by SUNY Press.

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Atlanta	36
Atlanta suburbs	57
Rest of Georgia	47
NATIONAL	
10 highest-density counties	36
Next 40	44
Rest of the nation	50

OPINIONS

“They’re comparing apples to pears. You simply can’t compare the United States to countries that leave



hundreds of thousands of rural and poor children without any education whatsoever. The Bates Motel may have the softest pillows in town, but it’s immediately disqualified because of the high chance of being murdered in the shower. No school system of this size anywhere in the world exceeds the United



States in providing free access to education for everyone. And that, alone, makes us one of the best.”

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Tell Your Story



By Brian A. Bailey, EdD My parents, both educators, shared their story of teaching in the 1960s.

In 1965, my father was making about \$5,000 as a secondary math teacher, whereas a secretary at Bell Telephone was making about \$7,000. Educators of the 1960s did not enter the profession for the salary, but they did believe in an honorable profession that had the potential to change the lives of the next generation of thinkers and doers.



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I have heard other people reminisce about teaching in the '60s, a time when communities often considered teachers the "authority" in the classroom and schools had significantly fewer state and federal mandates. Of course, there were substantial challenges in that era, but we like to reminisce about better times for both our teaching and our schools.

There are many factors that have challenged our school-community relationships today: the often salacious focus of broadcast and print media; many loud, yet uninformed voices on social media; governmental obstacles such as the tax cap, APPR, and the promotion of school privatization; and the added challenges of heightening poverty or extended working hours. My district has not been immune to these external forces and, as is often the case, we have sometimes propagated our own disappointment and downheartedness. It can be difficult for any organization to turn the tide and remain optimistic in a pessimistic world. It is, however, up to school leaders to see past the limitations of right now and clear the path for a successful tomorrow. As a leadership team within my district, we discovered that we needed to be strategic in our planning, to embrace the challenge of improving our own leadership skills, and to take a big and noisy approach to telling our story.

We are a new building and district-level leadership team, with six out of eleven leaders holding our positions for one year or less. Although we lead a multimillion-dollar organization whose mission it is to provide children with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in an ever-changing, interconnected, and complex world, our community has remained polite, respectful, and somewhat remote in offering critical feedback on whether we are achieving this mission. As a leadership team we therefore prioritized customer service as our main focus. We believe that if we are consistently welcoming, are transparent in our expectations

for ourselves and our students, and open ourselves up to feedback, we will forge stronger relationships with staff, students, families, and our community.

Our ongoing approach to tackling this difficult problem entails four steps:

1. Create a cohesive leadership team
2. Clarify our mission, vision, and core values
3. Share, teach, embed our mission, vision, and core values
4. Seek feedback from our constituent groups based on our intended outcomes

CREATE A COHESIVE LEADERSHIP TEAM

Our intended outcome equals excellent customer service that requires equal access to expert building and district leadership: we will ensure that we provide one voice, one message, and a consistent demonstration of highly developed skills from all leaders. During our first week as a new leadership team, we sat down and identified the leadership skills that would yield us the greatest gains in achieving our intended outcome. To this end, we are employing

collaborative peer teaching, we examine and discuss our work critically, and we reflect on our progress.

We identified skills such as public speaking, use of technology, peer coaching, agenda setting and facilitation, and change agency. These skills are included within our weekly leadership meetings and are addressed through various embedded instructional strategies. Members of the team have collaborated in

preparation for their individual building-level faculty meetings, open houses, and board of education presentations. Team members attend each other's presentations and we debrief by discussing our successes and challenges, as well as identifying growth toward our intended outcome. Different team members take on facilitation during our leadership meetings and we review both the agenda and our roles within these meetings. We have taken on a book study to learn about change agency, have selected personal change initiatives, and are peer coaching to assist throughout the process.

Most importantly, our communication to all staff members since the first day of school has been that we are a leadership team that is seeking to learn, improve, and provide a unified message, skill set, and expectation for excellence in ourselves and others. To demonstrate the point, our leadership team physically gathered, in matching jerseys, in front of all district staff to assert that we would collaborate to do exactly this.

CLARIFY OUR MISSION, VISION, AND CORE VALUES

Our intended outcome equals excellent customer service that requires alignment of needs and deeds: we will utilize the board of education, district shared decision making, and district leadership to develop a meaningful mission, vision, and core values that will ensure students are prepared for college and career. District leadership must start at the board of education level. I was fortunate to lead my board of education through a goal-setting process in which they clearly identified meaningful academic, budgetary, and organizational priorities for the district. The work of the board was used by our district-level shared decision making committee to update an aging mission and vision statement.

From these guiding documents, our leadership team spent an entire retreat focused on identifying the core values that would transform our mission and vision into practice:



inquiry, collaboration, risk taking, participation (citizenship), and empathy.

SHARE, TEACH, EMBED OUR MISSION, VISION, AND CORE VALUES

Our intended outcome equals excellent customer service that requires clear communication: we will clearly communicate and teach the message within the district mission, vision, and core values, both within our schools and the community. The opening day of school, with all 420 employees present, provided the perfect vehicle to start telling our story. The guiding question that all staff were asked to answer was, why are we here? In one hour with the staff, we acknowledged both the students who graduated and those who did not. We celebrated tenure, landmarks in longevity, perfect attendance, and offered our first ever PRIDE award to an employee who exemplified what we value most among all staff members: to be Professional, Respectful, Involved, Dependable, and Empowered. While celebrating, we highlighted our mission and core values along with our need to provide excellent customer service for our students, families, and the community.

Within 24 hours of the opening day meeting, the principals taught their staff an extension lesson on the core values. We continuously communicate each of our core values as “we believe” statements. We have also made it clear that these values apply to staff and students alike. We also shared ownership over teaching these values and have a shared ownership over applying them to our daily practice.

The opening superintendent letter to all parents included our belief in shared ownership over achieving our core values. As part of district-wide rebranding, the core values were added to all district letterhead and our new district website. The home screen on every computer in the district displays our new district logo and core values. The mission, vision, and core values were presented to all parents during each open house. Parents were asked to expect more from their school and to ask hard questions about how our

staff and program would help their children to attain these skills. Teacher walk-throughs, observations, and the resultant conversations continue to include the essence of our core values. We purposely reached out to the local print media sources in order to tell our story and highlight our priority for excellent customer service. Our physical education staff exemplified our core values of collaboration, risk taking, and participation by taking part in the first ever national Take Your Parent to PE Week. We received local and national broadcast media coverage as over 200 parents came to school to participate in PE with their children. We will again further project customer service and our core values by capitalizing on social media, phone calls, mailings, and personal contacts to invite our families in for American Education Week.

SEEK FEEDBACK FROM OUR CONSTITUENT GROUPS

Our intended outcome equals excellent customer service that requires customer feedback: we will seek multiple pathways of feedback to ensure that we are meeting the needs of our constituents. As superintendent, I have planned a number of community forums that will occur both on and

off campus, allowing me to share our mission, vision, and core values, solicit feedback, and enlist help with our mission. We have deployed the first of three district-wide surveys that will capture student, staff, and family feedback on customer service, academic programming, and our connectedness with the greater community. The feedback from these surveys will be shared as transparently as our mission, vision, and core values.

Our leadership team will continue to inquire, collaborate, take risks, participate, and have empathy with our entire school community. By outwardly modeling these values, by collaborating to strengthen our leadership skills, and by being big and noisy in projecting our intentions, we will build the community relationships necessary to clear the path for a successful tomorrow.

BRIAN A. BAILEY, EdD is the superintendent of schools, Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk Central School District.



The Success of Public Schools

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PUBLIC SCHOOL
SUCCESS



By Ira Pernick

One Facebook post is enough to create a firestorm of negativity about any public school, administrator, or teacher. Piling on via social media is so easy and comes with virtually no penalty that it's hard to believe that each of us hasn't been tempted periodically to do just that about a restaurant, a television show, or even the federal government. It's not difficult to think of a time when social media has been used as a means to spread negativity, when in reality social media is as often used for positive purposes carrying messages of hope, support, and celebration.

While school leaders maintain a wide range of views on social media and its place in schools, we need to allow schools to carve out a positive space on social media platforms to provide something more than the packaged stories we all publish about successful students.

Social media is neither the devil nor a panacea when it comes to managing a positive message about our schools. It is, however, a place where community members go to share, vent, or gather information. School leaders should never aim to drown out negativity entirely; that is an impossible goal, but we can provide an alternative with information and images that pull the curtain back on what is still a mysterious place for many parents – their child’s school. Social media allows for more frequent communication with a broader audience in a more informal manner. Often this can come with photos of activities within schools or classrooms that can help outsiders understand what day-to-day school looks like. Given advancements in social media capabilities it’s possible even to link to local newspaper stories, where most of us go to celebrate student achievement on virtually any platform, further increasing the number of people who witness something positive about a school.

Social media serves as only one way to communicate differently with students, parents, and the community. Communication apps like Remind allow administrators and teachers to share information that is more likely to be read by recipients in an increasing number of formats. We already know that text reminders from teachers to students and parents are effective and well received. Expanding usage to include administrators with the goal of providing text information to parents and

the community is another opportunity to leverage newer technology to provide others with information about their school. None of this means that we should eliminate email blasts or automatic dialers from our repertoire when it comes to getting information out, only that we spend some time determining which platforms to use and when. Of course, this requires management and care; still, that work is valuable, given that social media and cell phones in general are where students, parents, and community members are so it is incumbent on us to be there, too. Harsh critics of public education often forget the many

less formal communication structures, while many schools stand in place with traditional modes of providing information that many people simply don’t use anymore.

The more creative we become with how we engage the public, the more authentic we appear to the community. Of course, meetings with no agendas come with their own challenges and anxiety for many. Establishing a set of ground rules for those meetings helps recognize the value of everyone else in the room as a possible resource for an answer to a question and changes the focus away from the school leader as the sole source of information. Sharing

the room with others can set the table for productive talk and help spread the word to others about open sharing – a quality many community members respect. For the last seven years, I have hosted “coffee with the principal” twice a month. It is a meeting that is open to all parents and community members. It has frequently attracted school board members and other district administrators, as well as many parents who attend with questions or discussion

topics. My coffees have a few rules that have proven effective, including my commitment to answering as honestly as I can even if I don’t know the answer to the question.

Over the last few years, as attacks on public education have intensified, I have seen the walls that surround what we do go up, and our willingness to share become more limited. Yes, we all have students in our schools that are remarkable with amazing stories, but educators also have a story to tell that can shine a positive light on our own expertise and skills even when so many question what we do. Our collective sensitivity to criticism has magnified to a point where we have difficulty admitting when we are wrong, and that will never serve us well. Being open with our practice and letting outsiders see in means that we have to be honest and willing to admit that maybe, just maybe, we need to change our practice and be more open to those who do not work in education.



positive experiences they have had and think of the system and not the people who make up the system. Social media and other communication tools reinforce to students, parents, and the community that the system they bemoan is made up of well-intentioned, talented professionals. In short, by inviting the school communities to see who we are, we yield positive outcomes.

Communicating in less formal ways does promote less formal communication in return which can be tricky to navigate. Resisting the urge to engage in discussion or debate on social media is a good idea, and so is engaging parents and community members in non-agenda driven conversation about school issues. Typically we speak to our students, parents, and community members in carefully structured environments that don’t allow for open discussion. Virtually the whole world has migrated to





In the end, the success of our public high schools does not exist in the traditional photo opportunities that have too often become the only ways for us to communicate with communities. Our success is hidden in the day-to-day activities within all schools that most parents never get to see and only experience through the lens of the child when they get home each day. By changing what we share and how we share it, we can change the way public schools are viewed as well.

Social media is the best way to share what we do every day with a large audience. It is free, popular, and has the added benefit of connecting us to other educators struggling with the same challenges around the world. The real value comes within the bits and pieces of ourselves that we share,

the honest questions we ask, and the constant acknowledgment that we are not perfect. Maybe if we are willing to admit that we, public education in America, are still learning and refining our craft, then maybe there will be fewer blatant attacks and more support for our continued hard work.

IRA PERNICK is the principal of Paul D. Schreiber High School, Port Washington Union Free School District.

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Social Media: Perception Builder



By Tony Sinanis

“People’s perception becomes their reality and so we must shape the perception to create the reality we want people to have when they think of us.” My superintendent, who hired me for my first administrative position, used to say this to me on a daily basis. Initially it was rooted in the fact that I didn’t necessarily wear a suit each day to school and he felt strongly that the way I looked shaped the way people viewed me and interacted with me.

They had a perception of me that spread through word of mouth and thus became the reality. I was still relatively young at the time and would always fight back because I argued it shouldn't matter what I looked like but instead my words and actions should matter. Eventually I started to think about my perceptions solely based on the way someone looked, and I realized the only way I was going to get people to hear my words and attend to my actions was by creating a certain perception (that may or may not have been related to my appearance) and in turn shape reality.

This idea came back up again about a year ago when I heard Eric Sheninger (@NMHS_Principal) speak about using the power of social media to share our story and brand our schools. Brilliant – absolutely brilliant! Think of the golden arches – everyone knows about McDonald's and what a deal it is to eat there. Think about Apple – everyone knows they are always looking for the next iPhone or iPad – they are innovators and risk takers! Branding is key. Telling our stories is key! Eric was 100 percent right and

I knew that I had to get behind the idea and tell our story – I wanted to influence the perception of our school by sharing the daily realities. I wanted to help brand Cantiague Elementary School as the best elementary school on the planet! Why should we allow people to create their own perceptions, which could be rooted in misinformation, based on word of mouth or what is published in the local paper?

Branding, which typically is a “business world” thing, is exactly what our schools need today! There is so much bashing of public education in the media today and the landscape of public education is not a pretty one, but as educators – whether a superintendent, classroom teacher, support specialist, or the lead learner of the building – we still control everything that happens in our schools. And since we control what happens in our schools (even with state/federal mandates and policies, the final execution is our call) we know there are awesome techniques/approaches/etc. unfolding in our schools. So let's spread the word; let's brand our schools; let's fuel the perceptions; and let's create

our realities using technology as the key ingredient!

For me, that journey began with my iPad. I am fortunate in that my whole school has WiFi so this year I made a conscious decision that I was going to spend as little time as possible in my office and as much time as possible walking around the building visiting classrooms, talking to children, taking pictures, tweeting about our daily adventures, emailing parents with the highlights of our work, and blogging about our successes in a weekly staff newsletter. Well, I am thrilled to say that one year in, our school's brand is really taking shape! Our community knows we aim to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of individual students. Our community knows we believe in as much small-group instruction as possible and that whole-class/direct instruction is at a minimum. Our community knows that we believe in the reading and writing workshop models and our goals are to nurture lifelong readers and to support passionate authors who cannot wait to publish their work. Our community

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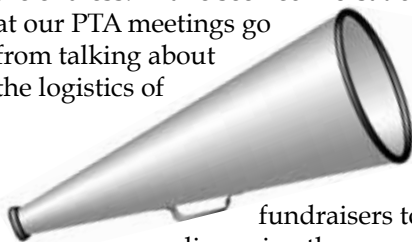
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knows that we are bucket fillers and that we support the Super Six: Be a SUPERStar by being responsible, respectful, positive, safe, and kind (these are the pillars of our success). Our community knows that we work diligently to make technology integration a seamless and powerful component. Our community knows that we value two-way communication. Our community knows that we invest in building school and community spirit. And most importantly, in my eyes, our community knows that we love our kids and are dedicated, not only to their academic development, but also their social, emotional, and psychological growth.

I don't share this information as a way to "toot our own horn" but instead to share that when a conscious decision is made to brand your school and tell your story, the possibilities are endless. I have seen conversations at our PTA meetings go from talking about the logistics of



fundraisers to discussing the concerns over high-stakes testing or the power of book clubs as a way to differentiate instruction. Our community is informed and that is what we want at Cantiague. It means that we have to be transparent. It means that we have to be confident in our choices. It means that we have to be open to feedback – good and bad. It means that we have to show that with every success there are at least three failures. It means that we are comfortable flattening the walls of our school and proudly telling our story so we can shape perceptions and build realities.

If you are ready to brand your school and create your reality, here are five starting points...

- 1) **Twitter** – create a school Twitter account (encourage teachers to do so also) and tweet about all the exciting things happening in your school and classrooms. Share your story – shout it from the rooftops before someone else does it for you! Don't just use it to share

when the next baseball game is happening or what time the bake sale starts. Use it to share practice from inside the classrooms!

- 2) **Storify** – we used this resource to amass all our tweets from the week that were heavy on pictures and really helped shape the reality. Check out the Cantiague storify page that features our use of Twitter – this is a great way to share tweets with families not on Twitter.
- 3) **Email parents** (if you can) and tell them about all the awesome things happening in your school across all grade levels!
- 4) **Create a staff newsletter/blog** and give everyone a glimpse into each other's spaces so they can see all the awesome things they are doing! We often spend so much time in our own little spaces that we don't get to share ideas and learn from each other. Here is a great way to start that process!
- 5) **Jump in the deep end of the pool and take a risk!** Be the storyteller for your school and contribute to the perceptions that will create the realities. Don't let someone else do it for you!

Also, check out these other amazing educators who are telling their own stories in their own way: Matt Gomez (@mattbgomez) Erin Klein (@KleinErin) Ben Gilpin (@benjamingilpin) Jimmy Casas (@casas_jimmy) Chris Lehmann (@chrislehmann)

These are just some of the awesome storytellers out there! So, pick the technology you want to use and start telling your story, shaping perceptions and creating realities!

Reprinted from the Spring 2014 *Vanguard*.

DR. TONY SINANIS is the 2014 NAESP/SAANYS New York State Elementary School Principal of the Year and the current superintendent of Hastings-on-Hudson Schools.

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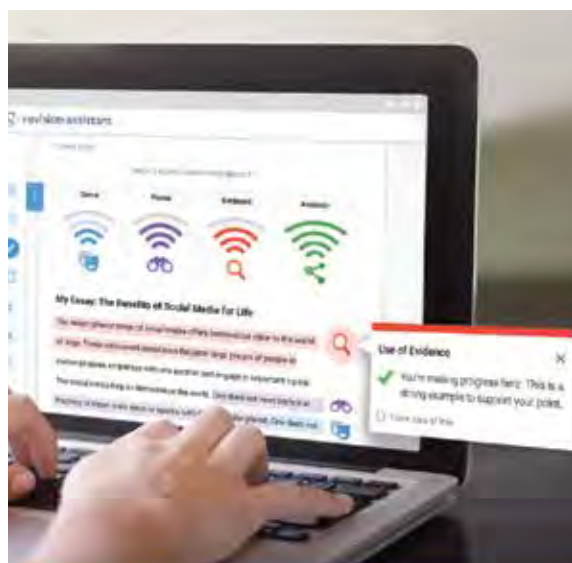
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The Power of Reflection at a Student Retreat



By Susan Ciminelli

As principal of a neighboring elementary school in our district, I had admired my colleague's ability to hold a retreat for students at the beginning of the school year. I had long believed that children should experience learning with an understanding that their own outlook shapes their success as a student. A couple years later, I had the opportunity to fill her shoes as the new principal.

As I became acquainted with my new school and staff during the summer months, I learned that my predecessor had accomplished something I had wanted to do in my previous school – a retreat for students. We all benefit when we reflect on our progress. I believe students get little opportunity to reflect on the habits of mind that contribute to their success and it's important our children to learn to do this. Although key staff who previously organized the retreat had moved to other buildings or retired, there were several remaining who could share some insight into what worked and what missed the mark. I found several teachers willing to work with me to create a powerful experience that would carry us through our school year.

The foundational concept of the retreat was goal setting and how choices make a difference in achieving our goals. Our team consisted of our reading and math specialists, librarian, art teacher, school counselor, and PE teacher. At our first team meeting, I showed them the book, *How Full Is Your Bucket?* and pitched my idea for a retreat theme centered on this and academic goal setting. Our team liked this and together planned a variety of activities for a two-hour event for each grade. The theme of kindness, getting along, setting personal and academic goals, and understanding how our choices can help us succeed was agreed upon and ideas began to spark. Everyone was tasked with finding activities to share at our next planning meeting, where we would collectively draft our lesson plan for the retreat.

The retreat team next had to determine where we could accommodate an entire grade level of about 60 students and have flexibility in case of inclement weather. Our emergency evacuation site was the fire station next door. The station had a large hall where the fire department hosted fundraising events like spaghetti dinners and bingo. There were tables and chairs we could use and arrange to suit our needs. Our schedule had literacy blocks and this

made it easy to plan three mornings for grades three, four, and five and afternoons assigned to kindergarten, one and two. Our fire department welcomed us to use the building for the three consecutive days that would fit our mutual schedules. The fire department liaisons observed that bringing our students there for the retreat was a great way to prepare them for the emergency evacuation drill held in October. This was a win-win for both my school and the fire department.



With the logistics worked out and three substitutes arranged for our PE, art, and library teachers who were on the retreat team, we rolled up our collective sleeves to draft a lesson plan for each grade. Our team would focus on kindness, social-emotional skills, and safety behaviors balanced with the basics of goal setting, grit, and mindset for academic achievement. Each member of the team contributed ideas for our activities that would meet our objectives. For kindergarten, first, and second grades the scale tipped toward more SEL and safety behaviors while for grades three, four, and five, our activities leaned more into goal setting and academic success. For the upper grades, we would be providing every child a copy of their final report card from the previous school year. Because I had been the CIO, I knew we had a PDF copy of the final report cards from June. The report card activity would be an individual consult of under three minutes with each child while the rest of the small group worked on a goal-setting writing prompt. In both the small group and one-to-one consults, we discussed student-identified goals and incremental steps each child could take in the coming school year.

Our final plans went like this... the first 20 minutes was a morning-meeting whole-group activity with me. My topic was to help students understand what a "retreat" was for, what "reflection" was, and how our thinking during a retreat helps us be

successful throughout the year ahead. I included that a school was actually the people in it, not a building, and asked how they could make our school a place we all enjoy. After this whole-group session with me, the students were divided into ten small groups led by one of our team members. The classroom teachers either joined a group or rotated between their students' tables as they wished. Each retreat team leader read the bucket book and did a drawing/writing and discussion activity with their small group. We returned to whole group for some fun physical challenges led by our counselor and PE teacher. These were icebreaker type activities requiring students to listen and quickly respond and were a lot of fun. The resulting laughter from our struggles – from teachers and students alike – bonded us together. We returned to our small-group tables for a second activity and followed that with another icebreaker. For our final activity, everyone came back to our morning-meeting setup. I led the wrap-up activity by asking open-ended questions and allowing students to summarize the thinking they had done during retreat. Finally, after giving directions for our return to school, our retreat closed with a cheer in the form of a call-response chant. This gave our retreat a powerful closing and something we could tap into throughout the year for assemblies and other group events.

Immediately after our retreat was done, our team debriefed. All the teachers had been given a feedback survey and the results were overwhelmingly positive. Our own experience and the buzz from our colleagues indicated our retreat was successful and worthwhile. But for our retreat team, the most powerful thing was yet to come.

In roundtable fashion we each shared our observations. Common themes emerged about how much our children enjoyed the experience and how involved they were in the discussions. A short list of tweaks emerged to save for next year's planning, since we all agreed we should do this again next year. However, our biggest surprise was about the report card activity. When students were given

their report cards during our retreat, we found we had to do more explaining as to what was on it, how the numbers or letters were determined, and how to “read” the information on the report. We learned that nearly all of our students had never seen their own report card. Some indicated they had a conversation with their parents about the report card, but by and large, very few had ever looked at it. Most of us had assumed our students knew what it looked like and the information contained. We realized how little our students understand about their report card and actually partake in their own progress. No wonder children struggled with the concept of goal setting since not only did they not have a discussion about their grades, they also didn’t equate their performance with their day-to-day effort. Grades were something teachers decided and told their parents.

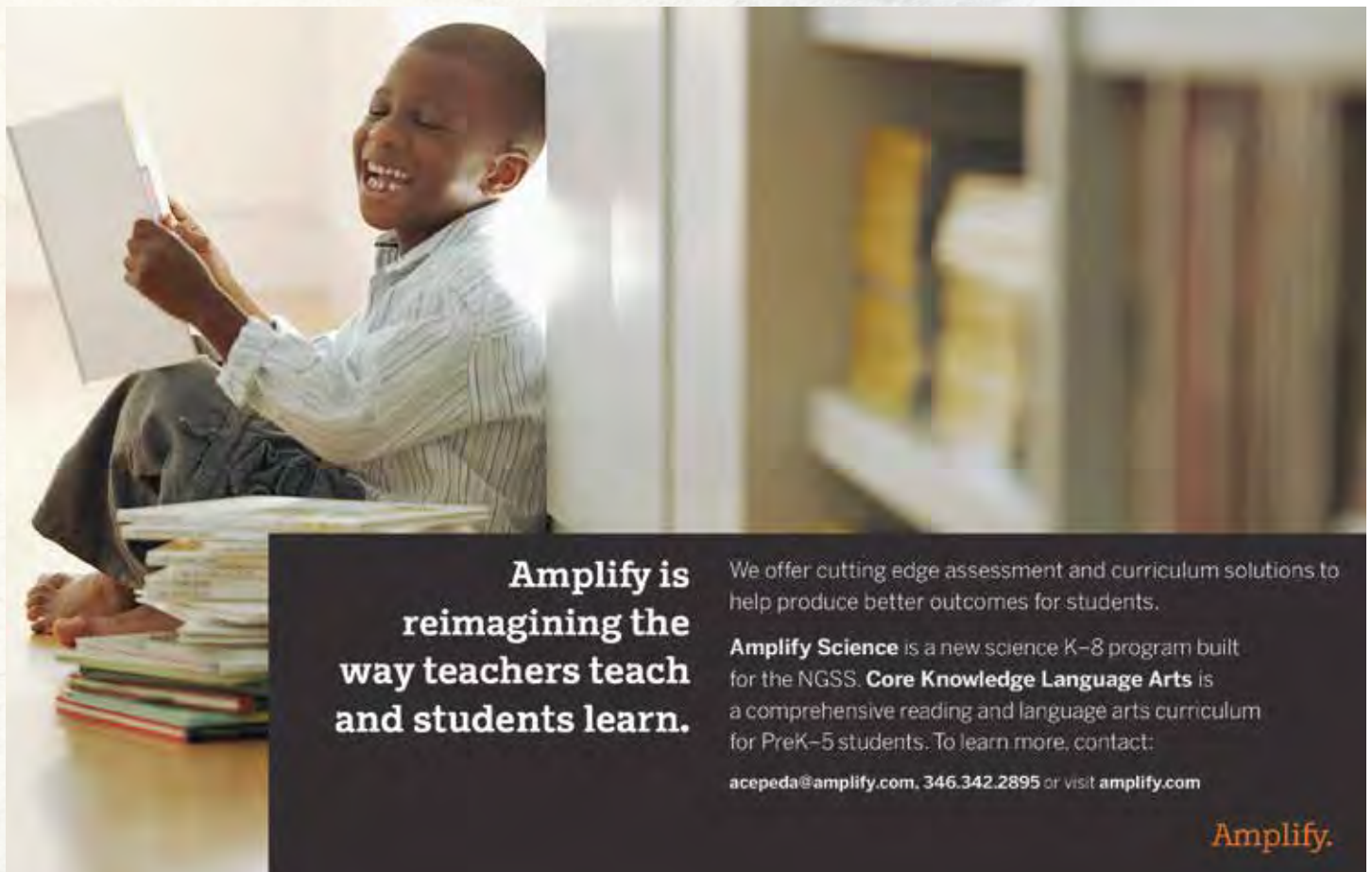
The revelations of our team and the surveys were shared with our

faculty and discussed in our AIS meetings. This gave us a point of reference, and for our reading and math specialists there was a new perspective that made a difference for our students. Students received more detailed information about their progress, not just “good job” or “that needs more work.” Progress details and goal setting became part of the discussion with our students.

As a principal, I learned something significant. We educators like to think we are holding students accountable, encouraging their academic effort with our grading system and having parent-teacher conferences to discuss a child’s performance. But as we found out at our retreat, our students actually don’t have much experience with their own progress. I couldn’t help but think that all of these are for naught if the child himself or herself is not included in their own measurement of growth. I began to see that our elementary students’ experience with their learning

was not unlike a cork floating on the ocean, bobbing about with no sense or control over where it was going. With a little reframing, whether it’s portfolio assessments or holding one-to-one conversations with our students on their performance, we can equip those corks with a sail and oars. When we teach our students to reflect on their progress, they become the captain of their own ship and willingly co-navigate toward their academic destination.

SUSAN CIMINELLI, has been an educator since 1977. She held the positions of public school teacher, teacher-trainer, technology coordinator, data manager/analyst, and school principal, retiring from Lake Shore Central Schools. She is a recipient of the Apple Education Grant Award.



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