



Community Voice

Getting your message out

Building Your Army of Advocates

*It used to be a lot easier for school boards to reach out to their communities. School divisions were smaller, so it was easier for school trustees to be well-known and respected as community leaders. The mandate of public schools had a much narrower, academic focus, more people had kids in school, and communities were less diverse. People got their news from only a few sources, and there were generally fewer demands for people's attention. Today, school boards have to make a concerted effort to be heard above the noise. They need to be both community **and** communication leaders, taking a targeted approach when it comes to **getting their message out**. By communicating deliberately and clearly with all segments of their communities, school boards can build an **army of advocates** who actively support kids and public schools.*

School trustees and parents have a lot in common, including their commitment to the total well-being of kids. And while most community members share that commitment, some also have specific interests, meaning that they value certain indicators of well-being and success above others. School boards need to bear that in mind when they engage with different community groups. They need to remember that different groups have different priorities, and ensure **everyone** knows how public schools are working for **them**.

As a board, build your networks. We've provided a couple of resources to get you started. Expand your efforts beyond the obvious education partners, parents and staff. Map out your community's human and institutional landscape—seniors, government, service organizations, faith and youth groups, large business, small industry, and more. At the same time, identify your community's formal and informal leaders—not just the politicians and CEOs, but also the coffee shop influencers, those people to whom other just seem to gravitate.

Actively reach out to these individuals and groups. The precise focus of your message may change based on



your audience, and you may use different communication mediums for different groups, but your goal should be consistent: building support for kids and public education. Tailor your specific message by asking the question "What's in it for them?" Focusing on your audience can make all the difference when it comes to how your message is received, or if it's acted upon.

And while you're working on building one-on-one relationships, think about how you can bring these diverse groups together in broad-based, community coalitions. Establish a forum where they can hear and learn from each other. Think of it as constructing a giant jigsaw puzzle, but you don't have all of the pieces. Your job is to find out who does, get them to the table, and help them understand that the picture will be complete only if they help build it. And in this case, the picture you are all creating is student success and well-being.

One final note: while board action is essential in community outreach, don't overlook the possibilities created by the diversity around your own board table. School trustees come from all walks and stages of life. Retirees and post-secondary students, business owners and civil servants, cultural aficionados and sports enthusiasts—all of these groups and more serve on school boards. Empower and encourage them to tap into their own networks to help build the support your students need for the technical and vocational programming, the music and art classes, and the extracurricular and intramural sports that contribute to a complete and rewarding school experience.

Nurture and grow your formal and informal networks by informing, engaging, and appreciating them. In this way, you will be building an **army of advocates** that will be ready, willing and able to help you **get your message out**.

This Division Dispatch series and other e-learning resources can be found at www.mbschoolboards.ca.