



## Community Voice

Getting your message out

# Introduction

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*Most people who are engaged with public schools—students, parents, staff and trustees—will tell you that schools do a great job. By so many different measures, not just academics, students are succeeding, and they are graduating at unprecedented rates. But the less involved people are with their local school, the less likely they are to share this positive opinion. Often, **they just don't know** what is happening in schools, or **why** certain things are happening. Their only points of reference may be negative media coverage, unsubstantiated gossip, or even their own memories of what school was like in “the good old days.”*

*As school trustees, we need to share positive stories, to help **everyone** understand the strength of today's public schools, and how school boards make good schools better. This video series on **getting the message out** is a toolkit that will help school boards and trustees do just that.*

We all know that **effective** communication is two-way communication. It requires listening as well as speaking, with the emphasis on listening. For school boards, “listening” often takes the form of community engagement. When school boards engage their communities, they create opportunities for **everyone** to voice their opinions, because everyone's opinion matters.

But as important as community engagement or “listening” is—and you'll find information about that on our website—it's not the focus of this series of Division Dispatches. Instead, we are looking at the “speaking” side of the equation. Our goal is to help school boards take greater control of their communications. By doing so, they can ensure the accuracy of information that is being shared. They can also communicate the success stories that are the real face of public schools, and re-frame public schooling conversations in a more positive light.

Broad-based support for public schools is possible, but that support needs to be nurtured through leadership and a strategic approach to communication. And that strategic approach can't be to communicate on an as-needed basis—that is, “we need our community to get behind us on this particular issue, so time to start communicating!” An effective communications strategy includes on-going, concerted and diverse components. This video series will support school boards in this regard by spurring ideas that will enable them to take control of and successfully convey the messages that communities need to hear.



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# The Role of a School Board

*One of the communications challenges facing many school boards is that they work in relative obscurity. Unlike other levels of government, their mandate—while incredibly important—is narrow: K-12 public education. So if people aren't somehow connected to the school system—if they don't have kids in school, work in the system themselves, or know someone that does—they may not give schools or school boards a moment's thought.*

*For school boards to be viewed as the trusted community voice on education that they should be, they have to become better known to their communities—not just as a group of elected individuals, but as a relevant and important body that adds significant value to the public education system. Only then can school boards be truly effective at **getting their message out**.*

The primary role of school boards is a simple one: to create the conditions that support success for all students. That role sometimes seems to take a back seat to controversies about tax rates, school facilities, or transportation, but students are at the centre of everything a school board does. School boards know that simple, powerful truth, but they need to ensure that their communities share that understanding.

You can start building that understanding by taking a look at your school board meeting agendas and minutes. You may not think of these as communication tools, but they are. For many people, those documents will provide their first and perhaps only insight into what it is that a school board actually does. What do yours say about you? Is the agenda student and learning-focused? One way to test this is to look at each agenda item, and ask yourself the question: does this matter to kids and learning?



If your answers are mostly “yes,” great! If not, it might be time to reassess your board’s focus.

And while you’re assessing your agenda’s student-focus, don’t forget to examine it and your minutes for clarity. Ask yourself this: if I had no background knowledge about what’s going to happen at this meeting, would this agenda make sense to me? And what about the minutes arising from the meeting—do they provide an understandable overview of what actually happened? If not, why not, and what can we do to improve them? And remember, when it comes to minutes, concise is good, but cryptic isn’t!

Of course, not everyone attends school board meetings or checks out online agendas and minutes, but as a school trustee, you are constantly interacting with your community in other, unofficial ways. And from time to time, you are going to be asked about your role as a school trustee, usually along the lines of “what exactly do you do?” Be prepared to answer, and in a way that will resonate with people! Whether it’s a 10-second sound bite or a 30-second elevator speech—and you’ll find more about those elsewhere in this video series—be ready with an answer that puts kids and learning right where they belong—at the centre of every school boards’ work.

Research shows that effective, high-functioning school boards have a positive impact on student achievement. That’s the message that communities need to hear, and the message school boards and school trustees need to convey.

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## Working with the Media

*The media can be great allies when it comes to **getting your message out**. Whether you want to convey straightforward information, ensure that both sides of a story are heard, or provide leadership in times of crisis, the media can help school boards reach their communities. By developing a positive relationship with the media, you will have greater access to the powerful tools of print, TV, and radio. A strong relationship with your local media will do more than help you convey specific information, though. It will also position your school board as a reliable and trusted educational leader, which will in turn enhance your reputation in the community. But a relationship with the media is no different than any other relationship: it requires hard work to make it strong.*

Have you ever heard the saying “never pick a fight with people who buy ink by the barrel?” While the media may not be nearly as dependent on ink these days, the underlying message still applies. When it comes to dealing with the media, there tends to be a power imbalance—and it doesn’t favour school boards. So while you might manage your media relations, you can’t manage the media. But there are things you can do to improve the odds of positive outcomes from your media interactions.

**One:** Plan for a media request. Identify a spokesperson or persons. Make sure they are media-savvy, even if that means investing some time and money in formal training. And don’t forget that the media work 24/7, which means that you should have a spokesperson available beyond the standard 9-to-5 work day.

**Two:** Make it easy for the media. Reporters are under a time crunch, so if you want to increase the odds of having your story told, help them! Provide quotes, background information,

photos—anything that will increase the appeal to the media of telling **your** story. But remember: just because you want a story told doesn’t necessarily make it newsworthy. If you throw out a hook and you don’t get any bites, accept that outcome. Railing against the media will not get your story published!

**Three:** Tell your story. Have your key messages ready, and focus on those messages. Gather your thoughts before you speak, and don’t worry about filling dead air. The media has come to you because they think you have something to say, but if you don’t answer that email or phone call, someone else will, and that someone may have a different story to tell. At the same time, you aren’t obligated to respond to every media request. Take responsibility for what is under your authority and leave the rest to someone else. While you never want to use the words “no comment,” sometimes, that really should be the gist of your response.

**Four:** Media relations in a time of crisis pose some special challenges. There’s a good chance that the reporter already has some information, either through another interview or via social media. Ask questions. Find out what they already know—or think they know—and be prepared to dispel rumours. If the story is a developing one, your job isn’t done after the first interview or comment. Make sure the reporter can reach you with further questions, or follow up yourself. If it involves your students or schools, try to position yourself as the authority on the story, and stay accessible. There is one common, underlying theme of your crisis messaging: we care, we are capable, and we are in control.



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# Going Social

While traditional news media can have a wide reach, it isn't always the best option when it comes to **getting your message out**. One of its obvious limitations is that you can't control what, if anything, is said. The media may be silent on a story that you feel is important to your community, or their version of the story may not be fully accurate or include your point of view. The best way to tell your story when and how you want is to tell it yourself, which is where social media can help. And because many of your community members already turn to social media to receive and share news, you'll be meeting them where they are, rather than expecting them to come to you.

We are in the middle of a revolution—a communications revolution—that is changing radically our day-to-day lives. And whether you like those changes or not, you ignore them at your peril. If you want to inform and engage others—something that is a fundamental goal of every school board and member trustee—you should take the plunge into social media.

Social media hasn't replaced print, television or radio, but for many it equals or exceeds these traditional communication forms in its importance. People have so many options when it comes to their news sources, and many choose Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram (among others). But don't think of social media as something that you **have** to do to satisfy someone else; embrace it for the very real benefits it can bring your way! Among those benefits are reduced communication costs, the ability to reach people over a wide geographic area, and the ability to send customized messages right to people's inboxes or feeds. But more than anything else, social media allows you to tell your story, in your way, and on your schedule.

One of the great benefits of social media is its immediacy: you can communicate on a moment's notice. However, that same benefit can be a problem. Don't post in anger, and always think twice, post once. Here are a few other

tips, if you or your school board are just embarking on a social media journey.

- Ask yourself the questions “who am I, and why am I posting,” and let your answers to those questions guide you. If your primary goal is to keep in touch with your family, don't expect your constituents to show much interest in your posts, and vice versa. Some people do a very good job of creating accounts that are engaging for both their personal and professional contacts. Others maintain multiple accounts, and post different content for different audiences. And some, unfortunately, don't give this matter much thought at all, post randomly, and alienate or even lose followers.
- Social media is about two-way communications, so expect replies and feedback, some of which will be negative. You don't want to engage on every perceived slight, but you don't have to let blatant lies go unchallenged. Find the balance that works for you.
- There's a more relaxed, comfortable, and conversational tone on social media, but remember—keep it professional, and don't post anything that may come back to haunt you.
- Social media is a commitment. If you want to build both a following and credibility, communicate often. You won't build an audience through once-a-month postings.

One final note for board or divisional social media accounts: make sure the responsibility—and log-in credentials—are given to someone with the time, interest and good judgement required to make your social media venture a success. This may mean assigning the job to an individual, not a position. Find someone who wants to and would be good at going social, and help them work to **get your message out**.

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# 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**.

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## Key Messages

*Conversations about education often mention the three Rs—reading, writing and arithmetic. Conversations about communications need to be focused by the three Cs: clarity, consistency, and conciseness. Taken together, these traits provide a solid foundation for your **key messages**. And when you couple the three Cs with a fourth R—repetition—you give yourself the best chance of having your story not only heard, but also understood.*

A lot of time and thought goes into school boards' planning and decision-making. You collect and analyze data, review various options, assess the pros and cons of each, and ultimately, decide on a course of action. Most of your constituents won't be paying nearly as much attention to these details as you are, and some of those details may be confidential in nature. Your challenge is to communicate your final decision to your community in a compelling and logical fashion. To do that, you need to focus on a **key message**. When you get that right, your message will stick with your audience.

Key messages need to be clear. Avoid jargon and technical language. Keep sentence structures simple. Repetition—to a point—enhances clarity, so if the format of the communication permits, structure it with an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. In other words, tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them!

Consistency is also critical to strong key messaging. Good media spokespeople are consistent. They stay on point with the pre-determined key messages, whether they are speaking with the media, at a town hall, or to someone in the grocery store. And if the conversation is about an important board decision, the key message should be the same no matter who's doing the talking, because key messages relate to the why and what of a board decision, not personal viewpoints.

Finally, key messages must be concise. One way to keep them concise is to make sure they are relevant. Remember all those options you considered before making your final decision? Those aren't nearly as relevant as the option you **did** choose. If asked to explain a board decision, be prepared to do so at some depth, but focus your key messages on what you are doing, not what you decided not to do. And if you have multiple key messages, prioritize them, because you may have only a very short time to get any message out.

Developing a great key message takes planning and forethought. You don't start planning your career on the day you finish your education, and you don't start planning your retirement on your last day of work. It takes effort, but planning your key messages is vital to **getting your message out**.





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# Elevator Speeches and Sound Bites

Some people seem to have a knack for thinking on their feet and providing immediate, clear and compelling responses to every question asked. Others walk away from a conversation and experience a Homer Simpson moment: they utter a “D’oh!”, slap themselves on the forehead, and think about all the things they **should** have said. But it may be something other than natural ability that separates these two groups. It may have more to do with anticipation and preparation. As a school trustee, one of the best ways to **get your message out** is to have at the ready a number of **elevator speeches and sound bites** that can be delivered whenever the opportunity arises—even during a 30-second elevator ride!

At one time or another, most school trustees have probably been asked the same questions. Why are you a school trustee? Why do we have school boards? Whatever happened to the 3 R’s? Why should I pay to educate other people’s kids? You can anticipate the questions, but have you thought much about your responses? If not, you should, and an elevator speech is a good place to start.

An elevator speech is a brief statement that captures important points on a topic. It conveys a simple, relatable and powerful message. An elevator speech is **not** the same as your division’s mission or vision statement—it’s more tangible, and depending on the question, may be somewhat personal.

The speech is short, not a laundry list of related facts. Think of it as the opening statement in a debate in which you are taking a definite position.

Elected school boards make for better schools. Everyone benefits from public education, so everyone should pay. Kids need more than reading, writing and arithmetic to succeed in today’s world. Your goal is to persuade people that **your** position is **their** position.

You want your elevator speech to resonate with your listener. Start with an understandable and jargon-free opening statement that immediately and clearly shows where you stand and what you believe. This is your **sound-bite**, that little nugget of information that will stick with someone, even if they happen to get off at the second rather than the twenty-second floor. From there, use anecdotes or stories to strengthen your message. You are trying to create a “wow” moment for your audience—as in “wow, I did not know that!”

Elevator speeches work well for explaining the fundamentals of public education and school board governance, and you should have them at the ready to respond to the most commonly asked questions. But they’re also a good tool to have at hand when you want to explain a school board decision, or provide information about an emerging issue. As a board, spend some time crafting your **elevator speeches and sound bites** at the same time you identify your key messages, and you’ll have the best chance at **getting your message out**.





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### Setting the Record Straight

*You've worked hard to be heard. You've crafted clear key messages, and they've been given wide distribution via both traditional and non-traditional media. You've struck the right balance when it comes to reinforcing your message through repetition—not so much that it becomes white noise, but not so little that large segments of your community miss it altogether. You have recruited your partners and allies to lend their voices to the cause, which is, as always, student success and well-being. But still, somehow, somewhere, something has gone wrong, and your message has become twisted or garbled. At times like these, you need to decide whether you need to **set the record straight**.*

"I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant." That statement pretty much sums up the complexities and ambiguities of human communication. Between voice and ear, there are countless pitfalls and obstacles that can impede the successful delivery of your message.

When this happens, your first task is to decide whether or not the misinformation warrants a correction. If someone has misspelled your name, for instance, sure—let them know so they can get it right the next time, but don't expect a printed correction. At the other end of the scale, if a story includes a factual inaccuracy, or your comments have been taken out of context, try to get a correction. The key word here is "try," because you don't control what the media does or doesn't do. *If* you've established a good relationship with a reporter, and *if* your approach to that reporter is non-confrontational, and *if* they haven't already moved on

to something else, you may get your correction. But if you don't, there are still things you can do.

Use your own communications networks to distribute the correct information. If your letter to the editor challenging an inaccurate story isn't published, post that letter on your website or Facebook page, and tweet the link to your followers. Share the real story with your partners and allies, and ask that they spread the message through their own networks. If the story raises red flags about student learning or well-being, communicate directly with parents, and make sure they know the real facts of the matter.

When it comes to **setting the record straight**, always remember these two things. First, correcting factual errors is relatively simple, but correcting—or more accurately changing—the interpretation of those facts is anything but. Where one person sees a 95% success rate, another sees a 5% failure rate. The facts are the same, but the emphasis is completely different. Decide when working to change entrenched positions is worth the effort, and when it's better to just walk away from the debate. Second, each time you work to correct a fallacy, you run the risk of repeating and therefore reinforcing that fallacy. When you work to set the record straight, make sure that your message and the correct information is front and centre, and that you minimize exposure for the story you are contesting. Do these two things when you need to set the record straight, and they will help you **get your message out**.