The Importance of Parent and Community Engagement

New Year's Day 2014, a single mother is sitting down with her family eating breakfast at a local establishment. She explains to everyone at the table about how excited her 4-year-old son is to start kindergarten next school year. Based on conversations with parents throughout the community, she already knows about specific teachers who adapt programs to fit her child's needs. She gleaned important information about the school from its social media feeds, website, weekly blog, video newsletter, school application (app), and online newspaper articles. The mother also has a strong grasp of the school's culture from word of mouth and various friends' Facebook and Twitter posts. Her nervous anticipation is real, but is calmed by the fact that after all her background work and research, she knows that her son will undoubtedly be in good hands. There is no doubt that the school has manifested credibility in both a physical and virtual sense.

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

The scenario described above plays out in communities around the world; parents are always vested in their children's education in various ways. Many years ago, it was more difficult to perceive how your child was progressing in school or to stay on top of pertinent information related to school events. As technology and best practice research became easily accessible, more parents understood the importance of communication in education. Parent involvement grew as well with the introduction of parent teacher organizations, school boards, and community initiatives, to name just a few. Fast forward to the present and you find parents, including myself, who rely on real-time information and a school's ability to leverage the power of available web tools in order to stay on top of their child's education. In this book, I introduce useful real-life applications related to school/parent engagement, both from a virtual and a physical perspective.

Consequently, I feel that stakeholder engagement goes well beyond the scope of parents and students. Another important piece to the overall puzzle of education is the active involvement of community members and businesses. There is no doubt that the presence felt by schools that are active in the community have a profound impact on student success and vice versa—schools that are not active have a deleterious effect. Expanding that present day impact into the future acknowledges an even greater need for schools to connect with their community utilizing technology, social media, and available web tools. Throughout this book you receive numerous examples that relate to new school and old school techniques and their impact on community engagement.

BUILD YOUR SCHOOL'S REPUTATION

Building and maintaining your school's reputation is paramount in today's world. There are so many terrific learning experiences taking place on a daily basis, yet often, schools do not expose

DIAGRAM 1.1   SCHOOL STAKEHOLDERS
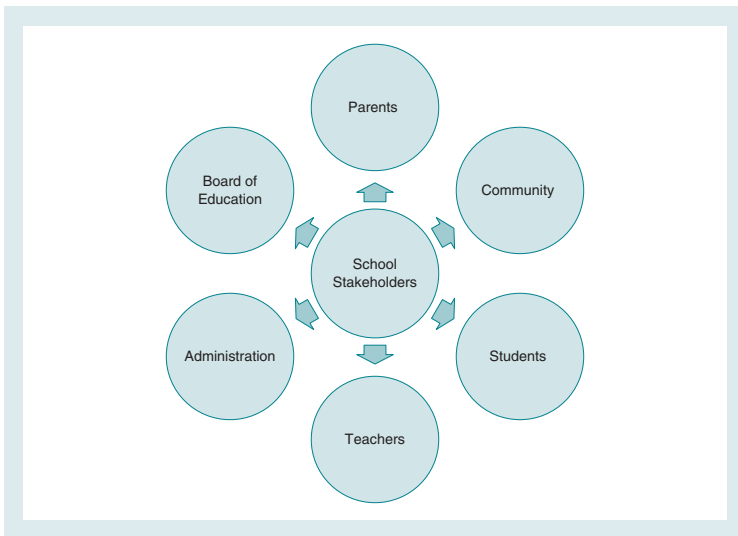
parents and other key stakeholders to those experiences. When this happens, one result is that people begin to question the education students are receiving and if their tax money truly is being put to good use. That is why schools must take the initiative and exhaust all options when engaging stakeholders. The bottom line is this: If you don't tell your school's story, somebody else will . . . and it may not be accurate or complimentary. Today's 21st century parents and other school stakeholders look to social media, websites, blogs, and other forms of innovative communications to stay current and informed. A sense of pride and belonging emanates from stakeholders when they feel more of a connection with school and educational events.

SPECIFIC AND INTENTIONAL

When it comes to schools and how they are portrayed in the media, often the positive aspects of education are overshadowed by the negative aspects: tragic school shootings, inappropriate student/teacher relationships, extreme budget crises where teachers and

programs are cut, drug overdoses, and other negative stories come flashing across the news. As school leaders and teachers, we need to turn the discussion around; we need to be proactive to accentuate the positive.

In an effort to promote the positive, schools need to be specific and intentional in every communication with parents and other stakeholders. Why not provide a transparent educational environment that is forthright and proactive? It's so incredibly easy with today's technology to disseminate your school's message and develop open lines of communication with stakeholders. Parents in particular love the added positive attention their child's school receives on *Twitter*, *Facebook*, online newspapers, websites, blogs, and newsletters. As a 21st century school leader or teacher, creating the message can happen with a few taps of your mobile device. The possibilities are endless and, in the long run, even more rewarding for every stakeholder in an educational field.

TRANSPARENCY AND BUY-IN

Letting parents and other stakeholders into our school's world is imperative. Whether highlighting academic or extracurricular achievements, there is so much to be proud of and to want to share. Every "tweetable moment" and "Facebook post" provides a sense of pride in the school community. Leveraging the power of social media tools and other online resources creates a transparent school culture. Building relationships with parents, community, and students through good times and bad goes a long way in developing and expanding a school culture of trust. The buy-in becomes contagious and enables stakeholders to be more confident in all areas of a school's efforts.

VOICE

Stakeholder voice is a crucial component of a positive or negative school culture. There are so many opportunities to seek input

from stakeholders that will inevitably result in a positive impact on your school. Phone calls, e-mails, conferences, meetings, and letters still are an effective means to make your voice heard in the school setting. However, now more than ever parents and others are taking to the comment section of an online newspaper or creating a website to voice their concerns. How will schools handle this virtual communication? Pretend the voices do not exist? It's very clear that this is an opportune time for positive dialogue to take place. Responding to these concerns can only increase the trust stakeholders have in your school's educational mission. Throughout the book various examples are highlighted of integrating stakeholder voice to promote student success.

DOORS OPEN

Anytime my office door is physically closed, I feel guilty simply because I don't ever want someone to feel that they can't approach me with a question or concern. For an educator, 5-minute lunches and handling multiple situations at the same time is the norm. If a parent or student drops by, I find time to speak with them; no issue is left unresolved. I listen, place myself in their shoes, and make a decision based on what's best for that particular child to succeed. Another example is the late night e-mail from parents overwhelmed by a situation that happened with their child earlier in the day at school. I didn't think twice about responding immediately to let the parents know that I would get to the bottom of things and that they could come in at any time the next day to further discuss the matter. The next day, the parents were so appreciative that we were able to talk and resolve the problem. I take great pride in being available to every stakeholder and solving issues with integrity. Sometimes though, the decision can be unpopular. But the fact remains all options must be exhausted and resources used to ensure a child's needs are met. Throughout this book, I highlight the importance of authentic human relationships coupled with associations in the virtual world.

PROMOTE AND INFORM

Promoting student and staff achievements is imperative if a strong school culture is to exist. For example, our outstanding school principal, Mr. Robert Mullen was recognized by colleagues as Morris County's "Friend of Education." Overall, as a staff we felt it was our duty to let the public know about this wonderful accomplishment. Therefore, I took a picture of the recognition banner with my iPhone and uploaded it to Twitter and Facebook. It was amazing to see the number of comments that were posted from parents and community members alike congratulating Mr. Mullen. Informing is just as important as promoting and relaying timely information is incredibly important as well. This means that leveraging the power of social media, mobile devices, and web-based resources quite frankly is no longer an option for educators—it is essential. With today's technology it is incredibly easy for schools to promote student learning experiences through Twitter. It's also an expectation that many stakeholders have in order to stay relevant with school happenings. The same can be said for promoting staff accomplishments. I work with an outstanding science teacher who routinely calls me up and to share a "tweetable moment." The reality is that people pay attention to and appreciate recognition. It contributes immensely to a positive school culture and leads to communication opportunities everyone can enjoy.

INFORMATION IS POWER

The more information that is disseminated about the great things going on in your school, the better. In particular, parents must have many options available to them to make sense of what is going on in their child's school. Through social media feeds, monthly roundtables, digital newsletters, blogs, podcasts, and various informal conversations, there are now many options available for stakeholders to receive information. However, there must be a greater goal than simply receiving information. When needed, a constant dialogue should transpire in order to address concerns or resolve

issues. For example, let's discuss the beloved "snow day." Instead of solely relying on sharing this information through a phone chain or automated system (a school's usual methodology), why not utilize Twitter and Facebook? We must remember that people want information in real time that is easily accessible on their social media stream or through an app. Information is power, and stakeholders should not struggle to access information that is important to them. A plethora of innovative ways to connect with school stakeholders, particularly community members and parents, is shared throughout the book.

This book details the remarkable wealth of available resources and opportunities to engage school stakeholders in the learning process of our children. Specific examples are shared on how all stakeholders can stay informed and move the conversation forward, using both traditional and nontraditional methods. There is no denying that we now live in a digital age, but we must not forget the importance that the human element plays in promoting the success of all students. There are great things occurring in our schools on a daily basis, and the more they are shared, the more they can impact everyone. At the end of the day, it is all about promoting the success of students. I am hopeful that you appreciate, learn, and employ the innovative ways that schools are involving stakeholders in the education conversation that I illustrate in this book.