



Be Indispensable!

By Tom DeLapp, President, Communication Resources for Schools

The headlines in the newspaper say it all: hard times ahead . . . billion dollar deficits . . . education funding threatened . . . budget cuts proposed. No doubt, 2008 promises to be a very challenging time for school communications professionals.

The state budget in California is a political and economic roller coaster. About every four to six years we go through a boom and bust cycle with rising economic fortunes in one year and plummeting revenues the next. As a result, in troubled times, school districts engage in a periodic ritual that I call “Donner Party Budgeting.” Cabinets and school boards are forced to eliminate jobs and chop overhead as far from the classroom as they can to balance budgets. Frequently, the first person on the menu is the district PIO.

Veterans grimly recall the budget crises of 1992, 2000 and 2004 and the corresponding layoffs and reassignments in our corps of school public relations practitioners. Is the budget crisis of 2008 going to target school PR professionals once again? Probably! So what can we do? Become indispensable!

Have you really thought about why you and the unique role you play are indispensable to your school district or educational organization? There is no one in your entire school system that does what you do on a regular and comprehensive basis. That often means people can't understand what you do every day. If they don't know what you do they can't really value and appreciate your contribution. Your first step as tough decisions are being made is to ask yourself this question: If they cut your job, what would they miss if you were gone?

It is a false economy for management to presume that communication can become diffused as one of the “other duties as assigned” in every school employee's job description. When that happens, effective communication usually suffers because the remaining employees are overworked. They do not have the time, tools, techniques or temperament to be an expert communicator. School districts are so short staffed now that they do not have enough people to absorb the myriad tasks, functions, and responsibilities that intersect on the school PIO's desk. Plain and simple, many important things won't get done. Unfortunately, when we have to scale back expenditures we don't also scale back expectations. Our internal and external customers still demand the same level of service, information and breadth of programs.

An initial recommendation: When your district talks about making budget cuts do NOT say you're trying to keep cuts as far away from the classroom as possible. That becomes code for not cutting teaching positions. It also implies that if you aren't in the classroom you are non-essential and, therefore, expendable. Instead, say you're going to keep cuts as far away from the learning environment as possible. A case can be made that to sustain student achievement, it might be more important to retain the curriculum director, technology coordinator, or communications officer instead of one more teacher. In other words, don't lump yourself into the faceless bureaucracy of organizational overhead!

Here are ten steps you can take to position yourself during the coming budget wars:

1. Treat yourself like a client

Your job is to market you and your work to the budget decision-makers. Have you “branded” yourself and the services you deliver? Who needs to be persuaded or reinforced that communication must stay above the cut line when initial budget and staffing reductions are discussed? These are your target audiences. Don't just be a good soldier and wait to become a victim of the budget axe. Be proactive and persuasive. PR = Performance + Recognition. Do a good job and then get credit for it! Make a case that your role is just as important as a teacher, principal, or other administrator.

2. Tie your work to accountability, program improvement and student achievement

“Accountability” needs to be the key word to justify everything you do for the school district. How is your work connected to accountability, student performance, test scores, drop-out rates, enrollment, parental engagement, and student support services? It isn't just producing the School Accountability Report Card; it's about how stakeholders use it as a diagnostic and public awareness tool. If you can't trace your workload back to the district Strategic Plan then you are out-of-step and probably on-the-block. Become the chief accountability officer that connects people to district improvement plans.

3. Show how your work impacts the financial bottom line

If your district is in declining enrollment, you can become a “profit center” and “revenue stream” by demonstrating that your communication efforts improve student enrollment, attendance, and parent participation. Will the district lose more

students if you aren't there to produce literature, up-dated web sites, speaker's kits and parent brochures? Does your work help the district foundation increase donations, fundraising and support? Will that go away if you go away?

4. Focus on the "Big Issues" in the district

Sure, everyone needs you when there's a construction bond or parcel tax to pass. Get beyond the bond election cycle by being an issues manager on things that are absolutely at the core of your district's agenda. Be seen as knowledgeable and involved in helping the district explain and position itself on issues like boundary changes, school closures, facilities modernization, program improvement, labor relations, teacher/student recruitment and retention, and budget adoptions. Rule of thumb: what is occupying most of your superintendent's time? Find that out and then get involved.

5. Produce a personal report card of your accomplishments

Conduct an inventory of what your office or department has accomplished in the last year or two. Bring evidence into the discussion about whether the district can really afford to lose you. When people see what's at stake they will have to think twice about: (a) how hard will it be to accomplish these things without you, and (b) whether they can really afford to eliminate these activities and services.

6. Have a plan that is visible, understandable, inclusive and measurable

A communications plan helps spotlight your department, adds a sense of continuity and structure to what you do, and promotes buy-in by various stakeholders to the priority of effective communication. Publicize the plan so others can see how their program or job benefits from what you do. Your plan ought to amplify any elements in other district plans that relate to or require communication (facilities plans, safety plans, program improvement plans, etc.).

7. Build a cadre of raving fans, endorsements and advocates

To keep from being a target surround yourself with allies who stand to lose something if you aren't there. Are there departments or programs that depend on your advice, skills and work to make their jobs easier and more effective? Gather endorsements, letters of commendation, a track record of awards, and supporters (parent, civic and staff leaders) who will stand up during the budget debates to advocate for communication. You are known by the company you keep. Let them speak for you!

8. Be output oriented, not process oriented

Do first things first. Take charge of your day, week, month and year. Keep a log of how you spend your day down to the minute. Compile a record of tasks and workload for a couple of typical weeks so decision-makers can see what you actually do. This helps in setting priorities and during budget debates, it lets other people see what they might have to absorb into their own workload if communication becomes "other duties as assigned." Don't just do things right, do the right things. In other words, focus on getting results. Now is the time to be hyper-productive.

9. Showcase how you impact the communicating culture and infrastructure of the district

Morale is a challenge when budgets are cut. Now is the time to show how you serve as the recognized facilitator, traffic manager, architect and trainer that improves the communication capabilities and maintains the communication network in your district. People feel worse about cutbacks when they feel out of the loop or disregarded. As the chief communications officer of your organization you play a positive role in maintaining open two-way communication with employees, parents and community leaders. You can help shore up morale and improve relationships during difficult decision-making.

10. Position your boss as a visionary leader

The shelf life of superintendents is getting shorter and shorter. The average superintendent in California stays in the job less than four years before retiring or moving on. In some respects, we face the same game of musical chairs with other administrative positions. Leadership matters a lot in public education. One of your indispensable roles is to be the bridge between the internal and external community and new leaders. You can become the valuable eyes and ears for a new leader and the strategic advisor that gives a practical reality check to a new superintendent trying to advance his or her agenda, vision, or plan for the school system.

In hard economic times, it would be unthinkable for a district to eliminate the chief business official, human resources director, or educational services assistant superintendent. They are seen as indispensable to the success and survival of the district. The chief communications professional needs to be seen in the same way. After all, who will be around to explain the budget reductions, and build awareness and understanding among stakeholder groups? Don't wait to be told what to do, get out in front of your superintendent with a planned approach to communicating during the budget debate. "Go to school on the budget" so you understand the key messages, formulas and issues. Position yourself as a crucial resource that promotes stakeholder support and buy-in for what the district must do to remain fiscally sound and educationally viable. In other words, make yourself indispensable!

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