

Communication Tips & Techniques

Breaking Bad News about Program Improvement

Tip #1 Break bad news yourself; don't let others break it on you

Be seen as the clearinghouse and steady drip-irrigation system of information on PI. Don't let the media or the informal word of mouth communication network dominate the flow of information. If reporters think they are discovering your PI status then they have a vested interest in preserving their investigative journalism reputation.

Tip #2 Be a Reputation Manager

NCLB is set up as a branding and sorting system. Never underestimate the negative effects on your district's long term reputation of being labeled underperforming. That becomes your "brand" in the educational marketplace if you let it. Communicate early and often to dominate what people know and believe about you in the context of Program Improvement. Magnetize your schools by portraying all of the ways students can succeed instead of letting parents linger on a "death watch" to see if they can transfer out of your schools.

Tip #3 Frame the discussion

The feds use the term "Program Improvement" to imply that your educational delivery system is a failure. In other words, your programs (and by inference the people who deliver them) don't work so you need to fix them. Don't fall into that trap. You got into PI status not because the whole system failed, but because some target groups of students within your schools aren't performing as they should. This is now an opportunity to show how you are mobilizing to use this diagnostic information to make sure they are brought up to speed. It is also an opportunity to educate the community about the needs and accomplishments of its public schools. Put PI in its proper place by communicating about all of the other ways you are succeeding with students. Seize the opportunity and be proactive.

Tip #4 Communicate from the inside out

If your employees don't have buy-in to your plan for responding to PI then they disengage and let it be the Principal's Problem or the District's Problem. They can't sell the program if they aren't sold on it themselves! Everyone needs to have the tools and motivation to be a Key Communicator on PI. Use e-newsletters and updates, web sites, and staff meetings to build internal awareness and support. Use the influential veterans to validate what you're saying and doing. They need to help you build enthusiasm and a sense of Personal Involvement, Personal Interest, and Professional Investment in Program Improvement.

Tip #5 PR = talking about Progress + Results

Public Relations is nothing more complicated than Performance (doing a good job) plus Recognition (getting credit for it). Get inside your data to show that you're taking PI seriously and using this to make data driven decisions that target resources, interventions and alternatives to lagging learners. Demonstrate "momentum" and report on progress that happened because you created a plan, implemented it and track your success.

Tip #6 Leave No Child Behind versus No Child Left Behind

The federal law is a regulatory scheme that tells locals what to do without being personally responsible for the outcome. Schools need to describe how they have always maintained focus on leaving no child behind. Catalog your options, alternatives, interventions, resource allocations, and staffing to demonstrate that you are putting your money where your mouth is when it comes to leaving no child behind.

Tip #7 PI is value added not a drain on the system

PI can be a very divisive thing if parents and staff perceive that it's "those kids or those schools" that are bringing us all down. That can be especially negative if staff or parents feel that their schools or children are being denied resources, time and attention because the district has focused on at-risk kids at their expense.

Tip #8 Use your web page as your wire service

Overhaul your district and school site web sites so that it is easy for parents and employees to track your progress on PI. There will be large segments of your educational community that may not have access to the Internet on a regular basis. Make sure you always have hard copies of posted materials and bulletins and have translated versions readily accessible. Be honest, be realistic, be comprehensive, be responsive and be positive.