

Colleague Roundtable: Strategies for Building Parent Advocates through Communications

WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE FOR? Hear from fellow Superintendent Dr. James Gray from the Jefferson Parish Schools in New Orleans as he shares his experiences with building parent advocates in his district.

What's the current state of parent engagement in your district?

- Depending on the population, we have huge gains in terms of support from parents around the communications we have in place. In other areas, it's almost tone-deaf. We are looking at all ways to get out information. We are trying to determine how to consistently do it, and that WE are not the issue in getting information out.
- During Covid - we over communicated and created new opportunities for the frequency of information. Now people believe there are no secrets in Jefferson Parrish. We will always give the truth and will not hide anything.
- When they understand the "why," it helps them to back off.

Diversity of district: What are some of the specific things you've done to improve engagement for a diverse parent base?

- Identify your advocates for each of the subgroups, then you will have a voice to speak for you when you're not there.
- We are viewed as "outsiders" by most, so it's important to find people in those communities that people trust, and have them advocate for us.

What are you hearing in terms of what parents need most post-pandemic?

- It varies, some want SEL and what we are doing in this space. Others are concerned about teacher shortages, community involvement, having more of a voice, and bus transportation.
- Our core values in what we are doing to educate kids are not a big concern for parents.
- They are paying attention to what we are doing, and they are giving us suggestions to mitigate situations.
- We are open and honest about our struggles and share what we are doing to mitigate these issues.
- It's really about being open and honest (for example, sending robocalls when buses aren't running).
- When they know we are doing absolutely all that we can regarding these issues, they are not at our throats.

What would you identify as two recommendations for colleagues grappling with parent engagement issues?

- Develop a system that does two things:
 - **Take advantage of EVERY outlet you have to get messaging out** (social media, robocalls, local news stations, superintendent councils, etc.) everybody doesn't have social media, so this shouldn't be the only channel you use. Also, make sure there is consistent messaging across all channels you use.
 - **Make sure you're being honest.** It's ok to be vulnerable, as long as you tell them, so

that you have a plan.

- We are working as a unit together to make our school system a better place for all stakeholders.
- Tell your success stories. Bombard them with information on what you are doing right so that they don't focus on the negative.
- The first hour of our board meetings is focused on celebrations.

Advice on parent engagement from colleagues

- Some parents don't like to read, so we are looking at social media and videos

What are you seeing in your district in terms of successes and challenges regarding parent engagement?

- We do a play on "TED Talks." Parents like this format better than reading. This format does work!
- We are trying to pull away from formats that we can't control.
- We offer in-person and virtual options (like Zoom). We have found parents are more engaged this way. Also, offer it at any time of the day.
- Utilize your communications team: Being strategic in how we communicate. We have a comms strategic plan to engage ALL stakeholders to make sure we don't have any gaps in our communication.
- A Communications Team or Dept. is essential...even in a small district
- We have some parents that challenge EVERYTHING (policy, mask requirements, etc.) how can we mitigate and communicate with parents whose motivation is not informational?
 - For People who oppose our position, the first thing we do is educate them to explain the "why." This helps take away any argument they may have. The goal is not to embarrass them but help them draw the conclusion that there is a purpose to why we are doing something.
 - Goal: Help them understand the why. Allow them to leave with their dignity. This will help them to back off.
 - For those that still choose to continue, this is now beyond your control.
 - Leverage the people that are supporting the work you are doing.
 - Consider assigning a specific person to be the "go-to" for those people. That person's job is to build a relationship with them, build trust, and let them be heard.
- I feel pushback from teachers on post-pandemic and burnout. How do I get those who are in the trenches more engaged with parents?
 - We've encouraged proactive communication to build relationships so that IF/WHEN things get hard and there is a need to communicate, their relationship is built. We give teachers communications tools to help them with this outreach. Set a weekly goal of reaching out to 5 parents. Providing teachers with sentence stems. Reach out with good news.
 - We focus on how to build the social/emotional well-being of teachers so that they feel good and are ok before we ask them to reach out to someone else/contact a parent. We have an SEL coordinator that plans activities for staff and goes into their classroom to help develop tools.
 - Eliminate all the other barriers that are creating trauma for your teachers. Get your teachers in a positive space, this will help them transition back to "normal."
 - Protect teachers from "energy vampires," those who suck the energy out of the room.
 - It's ok for the superintendent to need some social-emotional support as well.