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District communication on a shoestring budget

Dr. Joe Clark, superintendent, Nordonia Hills City

I became interim superintendent of **Nordonia Hills City** on Nov. 1, 2011, promoted from my assistant superintendent position after the sitting superintendent retired abruptly.

The school district was struggling, to say the least. We had lost our past five levy attempts, more than 100 jobs had been cut and our finances had us on the verge of state receivership.

As often happens when levies fail and employees and programs are cut, our community started to become vocal. The community loved our schools and our teachers, but they were upset about a lack of transparency and communication among school administration. In a word, they no longer trusted the leaders charged with educating their children.

Fortunately, a levy passed that November. Unfortunately, the millage was only enough to stop our bleeding; it was not enough to restore cut programs or employees, including our public information officer, who had been in charge of efforts to engage and build relationships with the community.

My interim tag was removed a month later, and I knew

immediately that my top priority was to re-earn the community's trust through communication, visibility and transparency. With a limited budget and limited staff, I knew we were going to have to do this in creative ways.

Tapping the power of Twitter

The very first directive I gave to Nordonia principals when I became superintendent was to become active on Twitter. Twitter is a free social media tool that allows anyone, including school leaders, to share all sorts of information.

I had started a Twitter account myself several months earlier when my district was in the midst of its financial struggles. I began reading letters to the editor suggesting that the assistant superintendent position was superfluous and should be cut. Being the assistant superintendent, and knowing how valuable I was to the school district, I decided to start tweeting to let people know all of the work I did. I used Twitter to show the long hours I was working and the many duties I had.

Ironically, my plan did not work. When I became superintendent, the board eliminated the assistant superintendent position, and I continue to do the work of both offices to this day. However, getting involved with Twitter showed me what a valuable tool it was. Hence my directive to principals to start an account.

Principals and I use Twitter multiple times daily to relay news about events happening in our buildings, share articles related to education, brag about great teachers and students, and give the community a brief glimpse into our personal lives. We do not tweet about arguments we have with our spouses, of course, but we do want the community to know that we are human beings, we have families and we are not just stuffed shirts sitting in ivory towers. Twitter makes us seem real and approachable, and the community loves it.

Twitter also has been a great tool for sharing emergency news, like calamity days. On calamity days, I often ask students to tweet me pictures of the books they are reading, and I choose someone at random to win a small prize (maybe a \$10 Chipotle gift card, for example). Once I asked students to create YouTube videos showing why they love



Nordonia Hills City Superintendent Dr. Joe Clark, left, and Nordonia High School senior Stephen Romanik appear on the district's "Network Nordonia" cable TV show. Romanik was on the show to talk about winning the 2014 Division I state diving championship.

Nordonia schools. These activities keep me engaged with our students, and parents love seeing the interaction. It has done immeasurable good for our district's image. And, of course, Twitter is free.

Superintendents and principals should be on Twitter now. If you do not have experience with Twitter, my advice is start small. Try to post one tweet a day, and keep it positive. Follow some of the great education leaders who are on Twitter, engage in some chats and soon you will see your followers grow and the tool become increasingly valuable to you and your district.

Incidentally, you can follow me on Twitter at @DrJoeClark.

Key communicators

The next major initiative I undertook was the creation of the Nordonia Key Communicators program. You may remember **Jamie Vollmer**, author of *Schools Cannot Do It Alone*, speaking at the OSBA Capital Conference a few years ago. Vollmer's book provides a very prescriptive approach to engaging the community in meaningful dialogue about the changes we need to make in education. I modified the framework of Vollmer's structure to create a way to rebuild communication, transparency and trust in Nordonia schools.

District administrators and I brainstormed a list of more than 130 recognized leaders in our community. These were elected officials; presidents of PTAs and booster clubs; leaders of community organizations; ministers; and so forth. They represented civic clubs, churches, municipalities, homeowners associations and more. I mailed a personal invitation to each of these folks inviting them to become one of my key communicators. I then followed up with emails and phone calls.

I asked the key communicators to do two things. First, I added each person to an email list in which I send them timely information about the district. This is to maintain transparency and give our community leaders facts about the school district. As leaders of community organizations, they meet with community members often. Sending timely information to the key communicators enables them to clarify rumors that their constituents hear about the district. Generally, almost every bit of information I send to the key communicators is then placed on our district website.

Anytime something happens in the district that I think will be a topic of conversation in the community or make the news, I share the facts with my key communicators. This has included the sale of land, an electrical fire on a bus, a student bringing a toy gun to school and more. I share the facts with the key communicators and they share the facts with their constituents, keeping the majority of the community in the loop.

Second, I asked each key communicator to invite me to a

meeting of their group, not for me to talk, but to listen. I called these my "three questions meetings." As the name implies, I went to each group to ask three simple questions: What do you like about Nordonia schools? How can the schools improve? What do you expect of your new superintendent?

I held many meetings and it took a lot of time. But I used the data collected from my three questions meetings to help build our new five-year strategic plan, and I am confident our plan focuses on issues that are important to the community.

My key communicator program has been an overwhelming success and all it cost me was a few stamps.



Superintendent Dr. Joe Clark sits on the set of "Network Nordonia" with Dr. Deborah Wallace, Nordonia High School community intervention coordinator, center, and Staci Ross, the school's guidance department chair. The TV show is one of many innovative ways the district communicates with its community.

The local newspaper

Many school districts have small local papers that are understaffed and begging for news. Nordonia is no different. Upon becoming superintendent, I asked the editor of our local paper, *The Nordonia Hills News Leader*, if I could write a monthly column. He was more than happy to oblige. Indeed, we were doing each other a favor.

I am extremely grateful to editor **Eric Marotta** for giving me the valuable space to help keep my community informed of significant issues or programs affecting schools. Rest assured, I do not use the space to campaign for levies or pontificate about the need for more money. This purpose of the column simply is to provide information about various school programs and legislation that affects schools.

If you have a small local paper, reach out to it to see if you can get some space. We know from survey data in Nordonia

that the vast majority of our community, 80% of whom do not have kids in the schools, get their information from the paper. It is a wonderful tool, and what does it cost me? Nothing.

To see some sample columns, please search at www.the-news-leader.com.

Community cable TV channels

We also are very fortunate in Nordonias to have a local cable channel, Cable 9 (which ironically airs on channel 15). Each month, I record a 28-minute show called “Network Nordonias,” in which I invite a guest or two to discuss various aspects of our school district. Guests have included principals, teachers, counselors, central office administrators and students. We talk about changes related to the Common Core and special education. We discuss the upcoming sports season. We have talked to parents about how to discuss drugs with kids. And the highlight show every year is our “Senior Showcase,” in which five graduating seniors talk about their positive experiences with the schools.

If you have a local cable channel in your area, contact it to see if you can create your own show. If you do not have a local cable channel, record your own show and put it on your district website. It is another way for you to reach your

community. And it is free.

To see some sample “Network Nordonias” episodes, please search at www.cable9.org.

Not communicating is not an option

As the district’s educational leader, I must ensure the entire community engages in the educational process. Community engagement is more than parents attending open houses and fans coming to football games on Friday nights. Having true community engagement means leading the discussion about the purpose of education and the vision the community has for its schools.

Not having a public relations person on staff or not having money for glamorous newsletters is no excuse for not communicating. There are many ways for you to communicate with your public for free. Get on Twitter. Start a key communicator group. Write a newspaper column. Create a TV show. All of these tools will increase your visibility, transparency and trust with your community.

And they won’t cost you a cent. ■

Editor’s note: To learn more, contact Dr. Joe Clark at (330) 908-6202 or joe.clark@nordoniaschools.org.



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