Keeping Community Stakeholders Informed About the Rationale for Program Changes

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Communication is the key element in much of education. Gathering input and utilizing the information to help educators understand community perceptions is a vehicle that has long been underutilized in schools. This article will examine the historical perspectives of involvement and communication and provide concrete suggestions for keeping all stakeholders informed about the continually changing landscape of education. The authors use communication about Common Core State Standards as an example for keeping stakeholders informed about school change.

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A historical perspective of Community Involvement in Schools

In the long tradition of public education in the United States, community involvement has been largely superficial and more geared to volunteering in schools, supporting bond referendums, and providing a fund-raising mechanism to support enhancements to the school's programs. In addition, true community involvement has been perceived to be intrusive and often counter-productive to the purpose of the schools. There were, in the past, limited communication tools that did not allow for the instantaneous communication which we take for granted today. School newsletters and occasional articles in local newspapers provided some information and afforded some level of community support and perceived involvement in its schools.

The need for Community Support = Effective Communication

Community support and involvement are more critically needed in education today than ever before. With the incredible array of technology avenues available today, there is really little excuse for not being maintaining a higher level of communication with all of the educational communities' stakeholders and providing avenues for greater levels of involvement in the total educational program. In addition, it is important to note that schools are in need of much more proactive and overt support and involvement by their local communities, if education is going to continue to progress and provide appropriate learning opportunities for 21st century students.

Dealing with a more sophisticated community

To achieve that end result, schools are going to have to recognize that the level of community sophistication is much higher today than in the past. The immediacy of information, both factual and false, affords schools with a much greater challenge than in the past; countering misinformation and providing transparency are very worthy goals if schools wish to capitalize on the higher level of education and desire for a meaningful and relevant education for students as a means of achieving not only greater involvement but a much higher level of overall support.

Higher Expectations

The bar is being raised by local, state, national and global constituencies. Students need a higher level of overall skills if they are to succeed in the complex world today and in the future. Living

in a technologically more complex world, students also need increasingly higher levels of technology competence as well as the skills needed to be actively engaged in the areas of both problem solving and critical thinking. The common core movement holds the promise of meeting the demand for increased levels of learning at higher levels if it holds to its overarching goals of greater in depth learning and then its application to real world situations. To that end, schools must also react to the demand of the world of work for employees with higher skill levels; such a demand may also bring a greater collaboration between education and business.

Countering the Fear Mongers of Common Core

A critical element in the entire common core implementation initiative is educating the larger community so that those who irrationally oppose the common core with continued misinformation and who continue to create an atmosphere of fear surrounding its implementation may be circumvented. Ironically, these same naysayers were conspicuously absent during the heavy-handed implementation of No Child Left Behind, arguably the most intrusive incursion by the federal government into the state and local arenas of education in the history of our country. Far from being a government takeover, the common core movement actually affords more autonomy to states and local school districts in using the new standards as a catalyst to create new generations of critical thinkers and problem solvers equipped with the skills to successfully navigate the 21st century.

However, this implementation cannot effectively become a reality without providing an unprecedented level of communication, not only within the local school community, but at all levels in the total community as well. Unless an intentional effort is mounted, the common core

implementation will continue to face an onslaught of negative criticism that will hamper its

incorporation into the educational programs of school districts throughout the country.

What the Common Core and its attendant program changes mean for Students, Parents and Community

Simply stated, the common core initiative is a new opportunity to do the right thing for students,

to equip them with the necessary skills to succeed in both college and career while assist them in

learning at higher levels and in greater depth than ever before. Already, teachers and

administrators are working diligently to create the framework for the successful integration of

the new standards into the very fabric of the school program. There is, perhaps for the first time,

responsibility for the standards across all subject areas which should incredibly reinforce them in

the minds and learning activities of all students.

Parents will have fewer concerns and will elicit greater support of this effort, once the results

begin to emerge. Parents want the best educational opportunities for their students; if

implemented correctly, common core should assist in accomplishing this goal. However, much

will depend upon the ability of the individual school community to clearly communicate

progress with parents and to allow them new opportunities for involvement in the common core

effort.

Communities will ultimately reap the benefit of the common core movement; better prepared

workers ready to deal with complexities of civic involvement and the greater demands of the

world of work in this century. Such progress should allay concerns which have been continually

expressed by the business community regarding the lack of preparation of today's students for the world of work.

Using technology to convey the message

Technology can be an incredible key to conveying the elements of common core implementation and the potential for students both today and tomorrow. Continuous updates can be provided by email, Facebook and other social media vehicles, school web sites, text messages as well as the traditional newsletters. A recurring mantra in education has been that we need to find ways to work smarter and not just harder. Technology can be an incredibly effective tool to allow for feedback as the common core initiative moves forward. In addition, blogs and other types of discussion forums can keep educators apprised of concerns as they occur and will give them the opportunity to respond in a short time frame. Living in an era of immediate communication, schools must adopt this approach to keep stakeholders at all levels in the loop and updated. Effectively doing so will create unprecedented levels of information sharing and could lead to higher levels of support for schools.

Countering the current lack of information – Gallup Poll Results

One area in which schools and districts must become more proactive is providing both their school communities and the larger community with pertinent information regarding the Common Core State Standards. As indicated in a report by Lesli A. Maxwell in *Education Week*, August 21, 2013, the most recent poll conducted by Phi Delta Kappa and Gallup indicated that "nearly two out of three Americans have never heard of the Common Core State Standards, and

among those who have, fewer than half believe the new, more rigorous academic goals in

English/language arts and mathematics adopted by all but four states so far will make the United

States more competitive in the world…". However, 95 percent of those surveyed felt that schools

should focus on teaching critical-thinking skills, one of the key elements of the common

core framework. Sixty-two percent of the respondents had never heard of the common core;

more alarming, fifty-five percent of parents surveyed knew nothing about the new academic

standards, even though many districts have already begun to transition from

No Child Left Behind to the new standards and are in the process of implementing them in a

number of classrooms. This lack of information is compounded by a significant level of

misinformation regarding the standards that is being circulated by a number of entities. Deborah

A. Gist, the Commissioner of Education in Rhode Island, indicated that this might be a greater

issue for schools to combat, particularly in light of the fact that factual information regarding the

standards was not readily available for patrons and community members. She pointed out in the

report that it was the federal government which had forced states to adopt the standards, which

has definitely been the case. "That's what we particularly need to address," Ms. Gist said.

"There is so much misinformation out there that it could be problematic for us to carry this

through. I think these results are a message to us that we need to engage our families much more

in this transition," she further indicated (Maxwell).

Establishing frequent communication regarding program updates

Schools have an opportunity to regularly update patrons regarding program changes as they

occur, providing stakeholders with a more relevant and accurate frame of reference regarding the

total school program. Such a venture will also communicate that school staffs are involved in an incredible array of curriculum related activities that reach well beyond the obvious teaching and learning activities which occur in classrooms every day. Communities will gain a much broader perspective regarding the amount of work it takes to move the total education program forward, resulting in clearly better and more relevant learning experiences for all students.

Professional Perspectives

The following perspectives from K-12th grade teachers indicate how they communicate with parents/guardians and stakeholders about Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The main aspect that all 35 teachers agreed on was the importance of communication regarding the value of these standards. These teachers also emphatically stated they inform their stakeholders that this is not a federal program. The teachers interviewed want parents to know that CCSS were developed in collaboration with teachers, content experts, and state educational leaders. Aimee F. wrote, "I tell parents that the Common Core initiative is a state-led effort to standardize the content students learn throughout their primary and secondary years in school, wherever they may be in the United States. It is not a federal program, nor is it federally mandated, and adoption is decided by each of the states."   Helen W. explains to parents "that the standards are not a national curriculum but simply standards for what a student should be able to know and do at each grade level". Trish commented, "I fear what education would look like if there were no standards. On that note, however, I would encourage parents to look at both the federal standards and the state standards where they live. I believe parents should be involved in board meetings and research the textbooks their children will be getting. When parents are involved,

[the] level of expectations are raised and hopefully a team approach can be taken where the child benefits."

Angie K. said, "I would emphasize that the standards are only guidelines teachers use with their curriculum to make sure students are being taught the same skills at each level, so no matter where a student goes to school, he/she will develop those skills. A student should be able to move to a new school and not worry about developing gaps in education." Megan N. commented, "I would tell a parent that the Common Core is a way to keep education organized so that we know what students are expected to know throughout each grade and what we, as teachers, are expected to teach them and assess them over."

Several teachers informed stakeholders that CCSS doesn't dictate how they are to teach. Jocelyn C. tells stakeholders, "Teachers are not being mandated what we should teach, how we should teach it, and when we should teach it. The standards create more uniformity from district to district and state to state for students who move from school to school."

Another point these teachers make is to assure parents or guardians that the standards are high quality and designed to make students think. Kimberly J. said, "What I generally tell parents is that the CCSS are preparing students to become thinkers and learn to evaluate their response to determine if their answer is reasonable. The biggest concern parents come to me about is they think we're trying to teach kids to do a million things to solve a simple math problem. I've had to dispel that belief several times. I do show them how we are encouraging students to engage in deeper thinking and how we are diving deeper in the curriculum instead of panning on the surface." Jocelyn C. tells parents, "We need to increase the level of rigor in our schools, and these standards are a step in the right direction." Megan N. added, "Students are not only asked

to know the information, but they actually have to understand the information and be able to EXPLAIN and DEFEND their answers. This is a great skill to have in life and to better understand their learning."

Many of these teachers thought it was important to ask stakeholders if they read the CCSS and have them go to www.corestandards.org site so they can see the standards for themselves. Sarah V. is one of the teachers that encourages family members to visit the site "to help the individual gain factual knowledge." Sarah indicated she has been approached by community members, parents, and family members with criticism of the Common Core Standards. She said, "As with all things much of the criticism comes from lack of understanding. Many of the myths or attacks on the Common Core are the exact opposite of the truth."

Kimberly J. said her school district works to educate the parents and community and "keep them informed about how the CCSS are preparing students for success from kindergarten through the student's senior year." Parents are encouraged to come and sit in on classes and participate in the discussions and lessons.

Overall, the teachers interviewed recognized the power of communication and education to help parents, guardians, and stakeholders understand the value of Common Core State Standards. Several teachers send out letters to parents/guardians explaining how they use Common Core Standards in their classrooms. There will be misconceptions about CCSS unless schools make an effort to inform the public. When community stakeholders are included in educational changes, the chance of successful implementation is higher.

The result – support of and Commitment to the Common Core

The result of the recommendations contained in this article should be a heightened level of support of and commitment to the common core initiative as a means to elevating student learning in the 21st century. A singular fact about education is this – education remains one of the enterprises that is constantly a work in progress; a venue whose work is never finished but always moving toward higher levels of teaching and learning, of thinking and applying, engaging and reflecting. It is our fervent hope that the common core movement will be a springboard for education in the 21st century as we move our students to unprecedented levels of learning and career preparation. Through common sense application, common core will succeed in ways that our country has never seen and yield results that will benefit local communities, states, and our country as a whole. An Wang's quote may sum up the effort best: "Success is more a function of consistent common sense than it is of genius."

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