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Practical PR: Engage elected officials, leaders to build support for schools

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Connecting with stakeholders and fostering strong relationships within a school community are important for all school districts.

In Consolidated High School District 230 — three large suburban high schools that serve 156,000 residents, 65,000 households, 8,500 students, 11 municipalities, six partner school districts and multiple legislative districts — one of the ways that challenge is best met is by engaging liaisons within the community.

Through its collaborative goal-setting process, the District 230 school board and administration chose to engage elected officials and leaders from each of its high school attendance areas. The purpose was to share achievements and challenges, listen to feedback and seek support in maintaining high quality learning for all students.

District 230 held three "Community Connections" events — one in each high school — and invited elected officials and leaders from the host school's attendance area. This included school board members, superintendents and principals from partner districts, community college leaders, mayors, municipal boards, police and fire chiefs, county officials, and state legislators. Segmenting the events by high school community resulted in meetings of 35 to 45 participants, instead of groups of more than 100 if organized district-wide. Personal contact by school board members, following mailed invitations, proved successful in engaging elected officials. Turnout included nearly 100 percent representation from governmental units and agencies.

A 90-minute presentation was prepared to maintain consistency across each of the three events:

Introductions by each participant, including a personal connection to the host school or district;

An overview by the school board president including geographic boundaries, school enrollments, collaborative goal-setting processes, and financial highlights;

A spotlight by the superintendent, focused on academic accomplishments, social and emotional learning programs, and communication and engagement efforts;

A presentation by the host school principal and student leaders, featuring student, staff and alumni highlights, and a virtual tour of the school;

Musical performances by students; and

Time for leaders and students to interact informally, share stories and ask questions.

School leaders quickly found that while most of the attendees — or a spouse, child or grandchild — had attended one of the high schools, many had not been inside the school in years, or decades in some cases. They were impressed with the quality of school facilities, the maturity and talent of the students, and the breadth and variety of academic and co-curricular offerings.

After seeing the school firsthand and learning about the accomplishments and challenges, attendees were prepared to share what they heard with their constituents, many of whom do not have children in school.

Each participant was asked to complete an exit slip to provide feedback on the event, to volunteer for school programs, to join the district's email list and to support the district as it faces the challenges ahead.

The success of Community Connections is evident in the support shown at subsequent town hall meetings related to legislative issues, through involvement in school programs, and in the expanded reach of district communications. Community Connections opened the door to future collaboration and support.

Ultimately, attendees agreed that schools are a centerpiece of the community. Successful schools attract and retain residents and businesses, prepare the future workforce and citizens, and are a key to the success of municipalities, counties, the state, and our country.

The seating of new officials following local elections provides a great reason to host similar events. Veteran and newly elected officials have an opportunity to interact across the community, learn about the successes and challenges of each district, and become liaisons for schools, staff and students.

For more information about public engagement, including examples from districts around the country, check out the National School Public Relations Association's resources at nspra.org/public_engagement(Opens in a new window). Also, make sure your district's communications professional is a member of both the national NSPRA (www.nspra.org) and local INSPRA (www.inspra.org(Opens in a new window)) organizations.

IASB offers school board members opportunities for community engagement education. To learn more, start here: www.iasb.com/training/connecting.cfm.