

edfocus

Urban School District Communications

Today's world is inundated with information. The challenge for urban school districts is how to translate it in ways that speak to distinct constituencies and provide clear avenues for partnership in the work. In Hartford, many issues complicate the task of district communications, but none is insurmountable. In this first issue, we examine ways to improve communications here in Hartford, from the perspective of the external observer.



WHY THIS LENS? Since 2008, Achieve Hartford! has been the independent voice for school improvement in CT's capital city. This new **edfocus** publication is our way of serving as a constructive friend in public education, shining a fact-based spotlight on the status of a particular issue that all stakeholders deem critical to improving education. By providing the **context** for the issue, assessing its current **status**, identifying local and national **best practices** where available, and offering targeted **recommendations** for action, we hope to add value and drive accountability for producing positive outcomes for the 23,000 students and their families in Hartford.



BACKGROUND

► *Portfolio District Reform Strategy*

Hartford Public Schools (HPS) has been refining a portfolio reform approach for the past eight years. This framework, being implemented in dozens of cities across the country, is based on seven tenets: a system of choice, school autonomy, student-based budgeting, talent-seeking strategy, tailored supports and resources for schools, performance-based accountability and extensive public engagement. The influence that the portfolio approach has on financing, staffing, curriculum and community partnerships at the district and school levels cannot be overstated. This is why explaining any significant changes, not as random decisions, but as part of a comprehensive and integrated strategy, has been and continues to be important (and very cogently explored in a December 2013 publication of the Center for Reinventing Public Education found at: <http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/PortfolioSpotlight2-pr.pdf>.)

► *A Rapidly Changing National and State Landscape*

Change is a constant force in education, especially in Connecticut and in the past three years. The advent of the Alliance District, Commissioner's Network and Teacher Evaluation strategies instituted

by the State, along with the Common Core State Standards and new related student assessments, make for great confusion for the layperson attempting to understand the real meaning and purpose of the shifts.

►► *Easy Access to Misinformation*

In our digital age, there is an abundance of sources: Local news outlets, blogs, tweets, Facebook pages and carefully constructed and politically driven communications campaigns instantly provide false or only partially true information to large numbers of people. These tools, when layered upon a history of mistrust, can result in confusion and work against improving our education system.

►► *Long History of Dysfunction in the Education System*

Hartford has at least a quarter-century history of dysfunction in its education system, including a lack of superintendent stability, a state takeover, and numerous failed reform efforts and promises. These have all fed into a deep and generational mistrust of HPS (including the Board of Education) within Hartford's neighborhoods, which still maintain a largely held belief that things will never change for their neighborhood schools.

Within such a challenging context, communications for HPS should not be a transactional afterthought, as a postscript to the real work, but should be integrated strategically into planning, decision-making and implementation at both the district and school levels. Let's look at progress so far.

Achieve Hartford! was founded in 2008 by the business community to build a culture of education excellence among families, communities, and schools in Connecticut's capital city. As an education advocacy organization, Achieve Hartford!, serves more than 23,000 students and families throughout the city. Through conducting independent research, evaluation, and engaging the community, Achieve Hartford! creates urgency and shared responsibility for closing the educational achievement gap in Hartford. Visit achievehartford.org. Join us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/AchieveHartford. Follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AchieveHartford.



PROGRESS REPORT

The Center for Reinventing Public Education recommends portfolio districts fulfill four steps to ensure effective communications:

- 1) Hire a professional firm; 2) Develop an achievable plan; 3) Pay attention to communication pathways; and
- 4) Anticipate opposition.

HPS has accomplished the first two of these through its Communications Planning last year, which culminated in a presentation to the Board of Education on October 22, 2013. However, it is not clear where the implementation of this plan stands and what actions have been taken since the board presentation.

As part of that **communications plan**, the district outlined three objectives in the areas of **systems, message** and **contact**. Below, we explore how effectively the district has performed in these three areas in recent memory, followed by targeted recommendations for improvement:

1 ►► *Systems: Establish systems that support open and consistent communications*

This is clearly the weakest area of the

district. Shortly after the communications plan was presented to the Board of Education, a series of sudden announcements about major changes that were being proposed for John C. Clark School and America's Choice at SAND were made without much parent, community or partner involvement. The result? Flash firestorms of often inaccurate basis – and negative perception, both in regard to the merits of the proposed changes and to the overall competency of the school district.

These announcements added to the recent track record of major changes proposed without communications planning at MLK, Weaver, Milner, Betances, Adult Ed, and Global Communications schools. All were disseminated without adequate family, community and, at times, Board of Education involvement. In these instances, the community was forced to communicate directly with the District during the public testimony portion of Board of Education meetings, where a focus on the merits of the proposed changes was replaced by a focus on poor process. The only way to prevent more of this from happening is to institute stronger systems that raise the level of importance for communications within HPS central office – and that force more coordination and consistency. On page 4, we offer recommendations to smooth that path.

2 ► Message: Strengthen interest and support for HPS and its work

HPS has put a great deal of effort into messaging approaches aimed to elicit more support for schools and the school district. In the past two years, a major re-branding campaign has been implemented including an updated website and online and print materials. Newsletters highlight activities and successes at the student, teacher, school and district level – albeit inconsistently. The School Choice office has done a great deal of work in promoting better understanding of school options and the choice process itself. Activities have included improved online and print materials, training and outreach, and developing a cadre of well-trained and deployed staff. The quality and timing of community-wide choice events, evidenced by the well-attended January 2014 Education Expo at Hartford High, is a good example.

All that being said, the district has done a poor job overall at communicating what it means to be a portfolio district, the expected path and pace of reform, where we have come from, where we are and where we are going. Since the community has a history of turmoil and no roadmap outlining upcoming changes, it is easy for every proposed school change to come as a surprise to parents, students, communities and even teachers. This sets up a defensive dynamic in the community that slows the pace of school improvement.

At the start of the reform, the District did a better job of projecting the number of schools expected to reach specific outcomes by a specific time and clearly articulated the actions that would be taken if and when milestones were not met. This communication early on was critical to building support for change – sometimes very disruptive change. While school redesigns (restitutions) have lessened and change has become less disruptive in the past few years, the communications strategy has not evolved to keep stakeholders primed for change when it is proposed.

3 ► Contact: Improve communications efficiency and responsiveness

The district has created some good tools and structures, such as a new website and new offices for the Welcome Center, which have improved efficiency and responsiveness. In addition, standing task forces on school choice and family engagement have the power to drastically improve responsiveness to community concerns if used consistently.

That being said, responsiveness is not solely based on the way in which the district handles a concern; proactive anticipation and effective follow up on systemic issues also are critical. For example, the Family Engagement Taskforce report was presented at the June 2013 Board of Education meeting – nearly one year ago – but the status of implementation is yet unknown to the public. Parent Portal, which provides parents access to the Power School database to monitor student grades and attendance and improve communication with teachers, is an important piece of the Family Engagement Taskforce strategy; yet, the public has not been told about what percentage of parents access this tool regularly.



RECOMMENDATIONS

It is critical that the whole of urban district communication be well-understood as part of the larger work of managing change in a city, and that the Board of Education, school district and each school collectively own and take responsibility for it. Below, we outline six strategies that, if implemented, could help Hartford Public Schools get communications right – something few urban districts in the country have been able to accomplish.



1 ► Ensure Necessary Supports for Implementation of the Communications Plan

- Engage school-based staff, community advocates, families and even students as partners in the launch and early implementation of the plan.
- Ensure the adequacy of funding to support ongoing implementation of the communications plan.

2 ► Advance a Culture of Open and Honest Communications

- With a proposed tagline of “Making and Keeping Promises,” the district must be careful not to over-promise. As such, the current state of the school district should be framed in terms of the various types of school strategies – and their level of success to date. This will help stakeholders make sense of how a school district can have schools that are

among both the highest performing and lowest performing in the state.

- Talk purposefully about the relationship between school performance and neighborhood poverty as a way of building an understanding of the degree of difficulty involved in school turnaround work, and building community ownership in the work.
- The community is not looking for a verbal guarantee of school improvement from district staff, so district representatives should talk openly about both progress and the lack thereof without sugarcoating. This will help build the trust that is necessary for the community to actively engage in supporting school improvement efforts.

3 ► Hire District Staff and Protect Key Staff Positions

- Hire staff with grassroots community outreach experience and include their perspective at all key meetings. Knowledgeable staff relaying lost voices can help HPS be sensitive to and re-connect with those who are disaffected and deeply suspicious.
- Make the Family Resource Aide and Family Support Service Provider positions sacred; ensure their skills are used by school principals to promote the value of education and the importance of parents' roles, and provide FRAs and FSSPs with the training and supports necessary to be effective.

4 ► Utilize Deeper Community Pathways and Partners

- Instead of relying on monthly Board of Education meetings as the primary vehicle to inform the community of key initiatives and issues, identify more effective methods for disseminating information through the use – and evaluation – of neighborhood newspapers, public TV, radio, YouTube, text messaging, etc.
- Identify a team of community partners who can not only help disseminate information, but also solicit feedback on key district initiatives from deep within the community and act as

advisors to HPS whenever community engagement is needed.

- At chronically low-performing schools, institute a new annual communication between schools and their communities that requires school leadership to publicly showcase the progress made the year before and share the plan for strategic changes next year. This will help bring school improvement out of the shadows and push awareness far beyond the school governance council – which lacks a clear communication mandate itself.
- Utilize Board of Education committees to solicit honest feedback from the community on how good a job the district has done with implementation of key initiatives.

5 ► Prioritize Time for Key Updates

- Reserve three Board of Education workshops per year to simply update the Board of Ed and general community on the status of previously adopted strategic plans; this will directly combat the perception that district plans don't ever amount to real change.
- In the Greater Hartford region, where the *Sheff v. O'Neill* desegregation case is central to the past, present and future success of thousands of students, communications about the results of negotiations each year are sparse. A more cogent public outreach effort here is very badly needed, not just to illuminate new choice options for parents and students each year, but to overcome the myths surrounding the impacts of *Sheff*.

6 ► Anticipate Opposition and Unfamiliarity

- Despite almost a decade of systemic school reform in Hartford, local State Representatives, City Council and even members of the Board of Education are still unfamiliar with the district's innovative practices in the areas of budgeting, teacher evaluation, blended learning, etc. As such, all major communications should include

a concise explanation and compelling rationale for why things are done the way they are. This will build familiarity and prevent opposition from growing out of misunderstanding.

- While anticipating opposition can add a layer of planning in all major communications efforts, the ability of HPS leadership to demonstrate sensitivity to community concerns – by either involving opponents to a proposed change in the planning process or messaging the change in a way that is most convincing to those in opposition – will go a long way toward building broad public support for the reform, despite the inevitable opposition that will exist on particular issues.

CONCLUSION

While major headway has been made in turning around the perception of HPS in the community, progress continues in fits and starts, hobbled by ineffective communications. We believe communications will be one of the most critical factors to making the next phase of the reform successful. Continuing to overlook its importance puts Hartford in the position of repeating a history of not bringing the community along and squandering opportunities to build trust.

While the district is the locus of specialists best qualified to assess and implement educational models, parents and communities are the experts on their children and their neighborhoods. This expertise must be seen as an asset to closing the achievement gap, and every effort must be made to tap this resource so that two-way communications can become a reality instead of rhetoric.

“Making Promises...Keeping Promises” is a tall order; a culture of customer service-and honest communications committed to children's futures can make it achievable.