

## Engage your community as partners in education

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For generations, this nation has been emphatic in its support of the public school system and the quality of education being delivered to all students. It is important for school districts, parents and community to be partners in the efforts to raise and educate tomorrow's adults.

Using this as our guide, Springfield Public School District leadership began a public engagement process that brought parents, students, staff members and business leaders together to discuss and plan the future of the school district.

During the course of a nine-month period, citizens met and heard presentations concerning district issues such as finances, school safety, teacher recruitment and curriculum. Following the presentations, participants debated the topic and arrived at a consensus concerning a topical question. Community chairs presented a core set of values to the Board of Education that became a blueprint for creating the district strategic plan. Committee members are now taking those core values and writing specific action plans the district will implement in the fall of 2005.

The successes of public engagement to the district and community are as follows.

1. Community participants gained a sense of ownership in the work of the district while developing a better understanding of school district issues and operations.
2. The district now has a community-defined blueprint from which to work with defined public values relative to their school district.
3. The process brought together public and district efforts that have important and necessary value in building a consensual strategic plan for Springfield Public School's future growth and success.
4. The district engaged over 1,500 community people in discussions about their school district during meetings.
5. Members of the media covered all public meetings enabling our message to be read, seen and heard through newspaper, television and radio.

Because of our efforts, community volunteering has increased in our schools, community organizations have reached out and initiated partnerships with the district, and community members have indicated that they think the district is moving in the right direction. Today everyone is reaching for one shared goal: improved student achievement.

### Tips & Tactics

Mark your calendars now!

- *Friday, December 10*  
**Idea Sharing**
- *Friday, January 21*  
**Media Relations**
- *Friday, February 18*  
**New Superintendents**
- *Friday, March 11*  
**Internal Communications**
- *Friday, April 15*  
**Avoiding Burnout**

Tips & Tactics are held at Aramark Corporation in Downers Grove.

**NSPRA's Annual National Convention**  
*July 9-12, 2006*  
*Chicago*

## TOP 10

Here's a sample of PR tips you might hear more about at the December Tips & Tactics workshop. Don't miss top tips from PR pros on what works and what doesn't work in the world of school public relations.

### Fax Cover Sheets Communicate

Most fax cover sheets have a great deal of unused space. Turn yours into a communication vehicle that promotes your school. Start a column headed "What's Right with (insert your school's name)" and briefly show student awards, staff achievements and other successes. Change the listing at least monthly.

### Start a Wall of Fame

Create a place in your school where successful graduates are recognized. Include their photo, the year they graduated and a short description of their accomplishments. Be sure the "wall" is in a prominent place where visitors to the school will see it.

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# Top tips that work for schools

## Let Students Demonstrate Their Computer Skills

Create a program where your students can teach senior citizens computing skills. E-mail can help seniors keep in touch with their families and the world, but many of them aren't confident using computers. Your students can teach them the basic skills. Students might also play computer games with seniors and write them occasionally. Let seniors know that the school can serve them.

## Web Site Dark Rooms

If your school has a web site, you may want to consider a tactic used by some larger companies. Large companies will often set up a separate web site for crisis situations. They call these "dark sites" and they prepare these sites by creating pages with information that will generally be relevant and requested during any crisis (key contact information, company information, company safety records, etc.). Then when a crisis occurs, they simply add the information specific to that crisis. They then can disseminate their web site URL to the media and public.

## Use Board Meetings as Positive Forums

At each Board of Education meeting, plan ways to exhibit student work or recognize the accomplishments of students, staff and programs.

## Tell your Side of the Story

If the media reported incompletely or inaccurately about an issue or event in your school system, consider writing a newsletter article that gives the complete and accurate story.

## Two Heads are Better than One

Plan a meeting with your local communications professionals (i.e. from the village, park district and library) to discuss issues, share ideas or work on joint projects. This can be a great networking opportunity, and the contacts will be invaluable if you

ever have to deal with a PR issue involving one or more of those organizations.

## Good News Starts at Home

Remember your best ambassadors for your school or district are your employees. Keep them informed every week -- make sure they know the great things happening.

## Prompt is Best

Return phone calls and e-mails the same day you receive them -- even if you don't have all the information requested. People appreciate your promptness, even if it is just a message that says "I'm working on it."

## Outfit your Principal

Try giving your school principal(s) index cards with your PR office return address pre-labeled. Ask him/her to jot down a few quick notes of potential positive PR stories as he/she encounters them and drop the card in the inner office mail for a follow-up.

## TOP 10

One of the nice things about INSPRA is that stealing from one another is okay. Come and hear each member talk briefly about this year's proudest moment or most difficult challenge. You'll learn more than you ever expected and have fun in the process. Be sure to sign up for the December Tips & Tactics workshop. Bring a tip, your best idea, question or concern and be ready to share.

**I N S P R A**

*A Blue Ribbon Chapter of the National School  
Public Relations Association*

*For questions or comments regarding this newsletter,  
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