



## CHAPTER 12

### Communications, Media Relations and Social Media

Communicating with the community is an important part of the trustee's role. All board community members need and have a right to know about what students are learning and how well they are learning. They also have a right to know how their tax dollars are being spent and a right to participate in discussions on the allocation of education resources in their community.

This chapter offers tips to help trustees communicate effectively, either through direct contact, in person or online, with parents, other

ratepayers, school councils, community associations, or the media.

#### **Board Communication Responsibilities**

##### **Start with a Communication Plan**

A communication plan helps to ensure that school board communications efforts are aligned with the board's multi-year strategic plan. A good communication plan supports consistency in school board messaging, both internally and

externally, and helps the board make progress toward meeting its strategic and operational goals.

The school board communication plan should be developed by staff in consultation with the Board of trustees.

##### **Key Parts of a Communication Plan**

The following is a guideline for developing or updating the school board communication plan:

- **Background:** the strategic plan and/or other research and facts outlining the need for the communication plan.



- **Goals:** what the board wants to achieve through communications during a set timeframe, with an emphasis on one or two priorities. The goals of the communication plan, like all that a board does, need to be aligned with the goals of the board's strategic plan.
- **Strategies:** the specific ways in which the board hopes to reach its communication goals, connect to audiences, share information and receive feedback. It is important to consider different methods of communication to ensure information is accessible to all community members.
- **Audiences:** the various groups the board wants to engage using the communication plan (e.g. parents, students, staff, education partners, government leaders, the media, etc.).
- **Key messages:** the main points and positions the school board wants target audiences to understand and retain.
- **Responsibilities:** the individuals and groups who are charged with implementing various elements of the communications plan (e.g. trustees, school board communication staff, etc.).
- **Timelines:** when things need to happen (e.g. issuance of a news release, meetings with the media, community town halls, etc.).

- **Evaluation tools:** items used to measure the effectiveness of the plan (e.g. surveys, analysis of generated media, operational audits, etc.).

It is important for school boards to review the board's communication plan periodically and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies being used. In addition to surveying target audiences to gauge and measure engagement, it is also important to examine the ways in which effective communications have helped to advance the strategic and operational goals of the board.

### Tips for Planning and Assessing Communication Efforts

- Assign communications responsibilities to individuals or subcommittees and make sure the responsibilities are clear.
- Use a variety of information-sharing approaches, including letters, newsletters, phone/email networks, websites, blogs, social media, radio, community-access television and print media.
- Prepare information sheets on important topics.
- Be aware of and respond to communication barriers, such as language, culture

and accessibility needs. For example, boards can often arrange for translations of board and school communications and interpreters for critical meetings and interviews.

- Be mindful of who needs to know, when they need to know and how they usually access information.
- Focus on listening as much as telling. Explore two-way communication, feedback and input throughout the community.
- Be informative, but do not impose your views. Welcome a range of viewpoints and seek common ground.
- Design committee structures that allow for maximum participation from school councils, parents, students and other community groups.
- Involve community volunteers in the initial planning of major initiatives.

### Guiding Principles

Regardless of the audience, and whether speaking or writing, certain principles apply. Always strive to be honest, prepared clear, calm, alert and proactive. These same principles apply to all board communications, but have been described below for individual trustee communications.

### Be Prepared

Whenever possible, have a good grasp of the board's position on an issue before speaking to it in public or in a written statement. Bear in mind the chair of the board is the official spokesperson for the board, unless designated otherwise. Refer to the communication plan for the appropriate key messaging (if it is available) or follow up with board communication staff or the director of education's office for guidance on messaging. Remember the purpose of key messages is to build trust and understanding among the key stakeholders and audiences of the board.

Good key messages are short and simple that trustees can use to articulate the board's position on a given issue. Key messages are designed for a specific audience and address those aspects of an issue that the board ultimately wants the audience to understand and remember.

When making a presentation or preparing for an interview, write out the main points using the board's key messages and rehearse them. Think of all possible questions that may be asked. If confronted with an unanticipated question, take time to think before answering. If you don't know the answer, indicate that

and if possible refer the person to someone who is likely to know.

Being prepared and having practiced the message makes it easier to follow the ten Cs: being confident, consistent, credible, clear, calm, compelling, correct, compassionate, candid and concise.

### **Be Honest**

Always tell the truth. Use factual and credible points that are not open to interpretation, and state the facts candidly.

If an issue can't be discussed, such as an in-camera matter, you should state that you are not able to discuss the matter and indicate it will be dealt with in the future. If you don't know the answer, say so, and refer the person to someone who may know. Don't risk the long-term consequences of speaking recklessly.

Never say "no comment" to a reporter as it may appear that there is something to hide. Instead of saying "no comment," explain why the question can't be answered.

Trustees also have an obligation to respect confidentiality. As members of the school board, trustees must comply with protection of privacy legislation. Most of the board's business is done

in full view of the public and the media. A board's policies will determine what information is confidential, but in all cases a trustee must not reveal discussions or material from a board's private session to a member of the media.

It is important that trustees support the process of democratic decision-making. During board meetings, some disagreement or controversy is almost inevitable, however once a decision has been made, trustees are required to uphold all decisions and should be able to explain the rationale for those decisions, even if they did not support them individually.

### **Be Clear**

Speak and write in clear, concise language. Avoid educational jargon. When talking to reporters, remember that they cannot present information clearly if they can't understand it themselves.

### **Be Calm**

Stay calm during any discussion or interview. Losing your temper will only hurt the message and damage your reputation. Try a relaxation technique when angry, tense or nervous.

### **Be Alert**

Don't say things that shouldn't be heard in any public situation. Anticipate words being printed. Listen for cues from the reporter that can indicate the story they want to tell versus information that a trustee would want shared. Avoid speaking in opposition to the message to be shared.

### **Be Proactive**

The *Education Act* requires a board to make its meetings public. As a trustee, encourage attendance at board meetings by highlighting the issues that will be discussed. Posting information on a personal website or social media is an effective and timely way to inform the media and the community of emerging issues or potential controversies.

Confirm with board staff that background information is also available to the public on the school board website and that they or the spokesperson (e.g. chair of the board) will send it automatically to local media. Where the situation warrants, boards can also hold information briefings and public information meetings. If a board proves itself to be a credible source for information about

difficult issues, the media and the public are more likely to listen when the board wants to share its good news.

Monitor the media. Be aware of current education issues and fast-breaking news stories. Most media outlets have websites that are updated regularly. Using social media, such as Twitter or Facebook, is also an efficient way to keep up with the latest news on various topics relevant to the school board and to one's role as a trustee.

### Tips for Better Writing

- Write the way you speak. Use a conversational tone.
  - Avoid jargon.
  - Keep it simple. Readers tend to be turned off by long, complicated text.
  - Include only one idea per paragraph.
  - Be selective about what is printed. Don't include all the background details.
  - Don't assume readers have the same knowledge as a trustee.
- Be aware of and comply with copyright laws when reproducing materials.
  - Be positive and constructive. Be an advocate for the school board.
  - Make it clear what is wanted from the reader (Call for action?).
  - Have several people proofread your material to be sure it is understandable and free of errors.





- When possible, use handwritten notes to thank people or to encourage their participation.
- Reply promptly to concerns and requests for information.

## Working with the Media

For many people in Ontario, what they learn about schools comes from the media. Media outlets are aware that a large percentage of their audience are parents with children at local schools or other residents who

are concerned about the impact local schools have on community life.

Trustees, in partnership with school board staff, are encouraged to provide their local media with ongoing, timely and newsworthy information about schools in the region. When a reporter calls about a story they are working on, it is equally important to respond in a timely and professional manner. This helps to both develop positive working relationships with local media and to ensure the school board position is included in their story, when appropriate.

Keep in mind that each school board's policy on communication with the media will differ because of varying needs and resources. Trustees should understand their board's policy before contacting or responding to media.

## Taking a Story to the Media

Wherever possible, trustees should consult with board staff and/or the chair before taking an unsolicited story to the media. When you do want to share a story, "think like an editor" and let the media know the key facts and the potential story idea.

While parents are interested in a great deal of information, reporters are interested in news. News is judged by assessing the impact of the story on a reader or viewer.

The following questions can help determine whether the story or event to be covered will be newsworthy to a reporter:

- Is it new? Does it highlight new people, new programs, new ideas, or new ways of teaching and learning?
- Is it current? Stories about certain technology, for example, may be in vogue this year but less so next year.
- Is it superlative? Does the story illustrate the fastest, highest, smallest or biggest of something? If so, what credible, third-party evidence exists to back up the claim?
- How is the event tied to a major news story? The media are constantly looking for ways to bring a local perspective to major national or international news stories.
- What is the impact? Reporters think about if/how news will impact their readers/viewers. Will it cause them to take action on something? What's in it for them?
- Is there a human interest angle? Reporters are

always looking for interesting stories about people in their communities doing something unique and that their viewers/readers can relate to.

- Are there interesting visuals? What visual appeal does the story offer – for example, students participating in an activity that lends itself to a compelling photograph for the newspaper's print or digital versions, or for television footage?

Once again, it is important to refer to the board's communication policy/procedure or communication staff for guidance prior to working with media.

### **Making the Reporter's Job Easier**

Most often, reporters are dedicated, well-meaning individuals who are usually facing time pressures. They may well be pursuing several stories in a single day, against the clock, with hourly or daily deadlines.

The reporter assigned to cover an event may be a specialist like an education reporter, but more likely will be a general reporter, who deals with a different topic in every story. This is almost always true in radio and television. It is primarily newspapers that have

reporters solely assigned to cover education, and this is increasingly rare. As a general rule, most reporters have limited knowledge of schools or school boards and how they operate.

Accordingly, it is essential to make it as easy as possible for reporters to tell a story. Where possible, work with board staff to provide written fact sheets about schools, contact numbers for parents (who have already provided their permission to share their contact information), and suggestions for lively pictures or upcoming photo or video opportunities to accompany a story. In short, think of ways to help the media do the best job they can within their time constraints.

### **Responding to the Media**

If a reporter approaches a trustee with questions about a current issue or event, don't panic. Follow the tips discussed in this chapter. Be ready.

Each school board's policy on communication with the media will differ because of varying needs and resources. Some boards have communications staff direct media calls through the office of the director of education. The *Education Act* stipulates that the chairperson acts as the spokesperson on behalf of the Board of Trustees unless the Board determines



otherwise. The key is to remember that the media require a consistent and available spokesperson.

Reporters may also approach individual trustees for comment, especially if the issue is connected to a school in a particular trustee area. If that happens, follow the board's policy on communicating with the media. This may include informing board communication staff of the interview request so they can assist with key messages and interview tips.

To ensure that the board is able to present its side of an issue, it will be important to respond to a media call within the deadlines specified.

A reporter covering a contentious issue at the board or an incident at one of the schools has probably been sent there by an assignment editor. Typically, the reporter has only a few hours to turn in the finished story.

If possible, avoid turning down a reporter's request for an interview, especially when it involves bad news. If the board's official spokesperson refuses to cooperate, the reporter will inevitably get information from other sources, including those with less knowledge on the issue, which is never helpful. There are cases when interviews aren't the best way to respond or aren't possible based on the reporter's deadline. In these cases, consult with the

board's communication staff or director of education's office for guidance in developing a written response or a holding statement if information is still being gathered to inform a response.

Make sure to understand what the reporter wants and how the material is to be used. For example, the recorded comments could be part of a 30-second clip on the nightly news, or incorporated into a feature segment on a radio documentary, or form part of an analysis piece for the local newspaper.

It is not difficult to anticipate what a reporter's questions will be if they are calling about a specific issue. When receiving a call unexpectedly, trustees have the right to ask for a reasonable amount of time to gather information, inform board communication staff and prepare thoughts. When a reporter calls, take the time to ask the reporter questions to gather as much information as possible about their story, including questions they would like to ask to support the preparation. It's also worth asking who else the reporter is interviewing to help anticipate how others may be responding to the questions.

Make sure to agree in advance about the

conditions of an interview. Keep in mind that if a reporter requests an off the record conversation, it is wise to assume that at some point what is said could very well become part of the record. For this reason, it is better to assume that everything said could become part of the record, and proceed accordingly.

**Maintaining a Working Relationship**

The best way to develop a working relationship with the media is to be an accurate source of information. This does not mean that trustees

must tell reporters everything or answer all their questions. It simply means that by facilitating their job, they will likely return to the trustee for information, quotes and opinions on issues. When speaking to the media, it is an opportunity to communicate the school board's key messages on the issue of the day.

**Concerns About Media Coverage**

There are occasions when the story resulting from an interview isn't ideal. When it is an issue of tone or context, there may not be

much one can do to change the piece, and it may in fact keep a negative story in the news for longer than it would have been otherwise. In these cases, although it may be tempting to contact the reporter to voice discontent, if everything in the story is accurate, it's unlikely this will result in any changes. If, however, the story has a factual error, it is important to let the reporter know about the error as soon as possible and provide a suggested correction.

The correction may be issued by the next business day. For many news outlets, the



correction is made to the online version of the story and subsequent searches of the outlet's database will turn up this corrected version. If the trustee is still not satisfied with the reporter's response, talking to the reporter's editor is a course of action. If that doesn't work, sending a letter to the editor or director of the news outlet is another option. If the problem is with a newspaper, contact the National News Media Council at <http://mediacouncil.ca>. Keep notes of the interview with the media so that third parties can judge the facts for themselves.

In all cases, it is advisable to speak with board communications staff and/or the director of education prior to pursuing a correction.

## Social Media

Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Snapchat (and whatever else is out there!) – Some trustees may not use any of these tools themselves, but no one can deny their potential communicative power. They offer the capacity to have an informative and interesting Twitter debate, discuss local issues directly with constituents on Facebook, or participate in a successful YouTube video campaign.

While printed school newsletters with messages from local trustees are still being used in some boards, the fact that they can never be as current or as quickly dispatched as an online publication or tweet makes them less popular. Twitter, classroom and school blogs, websites and Facebook pages are changing the way families get news from their local community school. Trustees across Canada are turning to social media to reach their constituents and build support for issues affecting students, staff and local communities. Consider using an online social media platform to communicate with communities.

School boards may have a social media presence (e.g. a board Twitter account) and staff expertise in the areas of social media and digital communications. Consider asking for a training session with staff to get their advice on the practices that would be best for engaging with local audiences. Be sure to ask board staff about applicable policies, procedures and guidelines for social media use.

## Objectives

Before using social media, users with public profiles should decide on their objectives, which

may include:

- Being accountable and transparent to the community
- Extending the reach of strategic messaging by building relationships with relevant social media users including school board stakeholders, other trustees, journalists, bloggers and the wider education community
- Providing leadership and credibility in the education field by sharing useful and timely information about online communication channels
- Monitoring social media accounts and engaging with critics and key influencers to address potential issues and correct factual inaccuracies
- Providing a low-barrier method for constituent feedback and interaction
- Posting live coverage of school board events for those who cannot attend.

## Social Media Presence

Just as with planning other forms of communications, there are no rigid rules for getting messages out through social media, but always keep in mind the following pieces of advice:

- Engaging on social media can demonstrate a genuine interest in



reaching out to and engaging with constituents. Twitter is one way to engage one-on-one with community members, staff and students. It can be a great way to foster positive relationships with constituents – without ever having to physically meet.

- Social media can be used to anticipate future policy minefields and ask constituents for their views in advance of boardroom debate. People will often appreciate the added opportunity to provide

their views on the issues that impact their community.

- Don't let social media accounts go stale. For example, send out a tweet (or two) at least every day to attract followers. Be engaging, punchy, succinct and humorous when appropriate. This will make the tweets, and therefore the information they convey, stand out. At the same time, pay attention to posting standards on each platform (e.g. an Instagram posting isn't required as frequently as Twitter).

These are some of the qualities that will keep content interesting:

- **Varied** – Cover a broad base of content types (e.g. pictures, text, audio) and sources to keep followers interested.
- **Lively** – Don't just regurgitate press release headlines. Posts should be written in conversational English.
- **Timely** – Posts should be about issues of immediate relevancy or upcoming events/opportunities.
- **Credible** – Posts can occasionally have a funny



hook but their connection back to priorities and objectives should always be defensible. If possible, there should be hyperlinks to related content or a call to action.

- **Inclusive** – In keeping with the knowledge-sharing culture of social media, take the opportunity to link to relevant content from a diverse range of sources other than personal or the school board website.

### Content

Often, the hardest part of maintaining social media

accounts is coming up with a variety of great content every day. Capture interesting and educational pieces to link in to everyday life. These can include: news releases, official school board letters and statements, new board campaigns and initiatives, YouTube videos, or sharing followers' content and live tweeting at events. Watch the school board account and other education accounts for content to retweet.

Aim to be established as a “thought leader” in the community. Sharing relevant research, events, awards and news from

elsewhere can position trustees as trusted sources of reliable high-quality, and relevant information.

### Risks of Social Media

Social media may provide many opportunities, it they also come with risks. It's important not to be deterred because risks can be mitigated with some proper planning and discipline. Some good advice for social media users includes:

- **Beware of trolls** – There are social media users out there who are merely looking to create or

encourage disagreement or abusive interaction. Learn to recognize a troll, and don't respond. "Walk" away.

- **People are watching** – It might sometimes seem like messages are sent into the void, but reporters and bloggers are always watching for stories, both online and offline. Saying something inflammatory on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms is no different than posting it on personal websites or newsletters. Don't post anything that shouldn't be said loudly in a crowded room.

- **Find a balance** – Be informative, but do not impose views on others. Welcome a range of viewpoints, and try to seek common ground. Social media must be democratic to be constructive.
- **Be aware of communication barriers** – Consider barriers such as language proficiency, culture and the accessibility needs of communities. For example, if posting an image with text, ensure the text is available in the post itself or via a link so that it can be read by a screen reader.
- **Report harassment** – Most applications have an option to block and report

complaints about other accounts. On Twitter, for example, block users from seeing one's tweets by clicking on their username and visiting their profile. Users can also be reported for disseminating spam and being abusive. Cyberbullying happens to people of all ages and backgrounds. If a user is taking their communications too far and bullying or abuse is felt, consider contacting the local police service.

**Promotion**

Once a trustee's objectives are determined, a format has been selected, and posts have been created, the final aspect in the social media



planning process should be promotion. People need to know trustees are on social media. Here are some ways to grow the audience:

- Post a prominent link on a personal website, Facebook page or blog
- Ask friends, coworkers and other trusted connections to promote proactively from their social media accounts
- Add a link to social media accounts in email signatures
- Add the link to all applicable newsletters, statements and news releases
- Email or call key ward stakeholders to communicate the news about a newly active social media account
- Create a posting calendar and commit to a schedule (e.g. one or two tweets per day).

### Evaluating Success

As with any good strategy, evaluation and follow-up are key to gauging the impact of one's efforts. To measure the effectiveness of social media initiatives, consider tracking things such as the number of followers, the number of retweets/shares, the volume and quality of two-way communication and any feedback from followers. Third party management

tools like Hootsuite can help by automating the tracking of the number of replies, retweets or likes.

It is important to review the plan periodically and evaluate its effectiveness. Ask fellow trustees and the community whether they feel that appropriate information sharing is taking place. Use this information to strengthen the plan going forward. Also, be sure to act on some of the feedback received. Keep a log of good suggestions and take action. If online presence needs refining, look to the approaches that are being successfully used by other individuals or groups.

Finally, don't worry if the audience doesn't grow quickly. Social media audience growth takes time. It's an organic process that builds with trust. Followers should be judged by quality, not quantity. Having 25 local leaders reading tweets every day can be far more effective than having 2,000 engaged followers spread out across the globe.

### OPSBA Social Media Platforms and Resources

OPSBA's social media Twitter account, <https://twitter.com/OPSBA>, allows the Association to communicate directly with key online

audiences as part of its wider effort to be accountable and transparent to the education community. The Twitter account gives OPSBA the ability to extend the reach of its strategic messaging by building relationships with relevant Twitter users including school board stakeholders, trustees, journalists, bloggers and the wider education community and is an excellent example of how social media can be utilized as a valuable communication tool.

OPSBA's Instagram account, [https://instagram.com/opsba\\_official](https://instagram.com/opsba_official), allows for the posting of photos and videos. The popular social media platform gives the Association the ability to communicate directly with stakeholders using visual-heavy tactics.

*"Social Media: An Overview for Publicly Elected Trustees,"* is a helpful resource. Developed by OPSBA, it provides tips and useful information about how to use social media effectively and responsibly as an elected official. This resource is posted on the OPSBA website at [www.opsba.org](http://www.opsba.org).