

# 5 Communication Tips For Educators

By Steven Weber

If education is viewed as a relationship with students, families, and the community, then good communication should be a priority. Communication skills are critically important in education. Teachers and administrators communicate with parents/guardians, community leaders, co-workers, and other stakeholders. A principal can be successful if he understands curriculum design and knows how to support teachers. However, if his communication skills are weak he will not last long as a school administrator. In a world where most people use a SmartPhone for coupons, Twitter, Facebook, alerts from the pharmacy, seeking information, and driving directions, families expect to receive real time communication from school staff. While it is important to focus on curriculum development, assessment, healthy school lunches, exercise, and student safety, some schools could benefit from focusing on how well educators are communicating. Educators could begin by asking, "Are we communicating?"

## 1. Identify Your Inner Circle

The President of the United States has an Inner Circle. Who is in your Inner Circle?

As a principal, you need to have an Inner Circle. In *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (1998), Maxwell described The Law of the Inner Circle. The Law of the Inner Circle states, "A person's potential is determined by those closest to him." In some schools, this group of teacher leaders serve on the School Improvement Team. Sometimes, the inner circle consists of a group of individuals who carry out the role without a title or committee. A teacher leader can make or break a principal. If you are a school administrator, you cannot lead alone. You need the input and feedback from one or more teacher leaders.

Maxwell (1998) gives us five questions to ask when considering who should be in our Inner Circle:

- Do they have high influence with others?
- Do they bring a complimentary gift to the table?
- Do they hold a strategic position in the organization?
- Do they add value to me and to the organization?
- Do they positively impact other inner circle members?

If you have this type of teacher leader in your organization, then you will see his/her impact throughout the school. Teacher leaders are critical to a school's success. By reviewing the five questions above, you can see that a principal needs this type of leader. The principal who tries to lead without teacher leaders will fail.

## 2. Create Forums For Two-Way Communication

Social media has increased the number of times a person can communicate with a wider community. If you are not providing families and stakeholders with a chance to communicate, then you are not encouraging a school community. Families want to have instant access to the school staff and to have a voice in school decisions. It may be time to ask, "Are we encouraging two-way communication or are we stuck in 1989?"

5 Ways To Increase Two-Way Communication:

- School App
- School Blog
- Twitter or Facebook Account
- Google Hangout
- Voxer

### **3. Be The Lead Communicator About Your School**

Eric Sheninger wrote, school leaders need to become the “Storyteller-in-Chief.” There is a story told about every school in the United States. In the 1980’s, the story was told in the daily newspaper. In the 1990’s, the story was told through pictures and videos. Social media allows parents, community leaders, politicians, students, and anyone with a story to describe your school’s culture. Are you promoting blended learning, community service, academic highlights, critical thinking, student leadership, and family involvement at your school? If you don’t communicate about your school, someone else will.

When you visit classrooms, take pictures and share the stories that you see on a daily basis. Show the passion students have for outdoor learning or for problem solving. Pictures speak a thousand words. Does your school have a hashtag? Check out #leydenpride - This hashtag is known outside the school district and outside Illinois. Students post school highlights on Twitter, along with teachers and administrators.

Does your school have an app? There is an app for coupons, weather alerts, online banking, scores and highlights from your favorite sports teams, and the news. If you design or purchase a school app, you can post a school blog, website, lunch menu, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, teacher and staff contact information, class websites, announcements, and the weekly newsletter. You can reach families in real time, rather than waiting for students to deliver a note home. Schools need to do a better job of reaching families the way the rest of the world communicates. The goal is not to have a flashy school app. The ultimate goal is to communicate. Once you post announcements, school stories, and highlights, families will have a way to respond. The era of one-way communication needs to end. Being the “Storyteller-in-Chief” does not mean that you are the only one doing the talking.

### **4. Make Sure Your Actions Align With Your Words**

When school leaders announce an increase in graduation rates, high performing schools, and closing achievement gaps, families expect to see results. Have you ever worked for a leader who had a difficult time practicing what he preached? As a school or school district leader, you can create press releases, post videos about student achievement, and hold family nights where you highlight your school. Parents and community members want to support schools. Real Estate Agents understand that strong schools increase the value of homes in a community. Most adults want schools to be successful, because they realize the future of our democracy depends on an educated citizenry.

Have you heard the saying, “The glass is half full?” If your graduation rate is 50%, you could announce that graduation rates have increased in the past year. The families with students who graduated would be happy with this press release. However, if your child is part of the 50% that did not graduate you would have a different view on the school’s performance and success. It is important to promote your school, but school leaders need to make certain their actions align with their words. If you have to search hard for a press release or tweet, then your school may have deeper issues to address. Your story is more credible when your actions match your words.

### **5. Be A 360 Degree Communicator**

In *The 360 Degree Leader*, Maxwell (2005) wrote, “the reality is that most people will never be the top leader in an organization. They will spend their careers somewhere in the middle” (p. 17). If you are a teacher, counselor, curriculum coordinator, administrative assistant, principal, or assistant superintendent, you are leading from the middle. You are constantly leading up, down, and horizontally in the organization. If you are a successful educator, you will take advantage of each opportunity to communicate. In your role, you are frequently advocating for students, teachers, board policies, instructional strategies, classroom resources, funding, and more. Some educators spend the bulk of their time complaining about board policies, state mandates, the school schedule, the school improvement plan, or a lack of family involvement. Other leaders use their experience and position to advocate for and lead change. Every school needs change leaders. How can you use your platform to support student achievement?

## **Conclusion**

In a movie titled, Cool Hand Luke (1967), Captain tells Luke, "What we've got here is failure to communicate." Communication problems in schools have a negative impact on student achievement, positive relationships, family engagement, a collegial environment, school culture, teaching and learning. There are multiple ways to communicate. This article only addresses five communication tips for educators. What would you add to the list?