School public relations communicators and superintendents from across the state gathered recently at the Hyatt Regency Wynfrey Hotel at Birmingham’s Riverchase Galleria for the 2015 State Alabama School Public Relations Association (ALSPRA) Conference.

The session opened with a presentation from State Superintendent of Education Dr. Tommy Bice, who talked to attendees about the great work educators and students are doing in Alabama’s K-12 public classrooms, and thanked them for their efforts to promote their school systems’ success stories. He also touched upon topics such as PLAN 2020, the Alabama College- and Career-Ready Standards, student testing and accountability.

Acclaimed national speaker Dr. John Draper, who now partners with the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), delivered the keynote address, Crucial Conversations. His session provided new and veteran school public relations practitioners alike with ways to engage stakeholder groups on various levels.

In addition, several PIOs were honored as part of ALSPRA’s Excellence in Communications Awards Program. Among those receiving awards were:

Nez Calhoun, APR, Director of Public Relations, Jefferson County Schools - Nez Calhoun Distinguished Service Award: Calhoun received the inaugural award named in her honor. The award honors an ALSPRA member for his or her commitment and dedication to the organization and to the profession. Typically, this member has gone above and beyond the call to support ALSPRA and its members.

Butler County Schools Superintendent Amy Bryan - Outstanding Leadership in School/Community Relations Award: This award recognizes an individual, other than those directly responsible for a public relations program, who has proven himself or herself to be a leader in using effective school/community relations to build support for public education in his or her community.

Malissa Valdes-Hubert, APR, Communications Manager, Alabama State Department of Education - Communicator of the Year Award: This award recognizes an ALSPRA member for outstanding work in the field of public relations prior to and during the previous school year.

Publications Awards were also given to school PIOs who have demonstrated exceptional communications skills by producing outstanding publications, photography, and electronic media. Categories include annual reports, calendars, newsletters, and special events, among others.

Resource: Common Phrases Even the Smartest People Misuse

As professional communicators, we cringe when someone uses the wrong “your/you’re” in written communication, or doesn’t know the difference between there, their, and they’re. But here are some higher-level idiomatic and grammatical mistakes that even the best of us make from time to time without even realizing it. Click here to get this full resource from The Muse and Inc.
Dear Wearer of Many Hats,

Here’s How to Manage Your New PIO Duties

By Denise L. Berkhalter, APR

Hey, you! Yes, you over there who was perfectly comfortable wearing a couple hats of responsibility and is now contemplating a full scale temper tantrum because the public information officer hat has been placed on your aching head. Why you could certainly resort to wailing and kicking, but I’m pretty sure that won’t do you any favors. How about taking a deep breath instead and turning your attention to these six tips for transitioning into the public information officer role for your school system.

1. Seek clarity and buy-in.
   Make sure there is a very clear job description for the public relations person and that your job has direct access to the decision makers (superintendent or someone in his/her cabinet). Ask the superintendent to impress upon his principals and central office staff the importance and value of public relations and working with you to get out the good news. Without this access or buy-in, you won’t be able to be very effective.

2. Find out what you don’t know.
   Make sure you know what your school system’s policies, procedures, protocols, traditions are in regard to handling the media, sharing public information, protecting private information/documents, etc. Meet the school finance officer and the board attorney to ask questions.

3. Accept that you can’t be everywhere at once.
   Work with superintendent/principals to select someone at each of your schools to be your eyes and ears and share those good news stories, to monitor customer service and alert you of any major issues that may arise. Train them. Make sure they know the rules when it comes to handling the media, sharing public information, protecting private information/documents, etc.

4. Identify ways to share news.
   Determine what channels you have for distributing news and information and assess whether they are being used and reaching the right audiences/people. Are people following you on Facebook? How many people are visiting your website? Is that newsletter really reaching parents? Fix any broken channels. Find out what actually reaches your audiences/stakeholders and focus on making those channels function well.

5. Set reasonable and aligned goals.
   While surely the world would benefit from a legion of you, there is still only one you. Rein in your need to overachieve and set reasonable, realistic goals. Start with two short-term and two long-term goals for the academic year and limit yourself only to those that align with your school system’s goals. Include only two objectives under each goal. Remember, we’re starting small. That’s important, especially if you’re wearing multiple hats. This is not the best way to do strategic PR (using the Research, Planning, Implementation and Evaluation method, but it is a nice way to ease into it.

6. Aim low and shoot high.
   With many hats, overachieving in every one of your job functions could lead to stress or worse. Start slow and steady. If you have set realistic goals and achieved them early, bravo. Try three goals and three objectives next year and bump that number up each year until you are able to handle a full-scale strategic public relations plan. Until then, focus on what truly can make a difference and never forget there is only one you.

* Denise L. Berkhalter, APR, is the Director of Public Relations for the Alabama Association of School Boards

Resource: 2015 Legislative Tracking

The ALSDE Legislative Services division tracks legislation dealing with K-12 public education employees and/or K-12 public education-related issues, as well as state employee and/or state government/agency-related legislation.

You can go directly to the tracking page by going to www.alsde.edu and clicking on Learn More under What’s Happening Now – 2015 Legislative Tracking.

Features on the Legislative Tracking Page include:

- Legislation headings in BLACK pertain solely to K-12 public education employees and/or K-12 public education-related issues.
- Legislation headings in BLUE and noted with a single asterisk (*) pertain to state employees and/or state government/agency-related issues.
- Legislation headings in GREEN and noted with double asterisks (**) pertain to K-12 public education employees and/or K-12 public education related issues, as well as state employees and/or state government/agency-related issues.
- Legislation headings in ORANGE denote either a simple resolution (only needs passage by one chamber) or a joint resolution (needs passage by both chambers and requires the Governor’s signature for enactment) and pertain to K-12 public education employees and/or K-12 public education related issues OR state employees and/or state government/agency-related issues.

Planning to Attend the NSPRA Seminar?: Here’s What You Should Know

The National School Public Relation’s 2015 National Seminar brochure highlighting major sessions and pre-seminar workshops is now available. At NSPRA’s 2015 Seminar, choose from over 70 practical, hands-on, informative sessions that include public education advocacy, effective engagement programs, branding and marketing schools, telling your story with video, expanding outreach with social media, crisis communication and management, winning bond and finance campaigns, and strategic communication planning.

The seminar headquarters hotel, the Renaissance Nashville, has already sold out, but you still have convenient housing options to choose from. NSPRA has secured three “overflow” hotels: DoubleTree Nashville Downtown, the Hilton Nashville Downtown, and the Hyatt Place Nashville. You can make reservations here.