School closures and mergers are no fun for anyone. Expect some level of disappointment, hurt, fear or anger in your community when such decisions have to be made. But outright protests to cry foul could be substantially limited or possibly eliminated by avoiding one simple error.

Don’t make the decision for the community but rather with the community.

The community isn’t a faceless mass of people out there on the fringes of your school system. They are real people with real emotions. They are invested in the community and in education. These are people whose lives will be disrupted or otherwise impacted by the decision to close a school. Some will lose jobs, their alma mater, a safe haven for their children, a steady supply of customers, a community gathering place, a symbol of the...
community’s identity, a source of school spirit, the rush of team pride. You get the picture.

Taking these steps may lessen the bitter backlash.

**Step 1**

**Know Your Data, Both Quantitative and Qualitative.**

Do your research beyond the basic feasibility study. You also need to know the demographics of the closing schools’ neighborhoods and look for any disparities. If you’re closing multiple schools, how many of these schools’ populations are predominantly of one race? What percentage of the city’s population is of that race? How many of the closing schools are in nearly homogenous neighborhoods? If all school closures are in high-poverty neighborhoods, what are the reasons for that? At what level do people use their schools as a source of employment or as a community resource? When asked, how vital would locals say the closing schools are to their neighborhood? Cull data not only from parents, students and staff but also area business owners, community organizations, real estate agents, personnel at feeder schools and others. Really think about the kinds of data you’d like to collect to get a true sense of how locals feel about closing their schools.

**Step 2**

**Share the Data Well Before School Closure Is Ever an Option.**

As education leaders, you know there is normally substantial time spent mining data before that fateful realization that it’s time to close a school. You know the numbers and reasoning are sound. You usually have time to process this data-based decision and acclimate to the reality of it. So, why give the community months, weeks or even days to draw the same conclusion?

Take the community along with you on this difficult journey. If you used a set of criteria to determine which schools should close – age and size of the facility, enrollment numbers, population shifts – share those factors. Share data and information quickly to limit misinformation and rumors.

*If a school closure is “breaking news” to your community, then you have already created trouble for yourself.*

Think about the kinds of data that would be most meaningful to the community and present it in an easy-to-digest format. For instance, are you losing students? Does declining enrollment mean less state funding? Will the inevitable result be personnel reductions, fewer academic and extracurricular programs and more costly challenges? Why doesn’t it make fiscal sense to build an entirely new school where the dilapidated facility is or to constantly repair the leaky roof on the old building? How much has been spent on facilities upkeep, and how often is maintenance done? Do you conduct exit interviews to find out why students are leaving the school or why parents aren’t enrolling their children in the schools? Are there even enough school-age children left in the community to fill a school?

**Step 3**

**Share Ownership of the Problems, and Ask the Community to Help Solve Them.**

What comes next is truly unsettling to education leaders who are used to the quiet, controlled comfort of an isolated school system. Share responsibility and decision making with your community.

Bake sales won’t keep a school open indefinitely. But community brainstorming could lead to some very creative approaches to problem solving and encourage shared ownership. If school leaders and the community are both working on a problem and come to a similar conclusion, then the decision is being made with the community rather than for it.

These brainstorming sessions and related community conversations should not be one-time events, either. They should occur often, and not just around the viability of a school. Honesty is also required. The magnitude of the problem should not be sugar-coated, and there should be no hesitation in asking the community what it can do to help. You may find yourself pleasantly surprised. The community may come up with enough funds to keep the school open long enough for the current senior class to graduate. You just won’t know until you have the conversation.

(Continued on next page.)
In the end, if the only logical option is to develop a closure plan, allow the community a meaningful voice in determining that plan. Then keep the community informed. If you leave a blank where there should be an answer, you shouldn’t be surprised when people fill it in.

**Weather the Storm and Point to the Rainbow.**

People love their community schools. Losing one is a serious blow. Acknowledge that and honor it. Host a homecoming that brings back alumni to see the last senior class graduate. Give away commemorative bricks from the demolished facility in exchange for buying a new brick to help fund the new facility. Keep part or all of the old school’s name when naming the new school. If merging schools, consider merging one of the old school’s colors with one of the new school’s colors. At a merged school, consider having a new mascot that is chosen by the incoming students and the existing student body. The point is to find ways to respect the community’s loss and honor the history and heritage of the closing school.

*People love their community schools. Losing one is a serious blow. Acknowledge that and honor it.*

- Host a homecoming that brings back alumni to see the last senior class graduate.
- Give away commemorative bricks from the demolished facility in exchange for buying a new brick to help fund the new facility.

Transitioning will give rise to a new set of difficulties to overcome. Give the community a heads up and, when possible, a say-so in addressing issues. Transportation challenges, for example, may eventually be alleviated by the addition of bus drivers. They should know that. A two-week summer camp may help students establish new friendships and become familiar with their new school facility and teachers. The community may be willing to fund that.

Then comes the fun part: telling the good news. Rainstorms often end with a rainbow. Point to it. The good news may be students will now learn in a safer, more modern facility. Classes may be smaller because the school system can afford more teachers. Students may have access to Advanced Placement courses, the arts, a variety of sports or other academic and extracurricular activities they didn’t have access to before. The good news may simply be there are now enough parking spaces for all upperclassmen who wish to drive their cars. Dwell on the good, big and small.

**Other Considerations for School Closures**

There you have it. My public relations advice on school closures in a sizeable nutshell. Not what you expected? Alright, alright. Make sure you have these things in place:

- An established and trained spokesperson
- An up-to-date plan for communicating school closure(s)
- Talking points and fact sheets
- A solid working relationship with the media
- Regular conversations with key influencers in your community
- The ability to host social media conversations
- Up-to-date information posted regularly on your website(s)
- Information-rich news releases
- News conferences to announce the pivotal aspects of the closure(s)
- Community listening posts and forums
- Public hearings
- The release of feasibility study findings
- The release of architectural drawings
- Public speeches
- Parent and student meetings
- Staff discussions about the closures

All are good tools and techniques. Yet, I remain firm in my advice for education leaders. Engage often in two-way communication with your internal stakeholders (those who work for and learn in the schools) and external stakeholders (parents, neighbors, businesses, faith leaders and others impacted by your schools). Inform and truly listen to them. Build and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with them. Work hard at systematically building the will for community support.

The aforementioned steps admittedly won’t work in regard to every school closure, specifically those resulting from unforeseen emergencies. Still, an engaged and informed community is the best defense in many situations facing local schools. If a school closure is “breaking news” to your community, then you have already created trouble for yourself.

Denise Berkhalter, APR
Director of Public Relations, Alabama Association of School Boards
DBerkhalter@alabamaschoolboards.org
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3rd Quarter Meeting
FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2013 • 10 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.

— AGENDA —

10:00 A.M. Jessica Hammond, Campaign Director, Alabama GRIT
(Graduate Ready, Impact Tomorrow)

11:00 A.M. Elisa Ferrell, Huntsville Council of PTAs

1:00 P.M. MEDIA ROUNDTABLE
Challen Stephens, Huntsville Times
Stephen Gallien, WAFF

2:00 P.M. ASCA Business Meeting and Discussion of current topics in Education

3:00 P.M. Group Tour with Hudson Alpha Institute—See the facility and opportunities for promotion to your group

Boxed Deli Lunch (12-1p.m.) – $5/Members$10/Non-members (Pay at the Door)

Register now through August 30
Email mvaldes@alsde.edu with your name and affiliation
As a superintendent, you realize that communication can make a profound difference in earning support for your school district. NSPRA has developed a practical toolkit so superintendents can ensure their district is at the forefront of successful communication. If you want to be able to validate the importance of communication in your school community, this is the e-kit for you. It is a brief resource to start and build a communication program for your schools. It is free to download from the NSPRA store. Below are just two excerpts of what you will find in this practical and quick-read resource.

Brands, listen up. The visuals-based platform registers engagement 18 times that of Facebook and 48 times that of Twitter, according to new research. Instagram is becoming a core platform for brands to engage with consumers. The “Intelligence Report: Social Platforms” found that the visual component of Instagram has helped the platform grow to 100 million users while the average luxury brand has 100,000 followers. Other visual platforms such as Vine, Pinterest, and YouTube have grown significantly and continue to be platforms where brands can deeply engage consumers.

The Intelligence Report: Social Platforms study is a comprehensive report that assesses the presence and performance of 247 brands across 15 social platforms. With Instagram’s recently added video capabilities, consumers and brands can choose between it or Vine. Instagram has 40 times as many users as Vine. Vine has approximately 5,133 accounts, and 35 percent of brands surveyed in this report are active on the platform. However, Vine does have a higher interaction rate with posts than Instagram, with a higher percentage of “likes” per post than Instagram. Vine and Instagram are not the only video-sharing social platforms out there.

YouTube is seeing continuous growth in video views for luxury brands. Dior and Cartier both have videos with more than 5 million views. The study found that although it is difficult for a video to “go viral,” there is a direct link between the video views on a brand’s channel and the amount of content uploaded.

“It is in brands’ best interest to use social media to funnel consumers into their traditional, owned marketing channels to extract the most value.”

Erin Shea is an editorial assistant on Luxury Daily. A version of this article first appeared on MobileMarketer.
The Leadership Through Communication Award recognizes the teamwork and exemplary leadership of outstanding superintendents and their communications professionals for demonstrated commitment to the enhancement of communication and relationships between their school systems and the families and communities they serve.

The award honors those who recognize that communication is a critical component of leadership and incorporate strategic communication into their planning goals and objectives as well as their daily operations. For more information, review the application.