

AASA New Superintendents E-Journal

January 2009

Listening to the Next Generations; Data-Driven Leadership; Advice for New Superintendents

Editor's Note

Dear Colleagues,

The AASA New Superintendents E-Journal is a quarterly publication tailored to the needs of new superintendents. Each edition includes two to three articles prepared by new and seasoned superintendents, educational leadership professors, consultants and practicing school administrators. This edition of the journal addresses three topics essential to the new superintendent's success in the school district.

Kitty Porterfield and Meg Carnes, authors of the recently released AASA book *[Why School Communication Matters: Strategies from PR Professionals](#)*, offer an important article looking at intergenerational communications. Central in their message is creating a better understanding of Generation X parents. The authors offer practical techniques for reaching out to Gen-Xers with effective communications.

The second article is authored by Bryan Blavatt, superintendent emeritus of Boone County, Ky., Schools. Blavatt draws from his many years of experience as a superintendent to advocate data-driven leadership. In doing so, he recognizes the relationship between the non-profit National Research Center for College and University Admissions and AASA as an example of leading school districts with a strong emphasis on using data effectively.

Darrell G. Floyd, superintendent of the Stephenville, Texas, Independent School District, reflects on initial steps to be undertaken by new superintendents. The article provides no-nonsense advice while also offering several cautionary reminders.

Future issues of the *AASA New Superintendents E-Journal* will look at such topics as instructional leadership, sustaining a district vision, board relations, and the impact of the economic downturn on superintendent decision making. Authors interested in submitting articles are encouraged to contact the editor. Submissions are invited throughout the year. Read the author guidelines online.

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P.S. I hope to see you at AASA's 2009 National Conference on Education, Feb. 19-21, in San Francisco. The conference offers a host of benefits to new superintendents, from renowned speakers to one-of-a-kind networking events to a new mentor program for new and aspiring school system leaders. [Learn more and register online today.](#)

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Listen to the New Generations: Reaching Out to Those Who Expect to Connect



BY KITTY PORTERFIELD AND MEG CARNES

Porterfield and Carnes are communications professionals and authors. They are principals in the firm of [Porterfield & Carnes Communications, Inc.](#) Their book, [Why School Communication Matters: Advice from PR Professionals](#), from which this article was adapted, was published recently by Rowman & Littlefield in partnership with AASA.



Thirty-year-old Cassie began the school selection process for her son before he was born.

By her sixth month of pregnancy, she was searching the Internet, talking to neighbors and reading local newspapers with a new sense of purpose: finding the best school. Sending him to Park Street Elementary, a public school just across the street, did not seem to be a foregone conclusion.

Cassie's actions are trademark Generation X, the moniker given to those born between 1964 and 1987 (Howe, 2007), many of whom are parents of the children in our schools today. Living in a world where options are weighed in an Internet environment, they search for the right school with the same determination and care they use when shopping for a child-care provider, a vacation home or a new car. Choices abound, and Gen Xers see it as their job to do a thorough search before making a decision.

Enter Park Street Elementary School Principal Mary Beth, a Baby Boomer born between 1948 and 1962 (Howe, 2007). When Cassie e-mailed Mary Beth in detail about her school search and wanted to set up a meeting, Mary Beth began to wonder: Is my parent communication strategy stuck in a time warp? Am I competing effectively for the students of these tuned-in, very involved parents?

Who Are These Gen Xers?

If those questions give you pause, they should. To get the attention of parents today, educators must upgrade those traditional print tools — such as newsletters, bulletins and long prose documents — with electronic options such as the Web and e-mail, and a writing style that is easy to skim and comprehend.

Here are some other things we know about our Gen X parents:

Relationships

Gen X parents place great importance on the value of relationships. The quest for give and take and the desire for community are needs educators must meet with warm, personal communication and an invitation to be a member of the team. Opportunities for group discussion are welcome and e-mail and text messages that have the personal touch are not just read, but valued.

Options

Parents in this generation value options and seek custom solutions to their problems. Do you have two different programs for high school diplomas? Hooray! Market the heck out of them and explain the pros and cons. Offer opportunities for discussion, questions and first-hand looks.

There's no such thing as too much good information. Make it clear and say it loud when you can provide custom solutions to individual circumstances. For example, showcase an additional bus that provides students transportation home from after-school activities as a benefit for parents and an indication of the district's willingness to work with parents to help children succeed.

Authority

Generation X parents, as a group, often show indifference to rules and a general distrust of institutions and authority figures. Therefore, it is important for school leaders to build relationships with parent groups at the first opportunity. These parents develop tremendous loyalty to what they believe in. Your job is to harness that energy and creativity to serve the greater school community.

Find an effective way to raise important issues — the need for additional staff, a new auditorium, new classroom space, or the district's response to the economic downturn —

and engage the parent community in its resolution. This is a generation of problem-solvers who thrive on collaboration and accomplishment.

Getting the Lay of the Land

With her Baby Boomer superintendent's guidance and support, our principal Mary Beth decided to organize a focus group of parents. The report from this group confirmed her suspicion that today's parents reject the traditional ways most schools use to communicate with them.

For example, she learned that the parents considered the newsletter she regarded as her signature communication vehicle as too long and cumbersome. What they did value was the way they were greeted when they came into the school's front office, and they expressed a strong desire to be considered as part of the school team.

Mary Beth developed a new strategy grounded in understanding and meeting the expectations of Gen X parents. Her objective was to build the parent relationships necessary to meet her ultimate goal: student achievement. She targeted the parents of kindergartners and identified ways she could connect them to the school. Let's take a look at what she did.

Creating a Virtual First Impression

The parent focus group noted that timing for mail — snail mail, that is — was off because kindergarten information arrived in parents' homes just a few weeks before spring orientation. Gen X parents have been browsing and blogging for months, sometimes years, searching for information. Spring is too late. Public schools compete with private schools, home schooling and child-care centers where enrollment decisions are made months before public school kindergarten registration.

Consider this e-mail Mary Beth received from one father:

My wife and I have a daughter born on June 12, 2004. She will be able to start school in 2009. We are expecting another daughter any day now. From what I know, she would normally have to start kindergarten in 2011 since she would be born in October. Considering we would like the children to be close in grades, is there any way for her to start kindergarten in 2010?

Shaking your head in disbelief? Gen Xers get it. Dad's e-mail request is well within their norm. Accustomed to information on demand, they create for themselves a new environment that allows them to decide among a wide variety of choices and to expect individual solutions based on their particular wants and needs.

School leaders must embrace the Internet as their communication tool to create a solid first impression with these Gen X parents. Failure to offer a dynamic Web site or to

answer e-mail promptly raises cautionary flags about the school's relevance in a wired world.

Thanks to Mary Beth's hard work, a Gen X parent looking for information about Park Street Elementary now will not be disappointed. Any time, any day, parents can go to the district's Web site and find answers to their questions. In fact, each elementary school's homepage offers a special link that takes parents of pre-schoolers to a page that describes the kindergarten program, introduces teachers, and provides an opportunity for parent-school interaction via e-mail.

There's more. Dates of school tours for the parents of prospective students are announced regularly and parents are encouraged to visit. This September's tour is already booked with parents of next September's kindergarten class. That's not surprising.

Using the Telephone to Reach Out

Mary Beth understood that Gen X parents are sensitive to customer service. She realized that time and goodwill spent building an informative Internet presence can be quickly destroyed by an impatient, disinterested or intimidating voice at the other end of a parental call to the front office. One of the focus group parents described turning to a private school after a telephone slight from the public one. "They told me to call back in six months," she said. "I wasn't about to wait."

If you don't take charge of the telephone, you'll spend more time mending the effects of a rude exchange than planning steps to help people do it right the first time. One customer service study estimates it takes 16 friendly actions to repair one unfriendly encounter (Barlow, 1996).

Pinpointing the right people is the starting point. An office staffer who believes the parent world should be seen, but not heard, should not be answering the phone in your front office. Instead, look for a smart, patient voice that conveys a smile. The right combination of knowledge and affability sends the message you intend.

Changing the culture and working conditions for office staff requires thought and intention. The re-culturing of front office can happen quickly when school leaders set the expectation and tone. Mary Beth offered guidance and training for staff, and they quickly established new protocols that supported the new vision.

Office staff members prepared consistent, concise and cogent answers to common questions. Each parent call is now followed up by recording the parent's name and address into a database and mailing a postcard with the Web site address and a handwritten message of welcome.

Parent calls are an opportunity for the school to strut its stuff. Courteous, helpful responses and follow-up are critical pieces in making the project a success.

After the Postcards, the Events

At Park County Schools, you'll see a strong investment in kindergarten orientation and registration events. The strategy is to reassure parents: we know what we're doing; we want you here; we love children.

Invitations to these events are accompanied by concise, bulleted information that anticipates questions and leads parents through the process. Jargon is replaced by clarity. The old focus on rules and regulations is gone. The new orientation is all about show and tell. Parents move around the building, meeting with the principal and kindergarten teachers as they experience their child's future routine.

A few weeks after the orientation, the parents return to the school with their children for registration. A carefully choreographed experience starts from the time they walk into the school and are greeted in a clutter-free lobby. There's no waiting, because each parent and child has been given an appointment time.

From the sign-in table, parent and child are escorted through a circuit around the school. The first stop is a room where the school counselor is seated. After the child is comfortable, the parent leaves and moves on to meet with a school staff member who walks the parent through paper work. With the school counselor, the child visits a kindergarten classroom in session. Parent and child are reunited in the library where refreshments accompany a friendly pre-screening process. When the good-byes are exchanged, the children each receive a "goody bag" that includes a book. A school bus awaits, and parent and child are treated to a ride around the neighborhood block.

* * * * *

Note to boomers: The tables have turned. The generation gap you bemoaned with your parents' generation is back to haunt you. Generation Xers are here and with them a communication style that requires attention and adaptation.

The days of mailing a 16-page newsletter with expectations that it will be read or announcing a new dismissal schedule without parent input are over. Historical events and cultural influences have resulted in a new way we all approach public institutions. There is increasing pressure on all our parents to be wary and skeptical. Understanding this behavior is important to developing a strategy for school improvement through strong, long-lasting relationships with parents.

References

Barlow, J. and C. Moeller. (1996). *A complaint is a gift*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Howe, N. and W. Strauss. (2007). "The next 20 years: how customers and workforce attitudes will evolve," *Harvard Business Review* 85(7/8): 41-52.

The Importance of Data in Promoting Student Achievement

BY BRYAN BLAVATT

Blavatt is superintendent emeritus of the Boone County, Ky., School District.

As you transition into the role of superintendent, you will face a new and broad array of responsibilities. Decisions about everything ranging from budgets, construction and curriculum to personnel, regulations and technology now rest on your shoulders.

While you listen and learn to balance the needs of the district and the school board with the needs of your students and teachers, the importance of data-driven decisions becomes clear. The underlying mission of schools, and your primary goal as district leader, is to do “what’s best for students.” This means that every area of student performance, instructional effectiveness and support services should be benchmarked and measured in order to make recommendations for improvement. Consequently, how can you measure the success of a change or improvement without presenting quantitative results along with qualitative impressions?

The success of your district and your success as its superintendent can be evaluated only through programs of reflection with quantitative means to improve, even if this system is not implicitly required by the school board. Having solid, reliable data about students and programs from a local, state, regional and national perspective is paramount in building solid metrics for success of learning and learning outcomes assessment. It’s hard to argue with data.

Today’s superintendents face many challenges, including dealing with dwindling funding for education, moving classroom education beyond the basics to prepare students for an increasingly complex world, integrating and serving ever-increasing and varied populations of students, and recruiting the best and brightest teachers in support of educational excellence. The only way to combat and effect change in these areas is by gathering and presenting data that support a specific course of action.

Educators need to know six fundamental concepts in order to be data-driven: emphasize learning; guide and report on student learning; connect standards, assessment and instruction; move standards from paper to the classroom; align content standards and assessment; and measure the process and outcomes.

So, how does one connect these concepts to the classroom experience? The focus in the classroom must be on content and the ability to continuously assess the level at which students are learning that content. A process to monitor student progress must be established. What are we teaching the students and how do we know they are learning it? Continuous assessment and performance testing are necessary tools in assessing student progress.

For this system of measurement to be relevant and successful, superintendents and principals must partner to provide visible, vigorous, ongoing and enthusiastic support for high learning expectations. To be most effective, the district offices should publish an annual progress report for each school about both cognitive and non-cognitive data affecting learning outcomes. Data regarding the degree to which the standards of an effective school are being met must be present. A formal evaluation of outcomes that can be presented to the board of education and other stakeholders also will enhance support for the strategic plan.

As superintendent, you will be responsible for monitoring and evaluating student performance at each school in your district. These evaluations are based on three objectives: meeting or exceeding student learning benchmarks; attaining a high level of parent and student satisfaction; and adhering to the standards of responsible and ethical administrative practices. Collecting and maintaining data on these objectives will be critical in fulfilling the goals of the strategic plan from year to year.

To facilitate the collection and comparison of essential data, AASA has partnered with the National Research Center for College and University Admissions™ to provide educators with valuable information about the students we serve, their academic goals, college and career interests and much more.

NRCCUA®, a non-profit organization, has been connecting students with higher education opportunities for more than 37 years. Through their educational research instrument, they will be able to capture and compare data from our districts to others on a regional and national scale in support of our strategic and operational goals. This partnership will be able to provide valuable “actionable intelligence” about issues like first-generation status, interest levels in science, technology, engineering and math, students’ post-secondary goals and desires and much more. This is a critical need in filling in the gaps for data-driven strategic planning.

NRCCUA provides this program and research data as a free service to students, educators, schools and districts. Students who participate will also benefit from access to the My College Options® program, a comprehensive, free online college planning service.

With the participation and support of superintendents, principals, educators and counselors, AASA and NRCCUA hope to maximize the accessibility and application of educational research data for school districts nationwide. To learn more, please feel free to contact us by phone at 816 525-2201 or check out our web page at NRCCUA.org.

Advice for New Superintendents

BY DARRELL G. FLOYD

Floyd is superintendent of schools in Stephenville, Texas, and is also a superintendent search consultant.

The long, arduous superintendent selection process is concluding and now reality is setting in. You will be the next superintendent of schools in a new school district. What now? What steps should you take to ensure a smooth transition and a successful beginning?

- **Communicate early and often.** Begin to communicate with the key players in the community and school district. Find out what is really important to the school board members, educators, community members and taxpayers in that community. There are several different ways to get this done, such as face-to-face interviews, electronic surveys and receptions.
- **Do your homework.** Thoroughly research the school district's data. Monitor the curriculum, instruction and academic efforts of the past. Leave no stone unturned in this area. Academic achievement is the area in which you will be judged the most (and rightly so).
- **Don't make hasty changes.** Every school district has challenges, but most also have traditions, historical achievements and honors of the past. Even though the school board may have hired you as a "change agent," don't make the mistake of changing things immediately. Keep your school board informed about proposed and forthcoming changes, but don't move too quickly. If you do, you could lose the support of the staff in the process.
- **Get out and about in the community.** Especially in the first few months of your tenure, begin to build relationships within the community. Make sure you are visible around town. Get involved in the chamber of commerce and at least one strong community service organization. This helps build bridges between the school district and the community it serves. It also establishes good will for the new superintendent and lets the community know that you have a vested interest in doing your part to improve the community as a whole.
- **Learn all you can (quickly) about the money/finances of the district.** Although student achievement is your main focus, it takes money to educate students. And nothing will hamper your job more quickly than having a school district's finances fail on your watch as the new superintendent. If your district doesn't have a strong CFO, get one -- your success will depend on it.

- **Maintain your own mentor network.** Nobody knows everything. Those who attempt to bluff their way through and try to make everyone believe they know everything, or have experienced everything, are destined for failure. It's not a show of weakness to ask advice; it's a show of strength. Make sure you have a small circle of mentors you can turn to for anything.
- **Be visible at schools and school activities.** Employees, students, parents and community members want to see their new superintendent at their schools and at their activities. It shows that the superintendent supports what is important to them. Don't focus on just one area of activities, such as athletics. In the first six months to a year, try to attend as many different kinds of extracurricular events as possible.
- **Listen, listen, listen.** As you make your rounds in schools and to community events, listen for what is said and what is not said. People truly appreciate being listened to. It builds respect and shows them that you value their input.
- **Develop a game plan for solving at least one major issue in your first year.** After gathering input from all stakeholders, quickly begin to work with your school board and outside experts to develop a plan for solving at least one major problem that the district is facing. Your goal should be to look back 12 months from now and see great progress in at least one major area. This creates a baseline on which to build in for the future.
- **Develop at least three non-negotiables of your own and then verbalize them often.** Folks need to know what you stand for and what is not negotiable for you. You must reiterate those non-negotiables to everyone concerned at every opportunity you have. Some examples of superintendent non-negotiables are:
 1. Keep the students' best interests at heart at all times, in everything you do.
 2. Be professional at all times.
 3. When problems arise, follow the chain of command in solving those problems.
- **Nurture your board–superintendent relationships.** Find out what is important to individual board members and the school board as a whole. Whatever it is, it is now important to you, too. You will not be able to solve all of their problems, but they need to know you are making an effort. It will ensure your future employment.
- **Set goals and expectations for your administrative staff.** Your administrative staff will make or break you. Surround yourself with excellent, loyal administrators. Set lofty, yet achievable goals and expectations for them and let them hear you reiterating those goals often. Then monitor your administrative staff to ensure they accomplish those goals and objectives.
- **Don't forget about your own professional development.** As author Stephen Covey says, you've got to "sharpen your own saw." If you don't, you will not move forward in your career as an effective school superintendent. One way to do that is to maintain membership in one or more professional organizations (such as AASA) that offer ongoing and valuable workshops, conferences, webinars and other professional development opportunities.

Contact Us

[Robert S. McCord](#), Editor

The American Association of School Administrators is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders across the United States.