

Public Advocacy

What Parents Want

Public relations studies can help win back public school supporters



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RIGHT NOW, BY JUST ABOUT ANY measure, charter schools and other alternatives are winning the public relations battle in our country. The 2013 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll on education indicates 68 percent of respondents favor charter schools and 67 percent support new charter schools opening in their communities.

While the research supporting the rapid rise of charter schools is mixed, at best, it is clear that this public perception and policy shift would not have been possible without a well-funded, 30-year campaign. This campaign has adapted its key messages and policy frames to suit the times and values of a majority of Americans.

Capitalism, privatization, and the introduction of market-based competition for students, staff, and resources are seen as representing America's best hope for

regaining U.S. economic prosperity and world dominance.

At the same time, to justify the introduction of market-based strategies, American public schools are consistently portrayed as in a constant state of crisis and failure. To combat this pervasive narrative, public school officials need to offer a compelling alternative—one that speaks to the real concerns many U.S. adults now have about choice, opportunity, competitiveness, and economic well-being.

RECENT STUDIES YIELD INSIGHTS

Recent public relations studies offer insights into what parents want and what they value when it comes to public education. The studies are supported by disparate groups with conservative as well as more progressive roots.

Taken together, the results point to a growing disconnect between policymakers and parents regarding public education, and between public school officials and the parents, teachers, principals, and other key constituents they purport to represent.

In a 2013 study of parental preferences and trade-offs regarding public education, The Thomas B. Fordham Institute found that all parents want their children to attend schools with a strong core

curriculum in reading and mathematics, followed by an emphasis on science, technology, and engineering.

Nearly all parents also want schools to help their children develop good study habits and self-discipline, strong critical thinking skills, strong life skills, and strong verbal and written communication skills.

Once these basics are accounted for, demographic differences do emerge, according to the Fordham study. White parents polled are somewhat more focused than African-American or Hispanic parents on schools that help children learn good study habits and self-discipline, but as a group, are less concerned than parents of other races about getting their children into top-tier colleges.

As a group, African-American parents place more value than white parents on diverse learning environments and high test scores. African-American, Hispanic, and low-income parents place more emphasis than white parents on schools that prepare students well for state tests.

Family income also impacts parent preferences. Parents in the lowest income group rank graduating from high school with job skills and training in careers that do not require college degrees much more highly than more affluent parents, who tend to prize critical thinking skills more.

These same low-income families also ranked helping students understand why college degrees matter more highly than more affluent families, indicating a desire that school personnel help them deliver this important message.

To assist schools with packaging their offerings and marketing their wares to parents more effectively, the Fordham study also identified market niches for schools to consider for possible growth opportunities.



ONLINE EXTRA

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VALUES DISCONNECT

A North Carolina study on parent and citizen views on public education offers some different lessons for those hoping to retain student enrollment in the wake of growing charter school competition.

Sponsored by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, the study found that most believe public education is vitally important to the state and its future. However, parents and citizens are more motivated by values and messages that appeal to individual rather than societal benefits.

Public schools are seen as better at delivering on societal goals than on individual student outcomes, including academic achievement. Forcing parents to choose between looking out for their own children and attending to the needs of other people's children, or of society as a whole, creates anxiety. That anxiety may push parents to seek charter schools, vouchers, and other public school alternatives.

As the Reynolds research summary indicates, "Generating greater support for public schools depends on rebuilding the social contract by providing people with confidence that they don't have to choose between personal aspirations and social ones."

The apparent disconnect between the values most frequently shared by public school officials and the values most prized by parents and citizens indicates an opportunity for improvement in public school marketing and communications.

By shifting the message from societal

benefit to student benefits, public school officials can start to make a dent in public opinion.

A MEANS TO AN END

Given the shaky economy and growing concerns about lagging U.S. competitiveness in education, business, and other areas, it's understandable that more parents and community members are anxious about their ability to provide their children with the kind of education they need.

Parents recognize that the knowledge-based economy has shifted permanently in favor of high-skill jobs and the ability to learn, relearn, and then learn again. They also view education as a means to an end. It's valued as a resource and a choice that will help their children succeed in life, much more so than as a treasured public good that must be protected at all costs.

Not surprisingly, a relentless focus on public school systems and infrastructure needs, while compelling to school board members and superintendents, falls flat when it comes to communicating with parents, voters, and other citizens.

Once parents understand how public schools can benefit their children, they're more likely to advocate for the needs of their school or district. They need to know that their child is safe, has a great teacher, is being challenged academically, and that their involvement in their child's education is welcomed and appreciated.

Parents also want to know that their

child isn't going to get lost in the shuffle. For many principals and classroom teachers, this means they need to increase the communication flow to and from parents, and make themselves more accessible for opportunities to interact with parents and family members.

GAUGING PUBLIC OPINION

The need to compete for students and budget resources also is why more public school districts are creating standards and providing training on customer service. They also are conducting "secret shopper" campaigns to see how schools measure up when it comes to rolling out the red carpet for current and potential parents and students.

Since public policy shifts often follow public opinion shifts, this important work merits attention by school board members, superintendents, and senior staff members, as well as by school principals and public information officers.

To compete, school boards may have to shift resources to provide more marketing and communications support to schools, while seeking private funding and partnerships that support more proactive school marketing and public relations.

Using data from national polls as well as from state and local research can help school officials frame messages appropriately and effectively. Public opinion research also should help school officials determine priorities, develop strategies, and select communication avenues to use for maximum benefit.

Parents value having choices in school options for their children. The key to success isn't fighting choice. Instead, it's making sure that the public school choices your district offers are seen as the best path for securing a bright future for each and every child.

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