



Communicating Effectively With Administrators

We need to make the case for our services. No one else will do it for us.

Administrators are the most influential stakeholders affecting school psychologists' role and effectiveness. Not only do they hold the purse strings on increasingly tight budgets, but they also can be essential to attaining buy-in for programs or initiatives from staff in a school building or district. Consider the following tips for communicating with administrators to ensure that your outreach is efficient and effective. Keep in mind that many of the issues to consider and strategies outlined also are appropriate for school board members, another key stakeholder group with regard to budgeting and district priorities.

GENERAL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

Calling Card Tactics are universal outreach strategies to increase visibility, raise awareness, improve collaboration, create an environment for stakeholder buy-in, and help you become a change agent in your school district. Many of these strategies can be directed at staff and parents as means of improving understanding of and support for your work within the broader school community, which in turn can help frame how administrators view you.

- Activities: writing school newsletter articles, having morning coffee with administrators, distributing parent handouts, creating a professional website, holding brown-bag discussions with staff.
- Consider creating a short monthly or quarterly newsletter for staff updating them on issues or initiatives on which school psychologists in the district are working. Include useful tips, if possible, and data on how students are benefiting. Distribute a handout to parents on a related issue. Send a copy of the newsletter to your local school board members as an FYI.

Action Requests identify a specific need within the school or district that you can help address (e.g., implementing new programs, preserving effective programs, redistributing existing resources)

- Activities: holding meetings with decision makers, conducting surveys or needs assessments, collecting and analyzing data, presenting at school board/administrative team meetings, collaborating with allied colleagues, building coalitions with allied professionals, conducting in-service trainings.
- Consider offering to conduct a needs assessment to help address a concern of your administrator's. Be prepared to present the data in an easy to understand format and make specific suggestions on how to address the issue.

Crisis Communication—strategies directed toward protecting or defending challenges to reputation or status. In early 2009, NASP embarked on a crisis communication campaign to help school psychologists protect their positions within shrinking district and state budgets.

- Activities: testifying before school boards or budget committees; defending the need for specific programming to administrators in meetings.
- Consider getting your crisis plan together now. Don't wait until the crisis occurs. Establish a team (know who knows decision-makers best, who is a good writer, who is an effective speaker/presenter, who has data). Identify possible data needs and start collecting. Develop key messages. And don't forget that you will be much better positioned to address a potential crisis if you have increased your visibility and built positive relationships through effective Calling Card and Action Request outreach over time.

REMEMBER: EXERCISE YOUR DATA MUSCLE!

Data is a valuable commodity for administrators, both in understanding a problem and in demonstrating a need and/or progress toward goals. It is also critical to making your case in almost every instance. School psychologists are the best equipped professionals in the building to collect and interpret data. Doing so will help students and enhance your value.

MEETING WITH ADMINISTRATORS

Arranging a meeting with your administrator is an essential part of planning for a new year. Additionally, regular meetings with your administrators should appear on your calendar throughout the school year for continued planning, formative assessments, problem solving, and data monitoring. You are likely to have a limited time to meet with your administrator; therefore, planning your communication strategy ahead of time will make these meetings more successful. It is essential to plan for these meetings in advance to ensure that you use the best strategies, organize your thoughts effectively, and make your points easy for your administrators to understand and remember.

- Know your audience. When crafting the information that you will provide and determining how you will share it, consider your administrator's:
 - level of knowledge or awareness
 - primary concerns and expectations
 - covert or overt agendas
 - perspective
 - possible barriers to understanding
 - competing considerations
 - ability or likelihood to take action
 - level of commitment and what is in it for them
- Come to the meeting with a goal and plan for how you will accomplish it. Bring:
 - data that support and illustrate your case
 - 1–2 page written summary of your information so that your message lingers
- When defining your problem, consider shaping it according to all populations that are impacted.
 - Students (academic scores, behavior data, attendance, referrals)

- Staff (morale, skills, collaboration, classroom climate, development)
- Parents (involvement, collaboration, communication)
- Administrators (AYP, school climate, resource allocation, legal requirements, district agendas, academic priorities)
- Community (access to services, collaboration, involvement, safety)
- Suggest actions or solutions: Have as detailed information as possible regarding suggested solutions.
 - What needs to be done? What existing resources can be tapped to help? How will staff be impacted?
 - Indicate what role you intend to play in the solution's implementation and monitoring of effectiveness. Let your administrator know how you can help.
 - Present the solutions in terms of the benefits they will bring to the school and the administrator (e.g., improved student/staff outcomes, school climate, better use of resources).
 - Frame benefits from the administrator's point of view.

DEVELOP YOUR KEY MESSAGES

In any communication, people typically only remember 2–3 points at most. It is critical to determine the most important points that you want your audience to retain. Simplicity, clarity, and relevance are key. Avoid acronyms and other technical language.

- Pick your main message. State it at the outset.
- Back it up with 2–3 key messages and how the issue creates a barrier to learning.
- Provide personal examples and stories to put a “face on the message.”
- Offer specific solution suggestions.

When crafting your communications plan, consider incorporating one or all of these three messages when working with administrators:

- School psychologists are a unique, essential, and valuable part of the school team.
- In today's rough economic climate, your school psychologist is a potentially untapped resource.
- Support the well-being of your school/district by supporting school psychologists' role and funding.

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