



Chapter 12 Community Reporting

Summary of Survey and Focus Group Research Study

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Introduction

What follows is a summary of the key findings of the Boddy Media Group's research on school-community communications. This study was conducted on behalf of Heartland Area Education Agency (AEA 11) in Johnston, Iowa.

The following key findings are derived from analysis of three primary research components: 6 **focus groups** with parents, community members, and educators; 19 **telephone interviews** with educators, education communication specialists, and community members; and 1030 completed **parent surveys**.

The goal of this research was to identify key needs among parents and/or community members related to school-community communications. This research study also worked to identify key components of effective school-community communications.

If you have questions and/or comments related to this research summary or the project itself, contact Jane Neff at jneff133@aol.com.

The Parents

Note for reading this section: The findings detailed here are primarily gathered from the parent survey. However, it is also important to note the parent focus group largely reflects the same attitudes and areas of interest/concern.

Results show the majority of parents are only somewhat satisfied with the amount and quality of communication between themselves and school representatives, with their child's classroom teacher as the exception. The majority of these parents in AEA 11 (56%) are very satisfied with the amount and quality of communication with their child's teacher, but lack that same amount of confidence with their child's principal (35% "very satisfied"), district administration (16%), and school board (14%). Not surprisingly, the higher up in the school "hierarchy," the more out of touch parents feel with school contacts. More than one fourth of these parents are dissatisfied with the communications they receive with the school district's administration *and* with the school board. Other key survey findings include:

- Parents who say they are very confident they know what type of education their children are getting are more likely to feel their children are getting a good education.
- Notes/Letters from teachers and parent-teacher conferences are most trusted forms of communication for these parents. Their children are close runners-up.
- Mass communications such as newspapers, radio, and internet are less likely to be trusted forms of communication for these parents.
- Just over one-in-five respondents say they attend school-related meetings and forums and use these as a trusted information source.



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- Newsletters are the most often seen form of communication for these parents.
- Nearly three quarters of these parents say they will definitely read these communications.
- These parents tend to be more concerned about issues that have a *direct* impact on their children. For instance, parents in this study tend to be more interested in student achievement and health/safety issues than school finance/budget issues.
- Communications regarding school sports are interesting, but may be overdone. At the very least, these parents indicate they do not view enhanced school-community communications as more sports news.
- Current school-community communications do not appear to adequately address parent concerns (see below).

Survey results show four issues rate equally with parents as top priority concerns.

Generally, the information needs of these parents (and those in the focus group) reflect these concerns.

Content Area/Issue	Percent Saying Very Important	Overall Rating* (Range 1.6 – 2.7)
Overall Student Achievement	79	2.7
Overall Academic Curriculum	78	2.7
School Health and Safety Measures	77	2.7
School Discipline Policies	76	2.7

Focus group findings back up this quantitative study. Parents want to know their children are safe. They are concerned that teachers are distracted by disruptive students that may both threaten their children’s safety and/or distract the teacher from focusing on student achievement. And in Iowa, perhaps the last bastion of local control, it seems logical parents here would place a higher rating than they do in national studies on the overall academic curriculum. They was to exercise their rights to “have a say.”

Sex. Is there anything going on at school about this? There was finally something in the paper about that inhalants stuff. I want to know what’s going on at school.

The teachers are overwrought, just having to put out a lot of fires.

The challenge isn’t there academically.

I’ll tell you what the problem is right now . . . the kid gets lost in the gray area. It only takes one or two students to disrupt the whole class. Teachers don’t have the authority to kick them out, to correct the problem.



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Issues of what might be considered “second tier” importance for these parents include:

Content Area/Issue	Percent Saying Very Important	Overall Rating* (Range 1.6 – 2.7)
Student-Teacher Ratio	69	2.6
Use of Technology in Schools	64	2.5
Bell Times and Schedules	63	2.4
Student Standardized Test Scores	60	2.4
Parent Involvement in Schools	60	2.4

Issues considered “very important” by fewer than 40% of these parents make up the bottom tier of concerns:

Content Area/Issue	Percent Saying Very Important	Overall Rating* (Range 1.6 – 2.7)
Transportation Issues	39	2.0
Sports	35	2.0
Dollars Spent on Buildings and Grounds	34	2.0
Integration/Diversity Issues	30	1.8
Teacher Salaries	23	1.7
Administrative Salaries	18	1.6

The Community

Community members in these discussions/interviews range from those generally satisfied with current communications efforts to those who simply beg for more, more, more. Largely, however, most see no real substitute for hands-on involvement in the schools, and quite a few add that they *and* the schools do not live up to their obligations to each other. The schools could do a better job of reaching out. The community could do a better job of reaching in, they say.

Three words: Invite us in.

I agree, but we have to be a part of it, too. I feel like I could go in any time, but I don't.

Additional key findings from these community focus groups include:

- Need for more true partnerships between school and community. Some say they do not see much true partnering right now, but they see good communications as a natural outgrowth of those relationships and good communications as a tool for building those relationships.
- Community members want information they can use to “sell” their districts. They say they need to know about student achievement (though simple test scores are not



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enough); district goals, progress toward meeting them and logic behind them; parental commitment to district; and curriculum and how it fits into the overall goals.

- A mix of hard data (e.g., test scores, budget figures) and anecdotal information (e.g., student success stories, information on teacher in-service) is ideal for these respondents. They say no set of test scores can tell them how their school is doing, but they also want a way to gauge their school and student achievement.
- Current school communications tend to focus only on immediate needs. These respondents say they only hear about their districts' needs when it is time to pass a bond issue or when the school needs their help. They ask for a more proactive communication strategy which gives them an ongoing look at the school, its areas of success, *and* its needs.
- Community members tend to agree with parents that they see too much communication energy wasted in sports reporting. (Note: these two groups are not mutually exclusive. Many of these community members are also parents.)
- Community members who are also parents tend to be more involved in their school and aware of what is going on in their districts.
- Face-to-face communications are ideal. These respondents acknowledge the value of the media, school newsletters, and other mass communications forms but say nothing beats coffee with the principal when it comes to communication. Community members acknowledge the challenges presented by these one-on-one encounters, but say they *and* the schools should use every chance they get to meet face-to-face. These meetings might take place in real community settings and/or in-school settings for non-school meetings. The "meetings" might be formal, involving groups like the Lions Club or school improvement committees, or more casual encounters between community members and district employees.
- School-community communications sometimes are written in "education-ese." These respondents say they want clear, concise communications, which give them the information they need in the easiest-to-read format. And, they add, a picture is worth a thousand words. These respondents indicate that graphs, charts, and photos of school activities increase the usefulness of school communications.

Community members in this study who are most satisfied with their school's communications often mention a mix of elements:

- Visible administrators who are actively involved in the community (not just school-related activities);
- Educators who pursue community service learning projects – getting both teacher and students out into the community. Teachers and students are seen as important ambassadors for the schools to the community;
- Educators and business people actively involved in school-to-work or other proactive, pro-exchange initiatives; and
- Relatively frequent, digestible reports on not just sports but other classroom and academic activities. Some of this information comes directly from schools, but many non-parents find themselves relying more on local media.