Communication and Listening When Viewpoints Differ

Article Communications & Public Relations, School Administrator Magazine
SEPTEMBER 02, 2024
Appears in **September 2024: School Administrator (https://www.aasa.org/publications/publication/september-2024-school-administrator)**.

The superintendent of a politically diverse school district shares her six principles for bringing community members together behind children



Erin Kane (standing center), superintendent in Douglas County, Colo., has put her leadership principles to the test while diffusing polarization in a diverse school community. PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUGLAS COUNTY, COLO., SCHOOL DISTRICT

Like many communities throughout the country, ours has experienced conflict and division that really came to a head during the pandemic. Members of our community have expressed concerns over issues such as mask wearing in schools, books in our libraries, the school district's equity policy, and how to keep our schools secure.

When I became the superintendent of the Douglas County School District in Colorado in 2022, one of my stated goals was to bring our community together so we all would rally around our common cause: creating bright futures for our 62,000 students. They attend 90 schools across 850 square miles in a range of settings from suburban cities to small towns to rural farming areas.

top-scoring school district in the Denver metropolitan area and one of the few districts nationwide to have met or exceeded its 2019 (pre-pandemic) student test scores in every subject and every grade. We're one of the only school districts in Colorado to increase proficiency levels across all student subgroups. The district is rated No. 11 on Test Prep Insight's list of the 250 "most envied" school districts in the country.

All of this serves as the important backdrop for what I think is a remarkable accomplishment. Eighteen months into my tenure as superintendent, Douglas County voters in November 2023 passed a $66 million tax initiative to give 9 percent raises to our teachers and staff. We achieved this election success because we all came together in a desire to retain great professionals in the local schools that help our students thrive. It marked a turning point.

Differing Viewpoints

When serving an expansive community such as ours, it's inevitable that families, staff and community members will have different perspectives about how best to serve our kids. At the end of the day, we must remind each other that we want the same end result.

These are my fundamental leadership principles for diffusing polarization, guided by the belief all stakeholders want what's best for students.

→No. 1: Presume positive intent.

It is all too easy today to make assumptions about those with whom you disagree. Our staff, families and community members all want what is best for all kids, but we may have different approaches. A parent who believes in stronger gun control and one who believes teachers or staff should have the option to be armed share the same core concern: They both want to know their own child is safe at school.

Start with the core concern and work with everyone to get to a solution that reassures both parents and keeps all of our students safe. There are many common-ground, commonsense solutions out there. Work with your community to find one. I believe people generally have positive intentions and will give you the constructive feedback you need to solve problems and grow and develop as a leader if you make the space to listen.

→No. 2: Lead with the voice of reason.

Remember their concerns usually are not directed at you personally, so try to avoid being defensive.

Flesh out the specific concerns they have for their own children in your district rather than responding to national narratives, hyperbole or sweeping generalizations. Then respond to those specific concerns. You are not debating national politics — you are responding to how issues are handled in your local schools and listening to everyone's feedback.

→No. 3: Genuinely listen to all voices.

It is human to generalize what other people think, what they believe and what they want. However, when we do this, we are almost always wrong. People are incredibly complex and cannot be easily placed into monolithic "buckets," even though that is exactly what our society and media often try to do. For our families, it always comes back to their own children. Your challenge is to find that connection to their children in your district.

Avoid making assumptions about what people believe and why. Instead, ask them what they believe and why, and seek to understand where they are coming from. Focus on people who are part of your school community. Try to understand each person's views, hopes and fears in the context of their own children and families. Often people have had a personal experience contributing to their particular views. Listen first and speak last.

→No. 4: Understand that it is not enough to be neutral.

As leaders, we often try to stay neutral when it comes to contentious issues. While staying neutral may help keep the polarization from getting worse, it will not diffuse it. Try to represent the viewpoints and good intentions of all "sides" to those who have opposing views and opinions. In the words of author Arthur Brooks, "true moral courage is standing up to those with whom you agree on behalf of those with whom you disagree." Never misrepresent someone else's intent or use hyperbole.

→No. 5: Be mindful of your language.

If a particular issue or topic sparks emotion for some in your community, find another way to talk about that issue. Talk specifically about what you are going to do for students and what you are not going to do.

them. The reality is the vast majority of us are all dedicated to equal opportunities for all students and for making sure all students have the resources they need to succeed. So talk about how, specifically, this works in your district. Specificity and clarity help avoid hyperbolic thinking and sweeping generalizations about your district.

→No. 6: Invite your critics in.

Ask for feedback from all community members, including your biggest critics. When people criticize your school district, ask them to meet for coffee. Ask questions and listen to their feedback. Try to understand what motivates them and how this issue impacts their family. Most importantly, check your own biases at the door. What you will hear is almost always someone's fears or concerns, and often his or her perspective may lead you to consider something you have not previously thought about.

Say things like, "I'm going to reach out to you in a month, and I want you to tell me how I'm doing." And then actually do it. Many people are surprised when I follow through with this promise. They share with me that it helps them to truly feel heard, understood and valued.

Advancing Together

After two years of implementing these six leadership principles, I see great things happening in our school district.

The voters' passage of the $66 million tax initiative to give pay increases to our teachers and staff has, in turn, increased morale and pride among our staff. This has translated into more trust and partnership with our families and community members in a school district that had experienced considerable drama, including changes in the makeup of the school board, over the past two decades.

Our staff, our families, our students, our community and I are feeling incredibly proud to be part of the Douglas County School District. I encourage others to try some of these communications and community relations strategies in their own school communities. You may be surprised to discover that members of your community have more in common than you think.

Addressing these challenges effectively can unite a community and move everyone forward together for the betterment of the students we serve.

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