November/December 2018

What’s in this issue…

Adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed care, Pt. 2
In part two of the two-part overview of childhood trauma, read tips for putting information to action. Recommendations include communicating with and engaging staff, starting a community conversation and engaging parents and students.

How much information is too much?
Budget communications are important but tricky. It is essential to share enough to be effective and transparent, but not bury the public with difficult-to-understand details. The best approach is to define what your community wants and needs. Read the outline of questions and tips to help with those decisions.

The importance of being empathetic: Why feelings matter
The best school district communicators understand how students, parents, staff, administration, board and community leaders feel. This ability to empathize results in more effective communication that meets informational and emotional needs.

Measuring achievement is more than test scores
School success and student achievement are often measured by test scores, but the tests are only part of the story. Student success includes the myriad ways teachers monitor how students are doing and whether they can apply those lessons. Read tips for sharing your comprehensive assessment story.

Tips for new school board members
New school board members face a flood of information and a fast-paced schedule of district activities. The introduction to board service may seem overwhelming. These tips are a useful reference for helping your newest members be effective in their new role.

Insights for Parents: Reputation Management
Students lead active digital lives that could affect the opportunities they have now and in the future. It is important for parents to help them understand that they are building a reputation, and they must take steps to manage it online and offline.
In the October issue, we provided an overview of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma-informed care (TIC). This month, we will dive into communication and engagement strategies, specifically, communicating about ACEs and TIC with your various audiences including teachers, community members, parents, and students. We will also explore common activities to help engage and provide training on this topic.

**Communicating and engaging with staff**

Most educators are already keenly aware of the impact of ACEs on their students. However, many teachers do not have the tools or training they need to implement trauma-informed practices in their schools and classrooms. Some school districts have chosen to join TIC/ACEs learning collaboratives to support the study and advancement of TIC practices. These collaboratives connect educators from neighboring school districts to share in the ACEs/TIC training.

Books can also be an effective way to introduce classroom teachers to this topic. A popular choice for a TIC book study is “Fostering Resilient Learners.” ([www.ascd.org/publications/books/116014.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/116014.aspx)) by Kristin Souers and Pete Hall. Grounded in research and the authors’ experience working with trauma-affected students and their teachers, the book is designed to help cultivate a trauma-sensitive learning environment across content areas, grades and settings.

Once a common understanding of the topic has been established, consider working with staff to conduct a TIC self-assessment, such as the one available in the resources section of this article. Examine how your programs align with the five guiding principles of trauma-informed practice: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and empowerment.

As you work to build a community of support, advocacy, and shared learning around ACEs and TIC, consider some of these additional activities:

- Establish a TIC/ACE Professional Learning Community to promote shared learning, collaboration, and support.
- Provide training for district staff on principles of trauma-informed care and resilience.
- Perform and review organizational assessments.
- Provide opportunities for educational leaders to learn from experts in the field, including site visits to schools that have effectively implemented these practices.
- Begin identification and implementation of TIC practices needed to mitigate the impact of ACEs.
- Collaborate with community partners and service providers to better serve trauma-impacted families.

By understanding how to create and sustain a trauma-informed learning environment, you can offer a proactive, strength-building approach to supporting learning and success in life. Clear communication that empowers and engages staff is key.
Starting the community conversation
For many communities, talking about ACEs is something quite new. It is important to take the time to lay a strong foundation of shared knowledge and understanding. This can include developing a common vocabulary around social and emotional wellness, ACEs, and trauma-informed care. Many communities start these conversations with screenings of the documentaries “Paper Tigers” and “Resilience.”

“Paper Tigers” (https://kpjrfilms.co/paper-tigers/about-the-film) is set within and around the campus of Lincoln Alternative High School in rural Walla Walla, Washington. It asks the question, “What does it mean to be a trauma-informed school?” Featuring diary camera footage, the film follows six students over the course of the year. It also documents Lincoln High’s work to institute trauma-informed practices and reshape their approach to discipline.

“Resilience — the Biology of Stress & the Science of Hope” (https://kpjrfilms.co/resilience) illustrates the impacts of chronic stress on children’s brains. These stresses put students at a greater risk for disease, homelessness, prison time, and early death. However, the film also chronicles the effort to fight back. It highlights people in various sectors who serve as “buffering adults,” building relationships that help to counteract the impact of toxic stress in our communities.

By holding community screenings of one or both of these films, you can start a public dialogue about the impact of adverse childhood experiences and the roles we can all play to mitigate their effect. Strategies for hosting a successful community screening include:

• Collaborating with community-based organizations and healthcare partners to broaden reach and impact
• Providing food, childcare, and work-friendly times to remove barriers to attendance
• Hosting a public discussion following the screening to further explore the topic
• Creating a safe space where people are heard and respected, whatever their experience
• Having a panel of cross-sector partners available to discuss the issues from various perspectives
• Providing opportunities for people to learn more or access services
• Providing take-away materials and resources to support next steps

If there is sufficient community interest in the topic, consider collaborating with partners to host a community forum on Adverse Childhood Experiences and trauma-informed care. This forum could include training opportunities for service providers, deeper educational opportunities for parents and community members, and opportunities to connect with local service providers and resources. Other opportunities to communicate with your broader community on this topic include newsletter articles, website posts, and community resource fairs.

Enlisting and supporting parents
Research indicates that trauma is often intergenerational and people who live in poverty are at increased risk of experiencing adverse childhood events. Many of the traumas experienced by children are also experienced, either directly or secondarily, by their parents. If we are to truly mitigate the impact of ACEs, foster resiliency, and improve student social-emotional wellness, we need parents to be involved as active partners. Once school staff have a solid grounding in ACEs and TIC, they can start to share information and resources with parents. Strategies can include:

• Sharing the potential impact of trauma on parents and caregivers
• Sharing the research around the impact of trauma on children and how to reduce that impact (including the importance of a caring adult presence)
• Pointing parents toward community resources and services
• Sharing resilience-building strategies.

While many of these conversations are best suited for one-on-one engagement, parent education nights are a wonderful way to introduce the topic. Many parents are concerned about student behavior. Information on ACEs can help parents understand why their students (or their student’s peers) may be acting in certain ways. Education and information can foster increased empathy. Empathy can shift adult behavior. And that can have a direct impact on students. Tone and emotional connection are key here. These are sensitive topics. Make sure to create a safe, non-judgmental space where parents can learn, share, and ask questions. Seek and respond to feedback on how you are doing and how you can do it better. Many of these parents are experiencing trauma too. If we can provide opportunities for healing or growth, we may be able to break or reduce the cycle of trauma.

Student communications

Loving, supportive communications are key to creating a trauma-informed learning environment. But it’s not just about how you communicate with students. Giving students the tools to communicate with others can be incredibly powerful. Teaching positive communication techniques can help students navigate the challenges in their lives and improve both peer and adult relationships. Some schools choose to use a specific curriculum to support social-emotional development. Other districts develop their own approach. Topics that can help students build resilience include:

- Building self-care and self-advocacy skills
- Helping students learn how to navigate challenging peer and adult relationships
- Behavior management techniques
- Social skill development
- Developing skills related to non-violence and conflict resolution
- Empathy development

There is a strong research base linking a focus on social-emotional learning and improved student outcomes (both behavioral and academic). Building strong relationships with peers and teachers can significantly reduce the impact of ACEs. Clear, loving, and supportive communications are key to developing those relationships.

While these issues can sometimes appear intractable, there are tools and techniques that have been shown to reduce the impact of ACEs and help break the cycle of trauma. Increasing awareness, education, collaboration, and communication around this topic can help us build more trauma-informed learning environments and support students' healthy social-emotional development.

Resources

- Paper Tigers: https://kpjrfilms.co/paper-tigers
- Resilience: https://kpjrfilms.co/resilience
- Fostering Resilient Learners: www.ascd.org/publications/books/116014.aspx
- SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach: https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA14-4884/SMA14-4884.pdf

Contributed by Crystal Greene, communications consultant
How Much Information is Too Much?

When it comes to school budgets, the question of how much is too much is a good question. The spectrum ranges from publishing every financial document online to releasing only the bare minimum that is legally required. The related question is when to release information.

In general, the answer is the more — and the more often — the better; however, there is no one-size-fits-all answer. School districts should work with the public to determine what best fits the public's interests. Here is an outline for making those decisions.

Determine the purpose

Is the purpose of the public budget disclosures to satisfy legal requirements, to improve the district's image, to inform the public, to give patrons the data by which they can evaluate district decisions, to encourage public involvement in budget decisions, or is it all of those reasons? I hope it would be the latter. But each of those elements affects the type of information that is released and when.

Setting the table

If the district’s budget year starts July 1, now is the time to be informing the public (and reminding the staff) about the process. Explain how the budget is put together. Is it built from the ground up or from the top down? Is it based on the previous year’s budget with additions — or subtractions — for enrollment changes, increased/decreased costs of services, and salary adjustments? Or does it start from scratch each year, looking anew at programs and costs?

Show how the public is involved. At which points in the process is public testimony encouraged? Are there public members on mini-budget committees at individual schools or only on the district budget advisory committee?

Include the deadlines in the budget process, and explain how and why the deadlines are set.

Strive to inform, not to justify or sugarcoat. Lengthy explanations are not needed. Clarity is essential.

Report to the investors

Keep the information flowing about district budgeting and spending, whether monthly or — at the most — quarterly. Think of these updates like corporate investor newsletters, except shorter and
more readable. Taxpayers are investors in the school district, and the community has a vested interest in the outcomes.

Thus, that strategy includes being forthcoming about challenging problems — real or potential — as well as successes. If there are substantial unexpected costs, say so. If income is significantly below projections, explain why. Help the public understand why income and expenses vary throughout the budget year instead of following a linear line.

Each time, include an update on significant projects, such as construction bids being accepted on the new heating, air conditioning, and ventilation system at the high school; the 5,000 new laptops being delivered for district teachers, counselors and other line staff; or the delay in ordering a new math curriculum.

Consider doing part or all of the update as a list of bulleted items:
- Number of students and increase/decrease since last month.
- Number of district staff and increase/decrease since last month.
- Total budget for the year.
- Percentage of the year that has elapsed.
- Percentage of the budget spent so far.
- Key budget adjustments.
- Any major expense(s) during this period.
- Consider including an unusual item, such as the number of pencils or rolls of paper towels purchased during the period.
- Next public budget meeting.
- How to get involved and whom to contact with questions.

**Remember the purpose**

A good reputation arises from providing accurate, credible information instead of deliberately creating a rosy picture. No institution is perfect. That doesn’t mean a district has to parade its shortcomings, but it shouldn’t ignore them either. Beat critics to the punch by disclosing negative information — as investor reports do — before conspiratorial critics stumble on it and accuse the district of a coverup.

Do you track spending by school or program? Can you accurately and believably track how much goes to the classroom and how much is spent on central administration — areas that frequently get criticized? If so, make that information available to the public, including trends over time.

Naysayers may seize on that information, but they would find reasons to complain anyway. Most parents, staff, and other taxpayers will value the honesty, transparency, and accountability.

**Use the public**

Let the public help you. Social media can serve as impromptu focus groups and editors. Don’t be afraid to post drafts of monthly or quarterly budget information and ask for critiques of content and clarity. In your final version, explain how you responded to the public input and made changes.

Solicit budget ideas. Treat them like a brainstorming session (i.e., collect ideas across the board instead of immediately rejecting some as irrelevant, unworkable, or “we already tried that”).
Explain how to participate in budget meetings and provide tips for testifying, such as practicing beforehand to comply with time limits on individual testimony.

Write for real life

Avoid bureaucratic terms such as “roll-forward budget” or “zero-based budgeting.” Use common language as if people were conversing around the supper table. That includes “expenses” or “costs” instead of the fancier “expenditures” and even “income” instead of “revenue.”

Be clear on this year versus last year. Too often, school districts refer to “last year” when they actually are talking about the current year’s budget.

Use the word “cuts” accurately. If the district or a program has more money to spend, that is not a cut in spending, even though services might be reduced.

No news is not good news

Rarely is it a good sign when no one is talking about the school district. Public involvement complicates decision-making but improves decision-making. The goal of year-round budget information is to answer questions, not eliminate them.

Dick Hughes is a communications consultant. Contact him at TheHughesisms@Gmail.com

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EMPATHETIC: WHY FEELINGS MATTER

One of the greatest attributes a communicator can have is empathy — for everyone they work with and for. The best school district communicators understand how the students, parents, staff, administration, board and community leaders feel. But how do they empathize and why does it matter?

Why empathy matters

The ability to feel what others are feeling matters for a number of reasons. In everyday life, it is a trait that makes people supportive friends and generally nice to be around. A lack of empathy leads quickly to boorish behavior and a whole host of conflict.

But in communications, the main reason to empathize is so that you can predict and fulfill the needs of the customer, whether they be a concerned parent or the superintendent. Empathy results in communication that meets needs — both informational and emotional.

Imagine the parents of bullied children needing to feel like the district cares and is doing something about it. The PR person needs to put herself in the place of those parents and provide information
that meets not only their informational needs, but validates their feelings of sorrow and fear for their children. Imagine how information about anti-bullying efforts could come across to those parents if presented in a way that made the district seem defensive or dismissive. That won’t happen if the communication starts with a validation of the parents’ feelings.

If a professional communicator only knows their own feelings, they will focus their work on meeting their own needs. Certainly, those needs are legitimate — providing useful, timely information to patrons and district staff. The PR person needs to produce effective communications products. But the PR person’s need to produce cannot trump the needs of the people he or she ultimately serves.

During emergencies, communicators must become somewhat numb to emotions so they can maintain a cool head and produce when everyone else is upset to one degree or another. After all, the communications person deals with everything that comes along in a district — the good and the bad. If someone dies or gets arrested, the PR person cannot feel the full brunt of sorrow or shock. They have talking points and a press release to write and distribute. So in a crisis, a little bit of detachment is a useful coping mechanism.

However, when the immediate crisis has passed, the communicator must lead the way in the healing process by developing messages that meet people where they are emotionally. And even during the emergency situation, the communications professional must know what others are feeling despite not allowing themselves to fully experience the same feelings.

Empathy matters when sharing good news as well. The only way to generate excitement is to support people’s goals, dreams and aspirations for themselves or their children. Without empathy, you won’t know what those dreams are or how your district is helping families attain them.

**How to empathize**

The surest way to learn empathy is to listen intently with compassion. There are many ways to listen to groups and individuals through surveys, focus groups and board meetings. The setting is not as important as the attitude the PR professional brings to the listening session. It must be a willingness to listen and a refusal to judge. Provide a forum for people to share their concerns with you and then take the time to listen and record their concerns. Often, a few bullet points on a flipchart will suffice. For more complex issues such as school climate, a full questionnaire or town hall meeting might be necessary. In either case, the forum should be focused on listening, rather than speeches from district personnel.

When a patron calls to complain, sometimes they are looking for something relatively simple to be fixed. Perhaps there is a broken link on the district website or a spelling error. But often they are calling to be heard. They need someone to listen to their concerns without judgement and without defensiveness.

One of the best ways to listen with empathy and without judgement is to separate the complaint from the resolution by the space of a few hours or a day. In many cases, the person receiving the complaint is in a hurry to get the matter resolved. But that haste can make the district employee stop listening and start talking. Don’t scramble to find the relevant policies and procedures if someone calls and is upset. Tell them you want to hear them out and make sure you have their story correct before you start discussing possible solutions. Any professional is busy, so patrons do not always need an immediate resolution.
To empathize with school board members or the superintendent, you will need to approach them privately and ask them how they are feeling about a certain issue. Leaders are like the rest of us. Some are very comfortable talking about their feelings and others are not. Some are not shy about telling you everything on their minds and others are. It is up to the communicator to ask the question if leaders are not forthcoming. It is amazing how often leaders are willing to share their hopes and fears with a trusted staff person if they are asked in an appropriate setting.

The second step is to analyze what you heard. Ask yourself how you would feel if you were in the same position as that person or group. Perhaps you have been in that same situation. How did it make you feel? What would you have needed to hear? What would you not have wanted to hear in that moment?

The issue may not be something you have dealt with directly. In that case, find a trusted friend who has been in that situation or think about the incidents in your life that could help you relate to what they are going through. Again, what kind of information would you want to receive or give in that situation?

**Putting it into practice**

One you have truly listened to the patron or leader and thought about how you would feel in their situation, start to think about communications. What would you want to know or how would you want to feel if you were in their shoes?

List out the hopes and fears of each audience. Gather all of the data available to you and think about how each piece of information could come across as compassionate versus bureaucratic or cold. Plan your communications as if you were in the audience feeling everything they are feeling. Effective communication is about knowledge, but it is also about feelings.

By empathizing, the PR professional creates effective, thoughtful communications and feedback channels. Even the worst news and most difficult communication challenges can be handled with empathy and compassion. By so doing, almost any issue or incident can help bring the school community closer together instead of farther apart.

*Contributed by Jay Remy, communications consultant*
The school year is underway with a testing challenge set out for almost every school district in Oregon — how to boost math scores to meet the new state standards on the new Smarter Balanced test. Every district saw their test scores featured in recent news media "box score" reports. And the results were "dismal," especially in math, as far as the media were concerned.

It's just five years since the state Department of Education updated reading, writing and math standards to a more intellectually demanding set of standards known as the Common Core. Then four years ago, the department changed the way it measures student achievement at school year's end by adopting a new test, designed to measure the new, higher Common Core standards. And, according to the department, the standards and test are not likely to be changed any time soon.

With all this emphasis on test scores, it's hard for school board members and administrators to keep in mind the myriad of ways teachers monitor how students are doing and whether they can apply the lessons they are learning.

**Understanding the job of improving test scores**

Yes, it is your district and building administrators’ job to review the test score data and work with staff to boost those scores. To see how one district is addressing this challenge, see "Solving the Math Problem" in The Oregonian, Sept. 23, 2018 (http://bit.ly/2OH1tMY).

It's your job, school board members, to check out what teachers in your district are doing to assess student progress and find ways to present this broader perspective of student achievement to community members — both parents and those with no children in your schools. Your community needs to know in school board meeting reports from school staff, in newsletters, on your website and in vignettes on your social media and in community meetings that assessment is an integral part of what teachers do.

**Does your community understand the assessments?**

Some of the assessment techniques, other than tests, that may be taking place in your schools include the following activities. Featuring any or all of these, and any others not listed, will go a long way to assure parents and community members that student learning is happening every day, in many ways in all of your classrooms.
**Assessment stations** — areas designated by a teacher that are used specifically for assessment purposes. These areas may be located inside or outside the classroom. A teacher may decide to use assessment stations to have students demonstrate a skill, make observations or manipulate materials. A teacher may observe and keep records of student performance, or students may work through assessment stations, recording their work in written format.

**Individual assessments** — focus on individual progress. Assessment activities constructed by a teacher are completed individually by the students. Teachers have students work individually on written assignments, presentations or performance assessment tasks to measure individual progress.

**Group assessment** — focus on the progress a group of students makes by cooperating and collaborating to complete assessment activities organized by the teacher. To assess social skills and cooperative learning processes, teachers may have students complete written assignments or make presentations.

**Contracts are agreements** between a student or a group of students and a teacher regarding what activity will be undertaken, who will do it, how it will be done, when it will be completed, and how it will be evaluated according to teacher-established criteria.

**Self- and peer-assessments** refer to the students’ own assessments of their progress in knowledge, skills, processes or attitudes, or to student assessment of other students. Peer-assessments may be conducted either individually or collaboratively in groups.

**Student-led conferences** are another form of self-assessment. This type of self-evaluation encourages students to become involved in setting criteria for evaluation of their own work. Used sensitively, with more emphasis on student growth and self-understanding than on arriving at a final grade, self-evaluation can contribute to a students’ ability to structure their own learning. It also can increase a student's ownership for the learning process.

**Portfolios** are collections of student work that assist students and teachers in making judgments about a student’s learning progress. Samples of work to be included may be selected by the student, by the teacher, or by the student and teacher in consultation. These samples can then be shared with parents at conference time.

**Senior projects** are major research or intern-type experiences that high school seniors must complete to graduate. Often these projects are community-service based. They are designed to increase the student’s knowledge and skills. They also can benefit the field of study or the organization that is the object of the project. These projects may also help seniors assess their interests and set their goals post-high school for further education and careers.

**Tell the assessment story…**

Once you’ve identified the many ways teachers gather information to assess their students’ achievement, let your community know how teachers are monitoring learning, not merely auditing the absorption of facts for a test. Here are five tips for telling the assessment story:

1. Encourage teachers to include information about the ways they are monitoring student progress in any classroom newsletters they send home, on their individual websites, on the school website and social media pages.
2. Ask building administrators to include reports about assessment and student achievement in their school newsletters, on their school websites/social media pages or in PowerPoint presentations to use with parents and other community groups.

3. Use school board meetings and district publications to showcase the various ways student achievement is measured through reports that feature one teacher, one student or one program to help community members, especially those with no children in school, understand how a particular type of assessment improves instruction and student learning. Include the stories on the district’s website/social media pages, in community meetings and at school board meetings.

4. Create an assessment section on the district website that includes more than the latest test scores. Use brief “case studies” to show the variety of ways teachers assess student progress and ways these kinds of assessments are helping students apply what they learn.

5. Find ways to showcase student learning and assessment techniques in presentations to the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary and other community groups. Consider having students and teachers make these presentations regularly at board meetings, Chamber or community organization meetings and senior centers.

Contributed by Jeanne Magmer, communications consultant

TIPS FOR NEW SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS

If you’re newly elected to your school board, congratulations! It’s an important job that can have a huge impact on the education of children in your community.

Most people who run for the school board have a genuine interest in education and are dedicated to making a difference for students. Some have long ties to the community and see board service as a way to give back. Some have particular issues that they are concerned about. Whatever the reason, it’s critical that new members recognize that they are joining a team and pledge to work together for the good of the schools and students.

The first thing to remember is that your role is to establish policy and set goals. It is up to the superintendent to manage the district and take it where the board says it needs to go.

Your introduction to school board service may feel a bit overwhelming. There is a lot more to learn about school district programs and operations than many new board members realize. After settling into your new role, tips for effective board service may serve as a helpful reference. Like students, new board members need to do their homework, so they can quickly get up to speed on what the board has done recently and what issues it currently faces.

The Oregon School Boards Association’s leadership team developed these tips to help make the transition easier:

- Review the board operations section of your district’s policy manual.
- Know your board member code of conduct backward and forward.
Review the board meeting minutes from the past half-dozen meetings to become familiar with issues being discussed by the board.

Meet with your superintendent to obtain a clear understanding of the district’s budget. Ask lots of questions.

Assume your position with an open mind. Abandon preconceived notions and hidden agendas, including opinions about administrators, teachers, and other staff and board members.

Realize that you don’t know everything, and capitalize on every opportunity to learn.

Expect to be in the minority on board decisions once in a while and accept the majority decision graciously. The time to voice your opinions about issues is before the vote is taken.

Expect some board decisions to be unpopular with your constituents or even the community at large. You have only one vote. Your issues can only be successful if you convince two, three or four (depending the size of your board) other board members to vote with you.

Do not surprise your superintendent, administrators or your fellow board members at a public meeting with unexpected comments or requests.

Be flexible and willing to compromise.

Be a good listener. Superintendents, administrators, teachers, students and community members can help you learn more about your job.

Stay connected with your schools, teachers and students.

Learn your district’s chain of command. Refer all complaints to the proper person.

The Michigan Association of School Boards also has some good reminders for new board members:

Go slow in the beginning, especially if you have come to the board to “reform” it. The chances are you will feel differently about a lot of things after six months on the board.

Remember that the only authority you have lies in the collective action of the school board. You have no legal authority to act alone unless the board as a whole specifically delegates a task to you.

Do not let your differences of opinion degenerate into personality conflicts. Nothing is more devastating to good board procedures than to have one member vote for a measure simply because another member votes against it.

Don’t talk too much. You may acquire a reputation for wisdom simply by not saying the wrong thing at the wrong moment. One thing is certain: you are not learning when you are talking; you are only hearing your own ideas.

If possible, keep out of teacher/personnel problems. The board has hired a superintendent and staff to take the responsibility.
Give the superintendent and staff your public support. Except in unusual and mitigating circumstances, the superintendent has a right to expect this. Use individual conferences with the superintendent and the official forum of legal board meetings to iron out differences of opinions.

Make an effort to be informed. School business is always important business — and big business — with budgets into the hundreds of thousands, even millions of dollars. To be informed requires time and effort. Ask for briefings from staff as you feel the need. Visit each school over which the board has authority.

Welcome people who come to see you about school problems. Listen carefully, then refer them to the appropriate person according to board policy. If the problem is controversial, remember that you may be hearing only one side of the story. Do not commit yourself to a course of action that you may regret later. The board as a whole may not support your view, and you could find yourself in an embarrassing position of having committed yourself to a stand that the board rejects.

When a special interest group approaches, insist on your right to hear and review all the facts before you act. A vocal minority can force a school board to act before all the facts are known and evaluated. If you are being pressed, tell them that you need more time to make a fair decision.

Accept your job on the board as one of responsible leadership in the community. You will be expected to attend and participate intelligently in many public meetings on school affairs. This is more than an opportunity; it is an obligation to interpret school affairs to an interested public. You may clear away doubts, misconceptions and misunderstandings.

Finally, the American School Board Journal recommends other ways to improve school board effectiveness:

Going solo’s a no-no. Board members have no power as individuals. The success of each member is tied to the success of the board.

Respect the team. Emotions on controversial issues may run high, but it is essential to take a long view of the board and respect the views of fellow members. Remember, too, that the board sets the tone for the whole district. They must model collaboration.

Understand the difference between board and staff. Board members must refrain from management functions. Those are the responsibility of the superintendent and district staff. Learn and explain the chain of command to constituents.

Share and defend your views, but listen to the views of others. Model good communication by listening and compromising. Move forward respectfully after difficult decisions.

Do your homework and ask tough questions. Decision making requires an understanding of extensive background information on complex issues. Do your homework, ask questions, and clarify issues so that members of the community can understand the topics and decisions.

Respect your oath. Board members are elected officials that swear oaths to uphold laws. Respect that oath by maintaining confidentiality and following public processes.
Keep learning. Participate in professional development opportunities. There is a big learning curve in educational reform, requirements and jargon. Keep up-to-date by reading resources from state and federal associations. Attend conferences and work closely with the superintendent and board chair.

Contact your state school boards association for more tips for members and opportunities for workshops and leadership development programs.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant

Most kids and teens have active online lives. Combined with the potentially poor judgement of adolescence, they may be creating an online presence that will have a lasting effect on their reputations and future opportunities.

Your online reputation is your reputation.

There really is no divide between how we act and what we say online versus offline. The difference is that the audience is bigger online and the posts are permanent. It is important that kids and teens understand the lasting effects of digital activity and how it can reach beyond the screen to impact your future life.

Michael Fertik, CEO of ReputationDefender.com, says, “It’s important to talk to your kids about their online reputation, especially on social networks, and how it can affect their real lives.” The following are his “Five things your kids should know about their online reputation”:  

Gina Patterson, Executive Director Virginia School Boards Association (800) 446-8722 gina@vsba.org
1. **If it’s online, consider it public information.**
There’s no way to guarantee that what you post online will stay where you intend it to be viewed. Before your child posts anything, they should consider whether it is “public information” — would they want their principal, grandma, or college admissions reviewers to see it?

2. **Your internet persona stays with you forever**
The Internet doesn’t forget, and is far more like a “permanent tattoo” than we realize. College recruiters look up information about prospective applicants. Hiring managers and recruiters look at online reputations before hiring.

3. **Practice good privacy**
Privacy settings aren’t perfect, but they provide a level of protection for social media. If your child is on a social networking website, make sure she knows how to keep updates from public view. It helps for parents to use the same website to familiarize them with the settings.

4. **Your actions online affect others**
Many teens assume that anything is okay to share with online friends. For example, a teen may write, “I wish my Dad would quit his job! He says he hates his job and his boss.” While that may seem like an innocuous rant to the teen, if word spread to the father’s boss, it might cause trouble. Teens have to learn that what they share online does not only affect them, but may have consequences for others.

5. **Keep personal information private**
One of the cruelest forms of cyberbullying occurs when a bully hijacks another student’s account, locks them out, and then pretends to be the victim. By the time your child has regained control of the account (if ever), her name and reputation could be smeared across the internet.

To help ensure that your child never has her information stolen, teach the importance of keeping personal information (such as their full birth date, phone number, and address) out of her social networking profile. Also, work with your child on creating a strong password. Specific tips include using a combination of uppercase and lowercase letters, symbols, and numbers. Another good option is making a mnemonic phrase into a password. For example, “I, John Brown, was born at 5:00 in the AM” becomes “IJBwb@5itAM.” http://bit.ly/2zFydOr

**Careless posts now = lost opportunities later**
The things we say and do have always been a building block for our reputations — even before digital tools. Kids have always said and done things they regret as adults. Now those things may haunt them later in life through the internet.

According to the news site, Crimewire, “It takes 15 minutes to ruin your life online. One momentary lapse in judgement can cost you your job, relationships, and your life. For kids, the risk is even higher. As young brains haven’t developed enough to understand the long-term consequences of an action, they’re more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors online. And these risks can easily spell devastation that can last a lifetime.” http://bit.ly/2Rc71xq

There are countless stories about students and student athletes losing scholarships or college acceptance letters due to explicit, sexist, racist and inappropriate posts. Recent graduates are also losing job offers over comments, or photos and videos of drunken or sexual behavior. And young
employees have been dismissed over social media posts that show disrespect to the company or show them lying about missing work because of illness when they were really playing hooky.

If your teen doubts the risks of social media activity, a simple web search will show countless stories of these scenarios, along with research studies that have found one in 10 young people have been denied a job due to social media use. http://bit.ly/2Oi4cMT

Read more internet safety tips for parents and teens

Teaching your kids about online reputation management

Social networks known to be used by internet predators
http://bit.ly/2Rdqu0Y

Talking to kids and teens about social media and sexting—Tips from the American Academy of Pediatrics

Gina Patterson, Executive Director Virginia School Boards Association (800) 446-8722 gina@vsba.org