What’s in this issue…

Guidelines for safe and effective interactions with students, parents and community members
Maintaining appropriate boundaries among students, staff and parents is easiest when expectations are clear. Read tips for developing and sharing protocols with staff that will protect students and staff alike.

Internal communications tips to reach staff through mobile devices
Most of your staff – more than 85 percent – carry a mobile device. Prohibiting the use of phones during the work day would be difficult to enforce, even if you wanted to. Shift your thinking to produce mobile-ready communications and reach your staff more effectively.

The rapidly changing role of the school principal
Schools are changing, and principals must have a broad skill base to navigate the rapidly changing landscape. Learn about resources to help principals cover the bases and serve their schools effectively.

Why can’t schools be run like businesses?
When education critics suggest that schools should run like businesses, they are overlooking the leadership principles in schools that are very much like well-run businesses. Read about business practices that you already employ or can add to increase effectiveness.

You are not alone: Using communications networks for support, inspiration, and professional growth
If you run a one-person PR shop – like many school district staff who are charged with communications tasks – you rely on networks, colleagues in neighboring districts and professional development opportunities. Be sure you are connecting with any untapped resources to help you do your work.

Insights for Parents: Help your child learn to read
Reading is an essential skill for learning and reading progress is an important indicator of academic success. This tip sheet for parents includes suggestions to help children read better.
GUIDELINES FOR SAFE AND EFFECTIVE INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS, PARENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Along with school supply lists and immunization notices, parents in many school districts are getting other important reminders in their student’s back-to-school packet about expectations and guidelines interactions between staff, volunteers and students.

Parents in the Salem-Keizer School District in Oregon receive a “Guide to Student Interaction,” outlining expectations for maintaining appropriate boundaries with students and their families. It also encourages parents to call, email or send a letter to school administrators or the district’s Human Resources Department with any concerns.

Hillsboro School District in Oregon produced a similar handout for parents titled “Maintaining Appropriate Staff/Student Boundaries – Guidelines to Avoid the Appearance of Impropriety.”

Many districts also send out volunteer handbooks, with guidelines on how volunteers should interact with students and staff as they complete their volunteer tasks.

Such guidebooks are important tools in communicating clear expectations about how employees and volunteers will interact with students. Written guidelines send a strong message that districts take student safety seriously and expect staff to as well. By sharing with parents, they are reinforcing their commitment to providing a safe and healthy learning environment for students.

Appropriate boundaries protect staff and students

Districts around the country are increasingly warning teachers to be careful in their interactions with students, even if their intentions are good. Behaviors that might have been acceptable in the past, such as giving a student a ride home from school, are not allowed by most districts today. It’s not just a matter of preventing potential misbehavior but also avoiding the perception of possible misbehavior.

Social media creates an added challenge because today’s students prefer to text or use Facebook and other social media to communicate, even with teachers. However, schools increasingly are prohibiting staff from “friending” students on social media and often require all electronic communications to be via the school’s student information system.

In Hillsboro School District, staff are asked to avoid any interactions that could appear inappropriate. The definition of inappropriate is interactions that “cross boundaries by creating relationships that become equal rather than adult-to-child.”

Staff protocols

Protocols for staff vary from district to district, based on the district’s culture, history and expectations, but it’s important for districts to put them in writing and reinforce them with staff. Here are examples of staff protocols:

RESPONSIBILITY
As professionals, we have a responsibility to act in an ethical way and to encourage our colleagues to do likewise.

AWARENESS
We must remain aware of the authority we have, which derives from our professional position. Because of the power imbalance which exists we must accept that it is our responsibility to control the nature of the relationship.
- Staff should keep separate personal and professional social media accounts.
- Staff should not be friends with or accept follow requests from students on personal social media accounts. This does not mean the staff member does not like the student. Rather, it is a way to set very clear boundaries.
- Staff should not communicate through text, social media or other electronic methods with individual students. Instead, communicate with students and parents through the district-sponsored student management system.
- Staff should not drive a student in a personal vehicle without authorization from a school administrator. Staff may sometimes drive groups of students in a small school activity bus. There should always be at least two adults or two students in the vehicle at all times.
- Staff should maintain a clear separation between their personal and professional lives and maintain appropriate boundaries with students and their families.
- Staff should not let existing friendships with students or families that originated outside of the school setting (i.e., church, neighborhood, etc.) supersede the district’s expectations. For example, a coach or teacher should even remove his best friend’s child from his or her personal Facebook page. This helps ensure there’s no implied favoritism for students.
- Staff should not hold team or class celebrations at their home.
- Staff should not meet alone with one student in a private area.

**Reporting inappropriate behavior**

Guidelines should also include which staff member parents should talk with if they are concerned about an interaction between staff or volunteers and students. List the contact (principal, human resources director, etc.), telephone number and email address. Acknowledge that sometimes parents don’t want to repeat a rumor or question someone’s reputation, but it’s better to err on the side of safety and share those concerns.

**Guidelines for volunteers**

Most districts have protocols for how volunteers interact with students and staff. Number one on the list is usually student confidentiality. Federal law requires volunteers to keep confidential any student information that they obtain while working as a volunteer for the district. Student information includes all academic, medical and personal information.

Other guidelines for volunteers:

- Do not meet with students behind closed doors or off campus.
- Refrain from initiating any conversations or correspondence of a private or personal nature with students.
- Refrain from giving students inappropriate signs of affection such as front hugs, students sitting on lap, touching, or patting on areas other than shoulders, upper back, arms or hands or any other contact that causes a student to feel uncomfortable.
- Be respectful of the teacher’s time when working in the classroom. If you have specific concerns or questions, ask the teacher when would be a good time to discuss them.

**Bottom line: Clarify expectations to assure a safe environment for students**
With clear, written protocols for interacting with students, districts help create a positive learning environment, free of inappropriate behaviors that can undermine student learning and success.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS TIPS TO REACH STAFF THROUGH THEIR MOBILE DEVICES

Do you notice that everyone seems to be looking down lately – you can guess the reason. Research shows that more than 85 percent of your employees have their own smartphone, their “mobile.”

The question then is not whether your staff should be using mobile devices, but how can they use them productively and responsibly during the work day?

Tip 1
They all do it: Regardless of whether they’re teaching or driving a bus, your staff communicate on the go – and assume you should be, too. Leverage texting and other apps to reach them, including the Class Dojo app for parents that was featured in the September issue of On Call, www.classdojo.com.

Tip 2
Enhance trust: Communicating via mobile fosters transparency of leadership, which leads to more loyalty and trust. Staff should learn things from their school district leaders FIRST, not from someone else’s social media page or text. Getting a direct text from leadership can remove or reduce rumors and doubt. Triple that benefit by knowing staff will share your news with others, probably as fast as they received it.

Tip 3
Don’t dump everything in: The value of mobiles is to send quick, need-to-know messages, like emergency meetings, “don’t forget today’s deadline,” and weather warning or security alerts. Build in a link to more details on a website for more complex messages. Smaller, more frequent messages are better because today’s communication habits (and attention spans), especially among millennials, are shorter.

Tip 4
Your top priority: You’ve heard this before, but employee engagement should be a top priority. With limited resources, capitalize on what they’re already using the most – their mobile. But don’t jump to conclusions just
because we said so … start with a discussion in a board or leadership meeting centered on the importance of reaching all staff – how should we do it, why and when – see Tip 5.

**Tip 5**

**From the ground up:** Before you test any new communication strategy, ask your community relations staff to facilitate a board or leadership discussion. And put technology staff at the table. Then move to focus groups or an online survey, which can be done through your community relations people, or contact the National School Public Relations Association for assistance. This fall is the perfect time, as you head back to school, to ask principals or admin staff to do a “pulse check” during huddles, staff meetings, or internal newsletters, to ask how they and their staff want to get important news/reminders from leadership. Any change in communication strategy should grow from the front line, or it will be seen as a top-down mandate.

**Tip 6**

**There’s no time, literally:** With news moving at the speed of social media and word of mouth, don’t delay getting important news to the front line. But don’t abandon your “hierarchy” of sharing, either – reaching principals first is still important, especially if you’re relying on them to back-fill the message with more details. Just realize the timing will be shorter. For example, if you share important alerts with leadership, make sure you (and they) follow up on the same day with front-line staff, providing as detail as possible. Even if you don’t have all the details, a little information is better than none.

**Tip 7**

**Use your professionals:** After doing your homework and research, rely on your technology and community relations staff to make any enhancements through new apps. Trust them to be your architects of short, engaging messages to reach everyone … at the right time with the right message.

**Tip 8**

**The other shoe:** Yes, another shoe will drop, if you increase your communications to mobile devices. Be prepared to reply and engage with staff in a “real time” mode. That’s where your community relations staff (and NSPRA) can help. Don’t get overwhelmed with long replies, or long “strings” of messages. That’s the beauty of your website and Facebook or other social media. Send them to those sites for details – and thank them for their interest! Show compassion. You’re connecting personally with staff in “real time,” which goes a long way in building trust.

*Contributed by Shannon Priem, APR, former public relations director for the Oregon School Boards Association.*
THE RAPIDLY CHANGING ROLE OF SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

Schools are changing. The era of assessments dictating changes in the classroom has led to student-focused teaching. Experienced teachers will tell you instruction is changing. But there is another role that has gone through a transition – one that doesn’t get a lot of attention – the role of the school principal.

Breadth of knowledge

J. Marie Riche, principal at Ideal Communications, works with dozens of principals every school year and observes that regulatory issues are finding their way down to the school level now. “I see human resources and compliance issues they didn’t have to manage a generation ago,” says Riche. “Communications expectations are through the roof and that has absolutely changed, just in the last decade.”

It’s not just telling people about the canned food drive and when they need to turn in permission slips for the field trip. Parents have a higher expectation of understanding curriculum than ever before. A growing minority of parents today are calling up teachers to ask, ‘what order are you going to teach history in’ and ‘how are you organizing math?’

“Those are reasonable conversations a parent can expect to have,” said Riche, “but it’s a new development, and principals need to be prepared to have more of those talks, and across more platforms."

Standards make the school

“One of the mega changes for principals is that in education we have moved toward a set of expected standards and for a generation ago of principals, that wasn’t really the case,” said Gary Kipp, Executive Director of the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP). “That move has caused a number of other things to fall into place that changes the work of the principal.
Assessments led to a need for a set of standards that teachers were expected to be teaching toward.” Now a main focus of the principal is to help teachers align teaching to a set of standards so the path of student learning is a smooth, upward trajectory.

“In the past we would get standardized tests back and we would look at them and figure out how we needed to align our curriculum and adjust what we were doing and we were done,” said Kipp. “Now when we get those results back we look at the specific kid and see how we get that kid to meet the standard.”

“There are four basic questions: 1. What do we want kids to know and be able to do? 2. How will we get them to that spot? 3. How do we know whether they are achieving or not? 4. And what do we do with kids that don’t make it? We used to stop at question number three, but not anymore,” said Kipp. “It’s just not acceptable anymore to have kids slip through the cracks or have kids graduate without the skills needed to succeed in the workforce.”

One of the pressures principals are facing is that these shifts take more time in the principal’s day. Doing the job of evaluating and helping teachers grow today is much more labor intensive than it was prior to this major shift. In addition, there is a new expectation that we don’t suspend students the way we used to, that we work with kids who have problems.

We’re getting feedback from principals that they’ve never had such rich conversations with teachers about their own teaching. It’s all driven by how well the kids are doing, and that’s the big deal for principals now.”

A wider scope of students means wider challenges

The school today has much greater liability than even a decade ago. “In Washington state, if you listen to school nurses talk about the requirements of their job, it’s not just doubled or tripled, it’s increased exponentially in the last five to seven years, both in an increased number of children dealing with health issues and also with increased regulations around how schools manage and document those issues, said Riche.”

That increased medical need impacts principals directly. Riche points out that medically fragile children who are mainstreamed into our public schools each come with their own logistical impacts. “Principals need to be educated in how to manage those logistics, and parents need to be kept in the loop on how they are managing their care as well as their education.”

A principal now might be called up on to be a quasi-expert on not just education, but also the medical issues of the children under their consideration. It can be intimidating.

“School districts are responding to this and understanding that expectations of principals have increased and we need more of them,” said Kipp. “The number of assistant principals in Washington state in the elementary schools has increased fourfold.”

The doorstep of the school

Schools have the distinction of being separate from the neighborhood in which it resides, but still a part. Whatever is happening out in the broader community, those issues come to the schools’ doorsteps.

“The complications may have always been there, but we are dealing with them now more than we did before,” said Riche. “That requires a nimbleness and a sensitivity to a broader range of culture.” A principal can be a community leader to the extent she is able to step into that. The role requires the social skills to navigate
bringing a divided community together, providing space, and encouraging people to support one another.

When tragedy strikes, schools are being called upon more often to help parents navigate those big challenging stories. There is now the expectation of the school having counselors available and having a support center in the wake of a local event, particularly one that affects the kids at your school.

In general, today’s principal has a bigger role in the larger community, as a convener. Schools are more often called on to host memorials when a student dies. “We expect more social EQ (emotional intelligence) from our principals than ever before,” says Riche. “It’s always been nice to have, but now it’s mandatory.”

While the issues that show up at the principal’s door are more complicated today, including things like politics, a principal needs to maintain a leadership ability and the focus on education, especially in a community that might be divided. The school can, and should be, a safe place where people with opposing viewpoints can put those issues aside and focus on learning.

Broadening your skill base

Are you thinking of becoming a principal or assistant principal? It’s much more than just a promotion. One of the things that can surprise people when they move from one level of an organization to the next is that the people who get promoted aren’t necessarily the ones who have those next-level qualities.

“While rock-solid teaching skills are good, they need to be focusing on the next-level up skills,” says Riche. “Can you understand the school as a full system? Do you know how to deal with the management, human resources and logistical issues of managing a full staff, student population, and an army of volunteers and part-time workers?”

If you see a future for yourself as a principal, it is important to be broadening your skill base, especially your social skills. Learn how to navigate a conflict, and communicate complicated ideas in ways that are easy to understand.

Check out what resources are available in your state. As an example, the AWSP has more than 150 online webinars developed specifically for educational leaders, which can be accessed for an annual fee. www.awsp.org/ProfessionalDevelopment/Onlinetraining.aspx

“This is an issue that is so consistent, it will always be relevant,” says Riche.

Even though the work has become more complex, and in some cases more difficult, Kipp wanted people to know that being a principal is a position without equal.

“Two years ago USA Today did a poll of the happiest jobs in America and being a principal was number one in terms of happiness of the individual in it,” he said. “Even though the work is more complicated, it is a job where you can see the evolution of kids and teachers come to fruition as the result of leadership, and that is hugely rewarding.”

Contributed by Megan J. Wilson, Los Angeles-based freelance writer and communications consultant
WHY CAN’T SCHOOLS BE RUN LIKE BUSINESSES?

Surprise! Schools already act like businesses in a foundational way. Well-run schools follow the same leadership principles as well-run businesses.

I’ve reached that conclusion after writing about public education for several decades and taking an in-depth look at one of the nation’s most successful school-improvement programs – the Chalkboard Project in Oregon.

Certainly, there are myriad differences between schools and businesses – and good reasons why schools cannot be like businesses in some ways – but this column will focus on their foundational similarities. When people speak the mantra of “schools should be run like businesses,” you can explain that schools already do, and in ways that go deeper than financial spreadsheets.

There is little new in leadership theory, especially in business. As in education, business theories go through cycles, being popular for a time before being forgotten. Today’s wannabe bestsellers that proclaim the latest business fad generally are rooted in longstanding leadership concepts, many of which date to the early- and mid-20th century. For example, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which psychologist Abraham Maslow first proposed in the 1940s and ’50s remains a mainstay of contemporary education, business, and community life.

The value-added proposition

The foundational purpose of a business is to make money by adding value, whether to materials or services. Some businesses create a product, such as a farm growing corn. Others add value by transporting the corn to stores, where corn is sold, or to a production facility, where corn is made into a new product. Others create and sell recipes for using that corn. Still others provide services – from agribusiness consulting to consumer marketing – along the way.

That same value-added proposition is at the root of a successful school, which is the ultimate service organization. Teachers and other educators add value to their students – the tremendous value of a well-rounded education – as well as to their community.

For anyone who wants to look up the data, economists have quantified the value of an education, although I would argue that its value cannot be reduced to mere numbers.

A business-like ‘case study’

The business world is big on learning from case studies. For this column, let’s use Chalkboard’s CLASS Project as such a case study. (https://chalkboardproject.org/initiatives/class-project) In doing so, you can find comparisons that reflect your own school or district.

The case: CLASS is an initiative of the independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit Chalkboard Project, which is financed by a consortium of Oregon’s leading philanthropic foundations. The CLASS acronym stands for Creative Leadership Achieves Student Success. Forty-five percent of Oregon K-12 students have been involved in CLASS, whose overarching principle is that an effective classroom teacher has the single-greatest effect on student achievement.

Teaching can be a solitary occupation, with little time to investigate best practices. To overcome that, CLASS includes collaboration,
coaching and professional development among teachers and within the classroom. That is not revolutionary, but the complete emphasis on research-validated best practices might be.

CLASS also includes expanded career paths so good teachers can remain good teachers, or also coach their colleagues, instead of having to go into administration to make more money. CLASS brings administrators and teachers together to create effective performance evaluations, and trains everyone so those evaluations are conducted uniformly, fairly, and consistently throughout each school district. Because trust and collaboration replace distrust, what is controversial elsewhere becomes the accepted way of doing business.

Independent research shows that students in CLASS districts significantly outperform their peers in non-CLASS districts. That is true across achievement groups. Furthermore, teachers are professionally happier and more engaged in CLASS districts because they have a greater say.

Chalkboard’s CLASS Project exemplifies several business principles, including:

**Effective, ongoing market research:** The Chalkboard Project started in 2004 by meeting with thousands of Oregonians, including educators, to gather their thoughts about public schools. Chalkboard listened to its potential customers, an imperative for any successful organization.

**A singular focus:** Chalkboard honed its focus to where it could have the most impact. All of Chalkboard’s initiatives complement that classroom focus, instead of straying into ideas that sound great but are extraneous (i.e., “mission creep”).

For example, one recent and complementary initiative trains – and retrains – building and central-office administrators to become highly effective instructional leaders for classroom teachers. That includes reducing central-office demands on building principals, so they have time to coach the instructional process instead of only administering. Chalkboard’s Leading for Learning initiative has proved so worthwhile that it includes 44 school districts and one charter school, representing 64 percent of Oregon’s K-12 students.

**Research and development:** Chalkboard utilizes research-tested and research-validated principles, and it employs independent, outside research of its programs. The data prove CLASS’ effectiveness. As a result, the state Legislature and state Department of Education have adopted Chalkboard’s professional-development approach into state law.

**Empowerment:** One classic theory of business leadership is the “path-goal theory.” (I won’t geek you with the details for this and other leadership theories, which you easily can look up online if you’re interested.)

Part of that theory is that the role of the leader is to remove obstacles so the worker can achieve the desired work outcome while also fulfilling her/his personal goals. A related aspect is that the most successful corporations are ones that achieve full-fledged employee buy-in, who value frontline workers as the cornerstone of the organization’s success and who empower employers to make decisions. CLASS puts control in the classroom – with the teacher – and gives her/him the tools to succeed.

Through CLASS, workers and management collaborate instead of the administration and employee unions being at odds. That collaborative process, with shared responsibility and joint creation of well-defined goals, fits both the classic path-goal theory of business leadership and the two-factor theory of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Mutual, group goal setting can help overcome negative variables, such as inconsistent government mandates and funding levels. Furthermore, the mutual goal setting, when coupled with realistic training, can reduce the
danger that high goals will be considered a threat instead of a mutual aspiration.

**Paying heed to current developments:** Businesses and nonprofits have lifecycles, as do schools and school districts. One difference is that school districts must continue operating even in down cycles, which in severe cases might involve state intervention.

In recognizing its lifecycle, the Chalkboard Project’s goal is to work itself out of existence. Chalkboard collaborates with school districts, education associations, universities, foundations, state government, and others to ingrain its research-verified principles so Chalkboard no longer will be needed. That is opposite the bureaucratic trend of holding onto power by expanding one’s turf.

**The bottom line**

Too often, people focus on the dollars-and-cents aspects of “schools should be run like a business.” However, good financial decisions start from employing solid business-leadership principles such as the ones outlined above.

As communicators, we can recognize, emulate, and share the effective use of those leadership principles.

We can invest citizen-advisory groups with the power to make meaningful suggestions instead of treating them as mere rubber stamps.

We can encourage tough questions from the public and from school budget committees instead of being annoyed when members who don’t follow our company line.

And when people want us to hop on the latest leadership fad, we can do our research and then point out how it’s just a repackaged, sellable form of time-honored leadership principles that our schools already embrace.

*Contributed by Dick Hughes, writing consultant: Facebook/Hughesisms and Twitter@DickHughes,*

*or email at TheHughesisms@Gmail.com.*

---

**YOU ARE NOT ALONE: USING COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS FOR SUPPORT, INSPIRATION, AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH**

Generally, only the largest school districts have communications teams. Most districts are lucky if they have someone fully dedicated to communications and media relations. More often, communications is one of many hats worn by an individual with many responsibilities and limited time and resources.

It is very easy to feel alone. While communications is all about engaging with and connecting to others, it can sometimes feel isolated or disconnected. Luckily, it doesn’t have to be that way. At both the state and the national level, there are professional organizations focused on supporting, connecting, and inspiring the school communications professional. These organizations can help support you in your daily work, provide practical resources and tools, and offer opportunities for professional growth and development.
The groups

At the national level, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) is a wonderful resource connecting school communicators to professional development opportunities, communications tools and resources, national conferences, and communications services (such as communications audits). However, it is often at the state level that people find the greatest benefit. With so many one-person communications teams out there, making connections to colleagues in other parts of your state can be an invaluable resource both for support and comradeship and for learning and professional growth. Both Oregon and Washington have School Public Relations chapters (OSPRA and WSPRA) as do the majority of other states around the country.

What NSPRA can offer

The National School Public Relations Association has been in existence for over 75 years. Their mission is to “advance education through responsible communication.” NSPRA provides members with a range of communications tools, resources, and professional development opportunities including:

- **The NSPRA Seminar** – an annual multi-day conference held each July that offers presentations, panels, and professional development on over 70 school communications-related topics. It is widely considered the most comprehensive communications workshop for educators anywhere.
- **The PR Power Hour** – a one-hour monthly conference call on a range of school communications topics. Topics in 2017 have included Managing Social Media Firestorms, Creating a Positive School Board Culture of Leaders and Ambassadors, and Employee Engagement During Difficult Times.
- **Publications** – NSPRA’s monthly newsletter, Network, is designed for school leaders. Each issue tackles a major problem and explains how communications can play a vital role in solving it. Principal Communicator is NSPRA’s building-level PR newsletter and provides practical help for school principals and other building-level leaders, including tips to improve communications at the community level. NSPRA also offers a number of electronic newsletters to its members.
- **Communications Audits** – School districts can also hire NSPRA to conduct communications audits to identify areas of strength, opportunities for improvement, and strategies you can employ to move your communications program to the next level.
- **Resources and Tools** – NSPRA also provides educators access to public relations resources and tools. Resources and articles are available on the website.

To learn more about NSPRA visit: www.nspra.org. While membership in NSPRA offers a range of benefits, it is not necessary to become a member.
What local chapters can offer

Both Oregon and Washington have active School PR chapters that can connect you both with professional development opportunities and with your peers and colleagues. Local chapters provide members (and other interested people) with:

- **State conferences** – Both OSPRA and WSPRA hold conferences, generally each spring and fall. These conferences provide opportunities to learn from peers and industry experts through presentations, panels, and keynote speakers. Conferences often have some sort of central theme such as communicating in times of crisis, or building resiliency. Most of these conferences not only include presentations and sessions but include time to socialize and connect with peers and colleagues.

- **Locally targeted resources and tools** – Both area chapters have resources on their website – some open to the general public (like OSPRA’s resource page), others limited to registered members (as in WSPRA’s case). These resources can help assist with common communications challenges, provide templates for district use, and offer tools related to a wide range of communications needs.

- **Peer connections** – One of the best resources local chapters can provide is an opportunity to connect with, learn from, and build relationships with peers across your state and region. As school communicators, many of us are dealing with similar challenges with small budgets and smaller teams. Whether you are simply chatting with colleagues over a post-conference happy hour, calling up a peer to get advice on a particularly challenging communications issue, or getting a second pair of eyes on something you are producing, these relationships can be incredibly helpful. Immediately after the 2014 school shooting at Reynolds High School in Oregon, OSPRA members showed up to offer help with crisis communications and a much-needed extra pair of hands. In good times and bad, these local networks provide a group of peers who know what you are dealing with and can serve as a resource and support network.

- **Opportunities for learning and growth** – For those new to school communications, these networks (and the opportunities for both formal and informal learning) can be of particular benefit. Don’t know how to write a communications plan? Don’t have a crisis plan in place? Not sure how best to respond to the media, write quotes, or prepare others for TV interviews? More likely than not, there is a communications colleague in your state who has expertise in that area and who can walk you through how to get started or where to learn more. By learning from each other, we can work faster and more effectively.

Resources:

- National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA)
  - [www.nspra.org](http://www.nspra.org)

- Oregon School Public Relations Association (OSPRA)
  - [http://oregonschoolpra.org](http://oregonschoolpra.org)

- Washington School Public Relations Association (WSPRA)
  - [www.wspra.com](http://www.wspra.com)

*Contributed by Crystal Greene, communications consultant*
Facts About Kids and Reading

The ability to read is essential for student achievement – in all subjects. First students learn to read, then they read to learn. Age and the rate of academic progress in building reading skills are important indicators of future academic success.

**Long-term reading benefits**

Students who are able to develop strong reading skills build confidence in their academic ability and are more likely to be high achievers. And, as a bonus, early readers are more likely to find a lifelong passion for reading.

**More likely to graduate on time:** Students who are still struggling readers in third grade are four times less likely to graduate by age 19 than a child who reads proficiently in third grade. Even worse, students who live in poverty and can’t read by third grade are 13 times less likely to graduate on time. [http://bit.ly/2gAedSv](http://bit.ly/2gAedSv)

**More likely to live longer:** A study by Yale University researchers found that people who read books live longer. Study participants, who were over age 50, had a 20 percent reduction in the risk of mortality over the 12 years of the study compared to participants who did not read books. [http://wapo.st/2wzbG4a](http://wapo.st/2wzbG4a)

**More likely to develop a passion for reading and choose to read independently during free time:** Students who read well are more likely to choose to read, which builds reading skills. According to a study published in the Research Journal of the American Association of School Librarians, “the amount of free reading done outside of school has consistently been found to relate to growth in vocabulary, reading comprehension, verbal fluency, and general information.” [http://bit.ly/2gGrJI5](http://bit.ly/2gGrJI5)
Tips to help students build reading skills

Reading is clearly an important skill, but some students are slow to learn it or struggle to keep up with grade-level benchmarks. Fortunately, there are many ways parents can help their children improve reading skills.

The U.S. Department of Education provides tips to help early readers in its publication, “Reading Tips for Parents.” Download the pdf for more information: www2.ed.gov/parents/read/resources/readingtips/readingtips.pdf

“Putting a few simple strategies into action will make a significant difference in helping children develop into good readers and writers.”

Through reading aloud, providing print materials, and promoting positive attitudes about reading and writing, you can have a powerful impact on children’s literacy and learning.

Invite a child to read with you every day.

When reading a book where the print is large, point word by word as you read. This will help the child learn that reading goes from left to right and understand that the word he or she says is the word he or she sees.

Read a child’s favorite book over and over again.

Read many stories with rhyming words and lines that repeat. Invite the child to join in on these parts. Point, word by word, as he or she reads along with you.

Discuss new words. For example, “This big house is called a palace. Who do you think lives in a palace?”

Stop and ask about the pictures and about what is happening in the story.

Read from a variety of books, including fairy tales, song books and poems.

Helping your older child read better

Many of the tactics to help younger children read will also work with older students. The key is
supporting your child, building an interest in reading and practicing, which includes reading aloud to kids and giving them a chance to read to you.

Even older kids like story time. According to a Kids and Family Reading Report by Scholastic, “Only 17% of parents of kids ages 9–11 read aloud to their children. Yet 83% of kids ages 6–17 say being read to is something they either loved or liked a lot.”

www.readbrightly.com/importance-of-reading-aloud-to-big-kids/

Benefits of reading to older children are modeling fluency, appealing to their love of a story, expanding vocabulary and exposing them to new authors and genres.

Problems that hinder reading success

Reading disorders: If your child struggles to learn to read, check into possible learning disorders, like dyslexia, that can cause significant learning difficulties. Schools can connect parents to experts who will assist with diagnoses and provide interventions and support to help children learn to read.

Print vs. digital: Some studies suggest that we may understand and retain more of what we read when we read books in print rather than on screens, especially if it is something longer than a page of the book or screen, usually more than 500 words. The cause may be the greater demands of scrolling, the glare of the device or the distractions from the page caused by the phone, computer or reading device. http://bit.ly/2eEEvpY