What’s in this issue...

Adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed care
The issue of childhood trauma has become a topic of great interest in the education community in recent years. As classroom behavioral issues are increasing, schools are looking closer at causes of student learning disruptions. Read part one of this two-part study of this issue that affects students in every school.

Crisis communication case study: Wildfires and smoke in your community
Many states are seeing increases in wildfire risks. These prolonged community crises can affect the start of school, air quality and even student absences as families leave the area. Read about one community’s experience and how the school district filled the role of information hub during the fire season.

Recruiting and caring for volunteers
Volunteers are the backbone of many schools, providing important support to staff and allowing schools to expand programs for students. Maximize your volunteer resources with tips to recruit and retain these important supporters.

Tips for local responses to national stories
When the big stories hit the national news media, local news reporters often seek a local comment. Be ready to respond with a comment about how the issue affects your district, and look for ways to share your programs and practices that highlight the good work you are doing.

Translating for your community’s non-English speakers
Successful parent engagement requires communications that reach all parents. Be sure your district has processes in place to reach parents through translated materials and cultural literacy.

Insights for Parents: Emotional and Behavioral Issues
Managing student behavior is increasingly challenging in classrooms around the country. Disruptive behavior interferes with learning for all students. The rise in behavioral problems is a result of a variety of issues that impact kids. Read tips to help parents work with their kids to improve the classroom climate.
Adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed care

The issue of childhood trauma — and the impact that it has on educational, health, and behavioral outcomes — has become a topic of great interest in the education community in recent years. As classroom behavioral issues are increasing, schools are looking closer at causes for learning disruptions.

This article will provide background on the issue of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma-informed care (TIC). In addition, we will provide links to resources and research on this topic. A follow-up article in next month’s issue will discuss strategies for communicating about ACEs and TIC.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

As educators, we see the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, on a daily basis. Our students’ adverse experiences impact their ability to learn and increase their likelihood of future health and behavioral issues. ACEs can include:

- Physical, sexual, or emotional abuse
- Neglect
- Economic hardship
- Living with someone who is suffering from mental illness, depression, or suicidal tendencies
- Witnessing or being the victim of violence
- Substance abuse (personal or family)
- Parental separation or divorce
- Incarceration of a family member
- Death of a parent or close family member

Since the initial CDC-Kaiser Adverse Childhood Experiences Study into ACES (www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acesstudy/about.html), there have been hundreds of research papers published on the impact of ACEs. The link between childhood trauma and future chronic disease, depression, mental illness, violence, poor academic outcomes, and negative health behaviors has been strongly established. No one is immune to the impact of trauma.

Trauma affects individuals, families, and communities. It disrupts healthy development, adversely affects relationships, and contributes to behavioral health issues, domestic violence, and child abuse. The costs to our communities of multiple generations of people with untreated trauma include an increase in crime, loss of wages, and threat to the stability of the family.
It is estimated that by age four, one in four children have experienced trauma. In a national sample, 60% of 0-17-year-olds experienced or witnessed maltreatment, bullying, or assault within the last year.

Sixty-two percent of adult Oregonians and 50% of children reported at least one ACE. Thirty-nine percent experienced two or more. In Washington, 47% of children had experienced one or more ACE, with 11% experiencing three or more.

The most common ACEs are economic hardship, divorce, substance abuse, and mental illness. Oregon’s ACEs rates exceed the national average in all four areas. Washington’s rates exceed the national average in three of the four areas.

Many districts are starting to offer training and professional development on this topic. This training can help educators identify ACEs and support families and students on their path toward healing. However, there is still a great deal to be done to mitigate the impact of ACEs and introduce trauma-informed practices into our schools.

**Trauma-informed Care**

In school settings, this training can help disrupt cycles of trauma and abuse, foster resiliency, and improve student opportunities and outcomes. A leader in this area has been Oregon’s Gladstone School District. Gladstone received grant funding to form an ACEs/TIC cross-district collaborative in partnership with neighboring districts. The districts went through a multi-phase process to learn about ACEs, train staff, and implement trauma-informed practices. The focus was on the development of high-quality, locally-driven solutions and the development of trauma-informed learning environments.

Research shows trauma-informed practices result in increased school readiness and attendance rates, higher graduation rates, and lower juvenile delinquency rates. The Pre K-12 education system plays an important role in this effort. Together with health partners and community-based organizations, we can mitigate the impact of ACEs on students, families, and communities. Educators are deeply concerned about the social-emotional development of children in school care. As awareness of ACEs increases, interest in TIC principles continues to grow. Training topics can include:

- Understanding how trauma impacts children and families
- Benefits of a trauma-informed system of care
- Principles of trauma-informed care
- Best practices in building resilience in children and families
- How to implement trauma-informed practices within our schools.

Trauma-informed schools provide an environment where adults are prepared to recognize and respond to those impacted by traumatic stress. Students are given clear expectations and communication strategies to guide them through the stressful situations in their lives. Adults intentionally provide a culture of respect and support designed to foster resilience and help mitigate the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences.

The November/December issue will cover strategies to help communicate with educators, community members, parents, and students about ACEs.
Resources

CDC-Kaiser ACE Study
www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html

What is a Trauma-Informed School
https://traumaawareschools.org/traumainschools

Adverse Childhood Experiences: National and State Level Prevalence

Washington State Department of Health ACEs Resources
www.doh.wa.gov/ForPublicHealthandHealthcareProviders/PublicHealthSystemResourcesandServices/LocalHealthResourcesandTools/MaternalandChildHealthBlockGrant/AdverseChildhoodExperiences

Trauma Informed Oregon
https://traumainformedoregon.org/about/

Oregon Student Wellness Survey
https://oregon.pridesurveys.com/

Contributed by Crystal Greene, communications consultant
Crisis communication case study: Wildfires and smoke in your community

In August 2017, an inferno raced toward our quaint coastal community of Brookings-Harbor, bringing fear, excitement, long-term evacuations and many needed adjustments for our school district in the far southwest corner of Oregon.

Here are five emergency lessons we learned during the Chetco Bar Fire emergency, which burned approximately 300 square miles (nearly 200,000 acres) of forest land just outside of town, becoming one of the nation’s top priority megafires.

1. Never stop communicating

From the moment the threat of the wildfire became eminent — when hot windy weather caused a long-simmering small fire to “blow up” and race across 20 miles of rugged forest land in a matter of hours — we worked hard to get the word out about how it was impacting the students, teachers and staff in our district.

This was the first national news attention that our small district of 1,600 students in three schools had received, and keeping track of talking points about the school leadership’s latest decisions impacting students, quick facts describing our district, and recent news made responding to those requests possible.

Our public information officer took point on many of these projects. If your district doesn’t have a designated communicator, it’s important to designate someone on the team to fill these spokesperson and communication roles in an emergency. It may be the superintendent, a school board member, principal or other administrator, but it is vitally important.

- **We covered the basics** by focusing on our specific mission in the community. Our focus was on school-centered messages such as cancellations of school activities; delays to the start of the school year; uses of school facilities for shelter and fire command; and resources for students and parents.
- **We went live**, using Facebook Live video as a venue to share information quickly and sent out messages with an automated call, text and email program as well.
- **We made our district’s homepage and social media a hub** for fire-related information, rearranging pages to put fire-related information at the forefront.
- **We coordinated with outside agencies**, including the unified fire command, city, county, and U.S. Forest Service communications personnel. Building these partnerships
helped us ensure that all audiences were being reached. Prepare to translate messages into other languages besides English and add community bulletin boards to your list of distribution channels, if web and power outages are occurring.

- **We wrote talking points and gathered Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)** and updated them over and over again, to ensure that a consistent message was shared with community members and the media, and that we did not inadvertently spread misinformation.

2. **Community safety first**

When a disaster strikes your entire community, the urgency of normal school district priorities takes a back seat to ensuring the safety of students and staff. The fact that nearly all of our teachers and students were living in or displaced by various levels of evacuation zones was a major factor in our decision to delay the first day of school. We couldn’t ensure adequate staffing, and suffocating smoke meant that many people left the area to escape poor air quality, stay with relatives, camp out, or stay in shelters spread across the region while their homes were under threat.

More than 1,000 personnel for wildland and structural fire crews representing nearly every town and county in Oregon and other communities across the West drove through the night to reach our town in time. They stayed for weeks to months, establishing three major fire camps.

- **Our district made its facilities and grounds available** for both a Red Cross Shelter and a major Fire Incident Command encampment that covered our sports fields with the tents of up to 500 personnel and filled our parking lots with firetrucks. We also hosted numerous community information meetings and a press conference for Gov. Kate Brown.

- **Finally, we celebrated and shared the bright spots**, such as our student athletes volunteering to move a major fire camp kitchen to a new location and the generosity of our California neighbors to the south in the Del Norte School District who hosted many home games and sports practices for our teams in Crescent City outside the smoke plume. Our athletic boosters and community even hosted a large-scale “thank you” dinner of steak and seafood for firefighters and emergency personnel. Stories of giving and cooperation in the face of the fire have only become more important to our town as time has worn on.

3. **Stay neutral**

In the face of imminent disaster, our community pulled together quickly with many shining examples of neighbors helping neighbors move livestock, evacuate, donate food and supplies, volunteer hours and funds for recovery efforts. But, as the hours turned to days and weeks, cracks did start to show and unity quickly gave way to strong opinions about what should have been done to prevent the emergency, who was to blame and worry over an uncertain future.

Even seemingly innocuous terms such as “natural disaster” could quickly lead to disagreement and outrage in a region with a long entangled history of fire and forestry management and extreme liberal and conservative viewpoints.
The bottom line is that fires are political. In fact, most emergencies of this type eventually are, as people search for the reasons that led to the disaster and look to hold the government or others accountable. Our school gymnasiums hosted multiple community fire information meetings, some of which devolved into brief shouting matches. People were stressed, and feelings were understandably running high.

Our superintendent was given more opportunities than usual to acquaint politicians with our community and schools. Politicians are an important part of the process. They can help to secure resources, create attention to the needs for those resources, and potentially sponsor future legislation that may assist future similar events.

How you engage with politicians is very important as a community leader. Every opportunity to secure leverage is important. Be appreciative, be thankful, clearly state your need, and accurately represent your community and communicate the impact that the event has upon your organization.

- **We stayed neutral by focusing on our schools’ mission** and only sharing information related to the impact on schools. When we received questions beyond the scope of our mission, we forwarded them on to the fire experts. We were thankful for help rendered to our community, but we were careful not to cheerlead for any one group or perspective.
- **We suggest considering the pros and cons of creating a forum via Facebook Live or other social media.** Know that you may receive significant negative comments and be prepared to moderate or remove content inappropriate for a school district page.
- **Keep in mind that all actions made during an incident of this magnitude will have to be communicated many times over,** and will likely be scrutinized many times over as well. Our district communicated clear reasons for our school delay, consistently referred to them and eventually won a waiver from the Oregon Department of Education for the lost instructional hours.
- **Be careful not to sensationalize.** School districts are not a newspaper or TV station and should avoid using dramatic fire images in communications just to grab attention when people’s lives and livelihoods are at stake. Images of disaster can trigger trauma, and that is not the goal of the school communications. Tone it down, then tone it down some more if need be. Think before you forward photos of disaster online. It’s easy to share misinformation, and the schools should be a calming force in the community, not add to panic.

4. **Student health and safety concerns: Air quality**

The decision to resume school was a difficult one after the immediate threat passed but the fire loomed on the horizon and it was clear that it would continue to burn for months until thoroughly extinguished by fall rains. Air quality due to smoke was a constant concern for our community, just as it was for much of the Pacific Northwest due to dozens of other fires burning across the West by the end of the summer.

Ultimately, we brought our students back to school after a week delay to help restore some normalcy and resume our educational mission. Because the fire was so close to our town, and because of the varied wind effects on the rugged terrain, smoke conditions could change very quickly or have neighborhood effects that differed from the forecasted conditions.
Our district formed an air quality advisory team made up of a diversity of staff across departments such as leadership, nursing, athletics, transportation and communications to monitor conditions at various sites in the district in partnership with government experts and local smoke monitors. Advisories were sent out multiple times per day to all staff and included clear instructions on whether outside recess or afterschool activities would proceed.

We depended on near constant air quality monitoring in partnership with federal agency experts and our school district referenced the Oregon Health Authority’s School Wildfire Smoke Guidelines and the OSAA Smoke Memo outlining the "5-3-1 Guidelines" based on visibility (how far you could see through the smoke), when making decisions about what activities were appropriate. These guidelines were being evaluated and updated that summer, as wildfires burned across the West bringing the topic to prominence as larger metropolitan areas far from fires suffered under hazy skies, but the same general guidelines still stand in September 2018.

We created an air quality and smoke information page on our website and shared it widely in press releases, e-newsletters and social media posts, to educate and inform the community about the air quality issues we were facing and the steps the schools were taking in response.

Our district facilities team also retrofitted and added smoke-rated filters across the district to keep the air as clean as possible after the belated school year commenced. Parents and students with questions about masks, asthma concerns or even concerns about additional anxiety or trauma their child was facing because of the fire were referred through the district nurse and counseling services.

Where there’s fire, there’s smoke. When and where a wildfire starts is hard to predict, but once you have one in your region, there is a high likelihood that you will be dealing with smoke sooner or later. In the past two summers, we’ve seen smoke from as far away as British Columbia affect northern California. Don’t be caught unprepared. Have a plan for how your school’s activities will change if air quality goes from healthy to unhealthy. Have a plan for both a one-day issue and smoke that persists for weeks and weeks. Will recesses be held indoors? Will masks be available? Will outdoor athletics and activities be canceled? Will practices move indoors or to other communities? How will parents be notified? How will you protect students with specific health needs such as severe asthma? These are all questions you can answer before the smoke arrives.

5. Staying ahead of the curve — from crisis to coordination

Looking back, if we could pick out one key decision that helped guide our schools through the situation that unfolded, it was the opportunity to have our superintendent participate in daily unified command meetings about fire operations. He woke early and attended these briefings each morning, and was sometimes called to urgent or emergency briefings during the day. Immediately afterward, he met with the school administration and directors team to update strategy.

This advance intel cut down lag time in communications and helped us to make the right decisions as we grappled with a situation no textbook or staff training had prepared us for. It is amazing what a unified team can accomplish together in the best interest of our students and the community.

When people know that the local school district is responding to an emergency event 24/7, decisions are being made in the best interests of students, and the district is responding to community concerns; it creates an element of calm during an unsettling situation and produces extreme anxieties and potential trauma. Do everything you can...
to provide stability, resources, a sense of normalcy, and forward progression in support for students and staff. This will go a long way in terms of the healing process for any community.

**When the smoke clears**

After the fire, there's still work to do. Fires leave long-lasting impacts on the community — from economic impacts to psychological ones. The day a fire is declared 100 percent contained is not the end of the story.

Was there significant damage to your schools or to the homes of your staff and students? As a district, you can continue to put the community first by acknowledging these losses and directing people to official and appropriate fundraisers and relief activities.

Ours was lucky; despite the incredible threat, we lost just one rural neighborhood and no students or staff were directly affected. But that has not been the case for all communities in recent years. Here is a great example from the Shasta County School District, which includes Redding, California, and surrounding communities. Their district just survived the devastating Carr Fire in summer 2018, leaving 67 employees in their district without homes, and more than 350 students impacted with either completely losing their homes or suffering significant damage. Superintendent Judy Flores and her team created an extensive Carr Fire Relief homepage, with recovery resources and information on how to contribute: [www.shastacoe.org/office-of-education/carr-fire-relief](http://www.shastacoe.org/office-of-education/carr-fire-relief).

Don’t lose the valuable lessons that came from your emergency. Debrief and update emergency plans and communications plans. What went well? When and why did communications get garbled, leaving your school community confused or frustrated? Where do relationships need to be stronger in the future? Do you have the right contacts in your local city and county government to coordinate efforts and maximize use of community alert systems in the future?

We took the lessons learned through our ordeal to improve our school district and emergency procedures, and are already revisiting the same air quality protocols, as we begin a new school year one year later. We encourage you to take the time now to talk with your school community about what you will do when disaster races toward you.

**Additional resources: Wildfires and air quality**

**InciWeb**: Latest information from government agencies on U.S. wildfires. Significant fires also have a Facebook page, where similar information is posted daily [http://inciweb.nwcg.gov](http://inciweb.nwcg.gov)

**Wildland Fire Air Quality Response Program**: Daily smoke forecasts from USDA Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management [www.wildlandfiresmoke.net/outlooks/](http://www.wildlandfiresmoke.net/outlooks/)

**Oregon Smoke Information**: Interagency/community partnership serving as a hub for smoke forecasts in Oregon [http://oregonsmoke.blogspot.com/](http://oregonsmoke.blogspot.com/)

**Washington smoke Information** (interagency/community partnership serving as a hub for smoke forecasts in Washington State) [http://wasmoke.blogspot.com](http://wasmoke.blogspot.com)
EPA air monitoring
www.airnow.gov

Oregon DEQ AQI
www.deq.state.or.us/aqi

Washington DOE AQI
https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/enviwa/

Oregon Health Authority School wildfire smoke guidelines (poster PDF)
https://apps.state.or.us/Forms/Served/le8815h.pdf

Oregon Health Authority Wildfires and Smoke
www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/Preparedness/Prepare/Pages/PrepareForWildfire.aspx

Oregon Health Authority Wildfire Smoke and Your Health
www.oregon.gov/oha/ph/Preparedness/Prepare/Documents/OHA%208626%20Wildfire%20FAQs-v6c.pdf

EPA Smoke Ready Toolbox for Wildfires: Guides, Fact Sheets and Other Resources
www.epa.gov/air-research/smoke-ready-toolbox-wildfires-guides-fact-sheets-and-other-resources

Contributed by Superintendent Sean Gallagher and Public Information Officer Nancy Raskauskas-Coons, Brookings-Harbor School District
Recruiting and caring for volunteers

Schools rely on volunteers. Throughout the year, a whole workforce of unpaid parents and community members help support schools through program leadership, student attention, office work and general assistance as needed. They provide services that are both essential and also nice-to-have bonuses. Students have a better school experience because of the countless number of volunteers who show up and generously donate their time and services.

The value of volunteer service in schools cannot be understated, but it may be helpful to estimate the economic benefit of volunteers as a means of celebrating the value of this army of school supporters. Visit PointsofLight.org for a calculator on the economic impact of volunteer service (www.pointsoflight.org/tools/volunteercalculator).

Plan your volunteer program

The start of a new school year is a great time to consider your volunteer needs, update how you seek new volunteers and review how you are retaining current ones.

Define your needs. What tasks can volunteers do to help your staff become more effective?

It is important to know why you want volunteers and how you’ll use them before you issue a blanket invitation to parents and others in your community to volunteer. Plan the volunteer work and try to have backup tasks that are not urgent but will allow general service volunteers to feel they are contributing useful volunteer time.

Volunteers often come to you with an offer to help because they want to serve kids. They are supportive of education and just want to share their time and service. Other volunteers will answer the call when a special need arises.

Set objectives for your school volunteer program. The goal of your volunteer program is to help school staff help students. Volunteers can relieve professional staff of non-teaching duties and also enrich educational programs. An added, important benefit is wider community engagement. They often become key school boosters in the community.

Get school staff on board. Be sure that teachers are comfortable with working with volunteers and are committed to spending the extra planning time to ensure effective use of volunteer time.
Assign a volunteer coordinator. This key position is often funded by the district or filled by a staff member as part of their role. If your school lacks this staff resource, seek a staff volunteer who can help with volunteer applications, supervision and scheduling.

Focus on recruitment. If you are lucky, volunteers will come to you, but it is just as likely that you will need to seek them out if you have specific needs. After you identify the long- and short-term volunteer tasks, it is easier to match volunteers’ skills, time and interests. Some volunteers may not be available during the school day. Remember to set aside work that can be done at home for that group. During recruitment, emphasize how much volunteer work will help students.

Parents are a natural volunteer pool. Be sure to post sign-up sheets during back-to-school events, parent conferences and school events. Another, possibly untapped, volunteer resource is the local senior center or senior service clubs. Seniors may be willing to come in as a group to stuff envelopes or as individuals to read with students. This group is among the most willing and available for volunteer service in your classrooms and schools.

Provide an orientation for volunteers. It is essential to introduce new volunteers to your to your site to make them feel welcome and comfortable. Give them a name tag. Share information about the resources they can use and the people with whom they will work. Be clear about the kind of work they will be doing and how their time and help will benefit both them and students.

Provide opportunities for volunteers to learn new skills. Volunteers, like employees, like to stretch and grow in their job. Think about bringing volunteers from all over the district together two or three times a year for a special program that will not only interest them as volunteers, but as parents, too.

Create a friendly, welcome environment. Volunteers who are comfortable and feel that they are part of the school team will keep coming back. Make your volunteers feel included and valued by assigning a staff or veteran volunteer to be a “buddy” when they are new volunteers, making sure they feel comfortable in the staff room and/or providing volunteers with their own workroom.

Evaluate your volunteer program. Ask teachers and volunteers how they feel about the program. Is the training adequate? Do the volunteers feel a sense of responsibility toward the program? Is there proper communication between teachers and volunteers? This information can help you improve and build your program.

Build rapport. Recognize and acknowledge volunteers when you see them in the building. Establish a warm rapport with them. Ask their advice and impressions. Listen to their concerns.

Celebrate and recognize. Volunteer recognition is an easy way to keep them coming back and call attention to opportunities for other potential volunteers. Be alert to opportunities to share volunteer stories with your local newspaper and highlight volunteer work in your school or district newsletters and social media channels. Be sure to ask volunteers if it is OK to share their photo and name online.

Express your appreciation. Recognize volunteers in the fall and spring with a tea, breakfast or staff-prepared luncheon. Give them lapel pins, special coffee mugs or student art. Honor them at a school assembly with student performances and certificates of appreciation. Write their spouses notes thanking them for sharing their partners with your school. Ask the local newspaper to sponsor a page listing the names of all the volunteers in your school. Write letters to volunteers’ employers, thanking them for their indirect support and requesting future cooperation.
Tips for local responses to national stories

The phone rings. It's a reporter calling.

“What do you think about … [whatever is the controversial education topic du jour]?”

Depending on where you work, as well as the curiosity of your area journalists, this may or may not be a common occurrence. In either case, it’s worth being prepared.

Know your elevator pitch

In the business world, there’s the concept of the “elevator pitch”: What to say when you’re on an elevator and someone asks what you do. Mine starts, “I’m a storyteller, with a particular interest in … .”

In a similar vein, an elevator pitch is like the sticky notes you’ve put on a computer with common responses for emails or phone calls.

Your goal is to take advantage of an opportunity instead of sounding silly.

For example, one of the worst things you can say to a journalist is, “I don’t know anything about that. Let me check.” Imagine that soundbite showing up in National Newspaper or on National Television Network as, “So-and-so of the Hunky Dory School District said she/he didn’t know anything about the federal curriculum restrictions [or whatever].”

Your answer was honest, which is good, but came across as being out-of-touch, which is bad. Prepare your sticky notes to remind you: “Good question. Thanks for calling (or emailing) to ask about that. I want to get you to the right person, so tell me a little more about what you’re specifically looking for.”

You’ll get a sense of whether the reporter needs someone to explain the issue in layperson’s terms, is knowledgeable on the subject and wants to dig into it, or just needs someone to give a quick comment. (Don’t ask the reporter’s intentions that way, however; that would be demeaning.)

Ask whatever questions are needed to clarify the reporter’s request. Would the reporter like you to gather the information and call/email her/him or prefer to talk to so-and-so? Always ask for the reporter’s deadline. That both gives you a deadline and signals you’re sensitive to the reporter’s needs.
Another option is to briefly put the reporter on hold, contact the district source, explain the journalist’s query, and connect them or arrange a time for them to connect.

But we’re not affected!

If you’re absolutely sure the news item does not affect your school or district, say so. For example, “The proposed law applies to districts with more than 6,000 students. We have 720, so we don’t expect it to affect us.”

Just be certain you’re correct. Otherwise, you'll sound silly.

Strengthen your brand and your relationships

News stories, regardless of the focus, are opportunities to build your district brand, get people talking about you in a good way, and strengthen relationships with reporters. You can convert potentially “negative” news into positive if your district answers questions honestly, thoughtfully and graciously.

Learn not to think of journalists as distractions, inconveniences, or problems. Your subconscious feelings can come across in your responses.

To journalists, you want your district to be known as the “go to” place — educators who are smart, readily available, and conversant on education issues.

Avoid negative soundbites

In answering a question, don’t include negative statements that a journalist can cull for a catchy quotation or soundbite. Avoid saying, “You’re absolutely right. The report says Hunky Dory High School has the lowest test scores in the state. That sounds awful. However, … .”

It’s better to say, “Thank you for the opportunity to tell our story. This is what we have been doing to raise test scores… . The early results show … .”

Instead of “No comment,” which often comes back to bite you, consider: “Thank you for asking. We take reports such as these seriously, and the first thing we do is dig into how the data were collected and analyzed — what was included and what was left out. We'll take this report at more than face value, dig into it, and learn everything we can from the individual pieces of data as well as the overall conclusions.”

Avoid blowing smoke

Watch yourself. There’s a tendency to say, “Look at what we’ve already done.” Again, it’s better to say: “The data appear to be from two years ago, which is understandable because the state has not released more recent data. However, since then we have … .”

Tip: The word “data” is a plural noun, so it takes plural verbs: “The data are … .”

Speaking of “blowing smoke,” in one instance, a communications person was instructed to flirt with a reporter to get a better story. No, no, no! Practically anyone, including journalists, can see through such ploys.
There is no harm, however, in developing relationships with someone: “I hear a dog barking. Is that yours? … No problem. What kind of dog …. Ours is a rescue, too. He’s a poodle, Gregor. It’s funny that you’re calling about the state’s new biology [or maybe, agriculture] curriculum. We don’t know how Gregor got his name, but I wonder whether his first owner named him after the early geneticist Gregor Mendel” [or, if the question is about the district’s ag. program] “… named him after Gregor Mendel, who did all those experiments with pea plants in the 1800s.”

That assumes, of course, that the journalist seems open to your anecdote and isn’t in a hurry.

Tip: To learn journalists’ techniques for interviewing and building relationships with you, look up Eric Nalder’s “Loosening Lips: The Art of the Interview,” which can be found online.

Again, you can’t control the news, but you can influence how it is reported. That is why it’s crucial to be gracious and helpful, even if the journalist — as often happens — is calling at the last minute and at the worst possible time of the day for you.

Reporters are human, too. They tend to be nicer toward people who are nicer to them.

It’s frustrating if you simply refer them to your district website for information. That info is easy for you to find — you know what’s there — but it can be baffling to a journalist in a hurry, especially if your website is not as clear and authoritative as you might think. Take a moment to send the reporter PDFs of the information — and explain them — as well as the links.

Know your resources: Many universities have source lists of who’s who on the faculty and in the administration and are experts in specific areas. A similar approach is worthwhile for school districts. You can connect journalists with your experts or encourage your district spokesperson to get info from them.

Consider a reporter who calls about the relevance of standardized tests. Is your superintendent the best person to respond? Or is there another person who has more hands-on experience in that area and is better at explaining standardized testing in everyday terms that will make sense to readers, viewers and listeners?

Or perhaps there are teachers or other district personnel who are particularly knowledgeable and articulate on the topic.

Maybe your district has a policy that the superintendent or another designated person — you? — should answer media questions. That’s fine. But one of our roles as underlings is to prevent the boss from looking dumb. You want to make sure the spokesperson is fully informed, including the most recent developments.

Prepare yourself: You probably already follow the local or community news. It’s important to stay tuned to the state, regional and national news — at least as far as educational, political and cultural news affecting schools.

Again, it can be unnerving to you, and damaging to your district’s reputation, to tell a reporter that you are unaware of the news issue about which she or he is calling. Spare yourself from that awkwardness by spending a few minutes each morning catching up on the latest news.
You probably have Google alerts established to notify you of any mention in the news of your school district, key personnel or schools. Add alerts for education topics that interest you.

National news outlets, as well as such specialty publications as Education Week, have daily emails for which you can sign up. Don’t go overboard but find ones that work for you. Follow a few organizations or people on social media who post the latest education news.

On my smartphone, I have apps for the Associated Press, Reuters, several other print outlets, TV and radio. As with email newsletters, I scan them as I have time.

One last suggestion: Be proactive. Look for opportunities to highlight your school district.

When a national education story breaks, line up your district’s response. Then contact journalists to let them know your district is available to comment.

If a reporter or news editor is not interested, no problem. Come back to them next time. Story decisions are made for multiple reasons, most of which are out of your control.

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Translating for your community’s non-English speakers

As most administrators would tell you, schools are always aiming for successful parent engagement. And for good reason. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “research shows that parent engagement in schools is closely linked to better student behavior, higher academic achievement, and enhanced social skills. Parent engagement also makes it less likely that students will engage in smoking, or alcohol or drug use.” It also lessens the chances of risky sexual behavior. www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/parent_engagement.htm

One of the things standing in the way of parent engagement is the language barrier. “As refugees spread out across the U.S., settling in the Southeast, Midwest, and many rural areas that, before,
were fairly insulated from large immigrant populations, schools are being forced to adapt to a new reality." https://hechingerreport.org/schools-federal-pressure-translate-immigrant-families

That reality is the need for translation services. With more non-English speaking families moving into rural areas, school district responsibilities can change quickly. This means that schools need to be taking a harder look at whether they are offering enough services to their immigrant families.

For one thing, it’s the law

A failure to communicate effectively with immigrant parents is a violation of their civil rights, considered discrimination based on national origin, which is prohibited by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=97

Without language services, non-English-speaking parents are considered to be blocked from equal access to school information and resources, leaving the district open to a lawsuit. In addition to being a legal battle that nobody wants, it’s not conducive to student learning, engagement, or test scores.

In a non-English speaking household, children often become the de facto translators between their household and the English-speaking world. But this not only creates a situation where the school is not communicating directly with the parent, it only works with older children. To state the obvious, a preschooler isn’t going to be able to explain her own enrollment package to her parent.

Non-English speaking students need translations, too!

It isn’t just parents that the district is responsible for helping. Even though the goal is to turn non-English speaking students into fluent English speakers, in the meantime they need full access to the educational materials. A letter from the Education Department’s Office of Civil Rights and the Department of Justice in 2015 lays out the State Educational Agency’s (SEA) responsibilities to English Learners (EL) in schools. “Title VI’s prohibition on national origin discrimination requires SEAs and school districts to take “affirmative steps” to address language barriers so that EL students may participate meaningfully in schools’ educational programs.” www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-el-201501.pdf

In legal terms, this means students and families need any material translated that has an effect on their education. In practical terms, it means that schools need to step up their game.

First things first, let’s keep everybody safe

If you’re trying to catch up with your translation services, start with the most urgent area first. Anything involving the safety of your child or your school needs to be translated. This means information about immunizations, school rules, who and who cannot drop off or pick up your child, and where to safely do so. It also includes the school’s procedures for what to do in case of an active shooter situation.

Generations of parents have been boggled by the black hole that exists somewhere between the classroom and the home that sucks important take-home notices into its depths. This is no less true for non-English speaking students. What happens when those parents don’t receive notice? Try to create a place where they have access to the most recent materials and make sure they know where to go to access them.
Having materials organized on the school’s website is a good first step, but not all families have access to the internet. In fact, five million households with school-age children in the United States do not have internet access. [https://nypost.com/2018/03/02/an-insane-number-of-american-kids-dont-have-internet-access-at-home/](https://nypost.com/2018/03/02/an-insane-number-of-american-kids-dont-have-internet-access-at-home/) Try to find a place on the school grounds where the materials can be accessed.

**It’s not just about language**

As important as the language materials are, it’s important to look at the bigger picture. If you’re dealing with a student or group of students from a nation that’s new to your district, you also need to step back and learn about the culture. It’s likely that aspects of the educational system here are new to these families. For some cultures, parent involvement is unheard of, meaning that a culture clash is bound to happen. For others, classroom behavior such as speaking up and making eye contact with the teacher can seem rude.

In New York state, following new requirements to reach out to non-English speaking families, facilitators hold day-long events introducing immigrant parents to the intricacies of U.S. schools, including the practice of holding parent-teacher conferences.

One parent group in Maryland, Hollifield Station Elementary PTA, found an inspired way to bridge the gap. “With the help of district coordinators, they organized an event called American Culture Night. It was so successful that immigrant families are connecting with the school—and getting involved in the PTA.” [www.ptotoday.com/pto-today-articles/article/298-connect-with-immigrant-parents](www.ptotoday.com/pto-today-articles/article/298-connect-with-immigrant-parents)

Events like these can also be used to help parents connect themselves to services throughout the community, such as the library, where they can get internet access.

While offering all of the school’s materials in multiple languages may seem like a huge effort, the reality is that these families have a strong desire to support their child’s education and success in their new country, and may become an effective member of your parent-teacher community. The more we can help them do that, the better.

*Contributed by Megan J. Wilson, Los Angeles-based freelance writer and communications consultant*
Insights for Parents: Emotional and Behavioral Issues

Managing student behavior in the classroom has become a hot-button issue in schools around the country. Poorly behaved students that create distractions in the learning environment for other students are a challenge that both new and veteran educators struggle to address.

In extreme cases, teachers say they are fending off physical violence, such as kicking and biting, and parents are complaining about disruptions that affect their children.

Is this a new normal?

In the last several years, teachers have reported higher rates of student misbehavior. Teacher survey results in a Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation report show that behavioral issues are present in all grade levels and have a significant impact on the entire classroom. Discipline takes time away from teaching and learning.

“Concern about behavior issues was not limited to any particular demographic group. While teachers who worked in schools in low-income areas reported concerns about behavioral issues at a higher rate (65%), teachers who worked in high-income areas were not far behind. In high-income areas, 56 percent of teachers reported more behavioral issues that interfere with teaching and learning.”

https://bit.ly/2oDZnyQ

Don’t blame the child

The rise in student behavioral problems is a result of a variety of issues that impact kids: social media influences, social and emotional issues from family dysfunction and poverty, and even the national political tone. Regardless of why, it is essential to address behavior without blaming the child.

One of the best ways to do that is to focus on positive behavior. Behavioral expert Doug Maraffa emphasizes the need for schools to set up a climate of positive support for all students. “Current student outcomes are based on our current school culture.”

Parents can have an important influence on school climate and culture by being involved in their child’s school and classroom. Establishing good communication with school staff is an important step in sharing concerns about climate that may impact learning for all students.

Parents can also help improve climate by understanding the need for all students to succeed. Students who are acting out emotionally or misbehaving in class should not be labeled as one of “those kids.” The strength of a school is based on the ability for all kids to succeed. According to
Maraffa, school climate and culture is influenced by our beliefs: “Do we believe the child is a problem or the child has a problem? https://bit.ly/2MOIdgm

Tips for parents

The good news for parents is that school leaders are aware of the issues that contribute to unruly classroom behavior, and there are many resources to help and coach teachers in supporting positive student behavior.

Everyone wins when all kids get the help they need to be ready to learn. Parents with concerns about classroom disruptions due to behavioral issues should talk to teachers and principals about their approach to a system-wide positive school climate.

For parents whose children have emotional or behavioral challenges, there are resources to help manage these challenges.

Social and emotional development

Age-appropriate physical development is easier to see, but social and emotional development is just as important. These skills will help them manage stress, build healthy relationships and thrive in work and social settings. Effective ways to support this growth are:

Lead by example, by modeling positive behaviors.
Be affectionate.
Be considerate of feelings, wants and needs.
Express interest in daily activities.
Respect their viewpoints.
Express pride in accomplishments.
Provide encouragement and support during times of stress.
https://bit.ly/2oGh9Sg

Challenging parent issues

It is hard for parents to watch their children struggle with the disappointment and challenges of childhood, especially when they feel the natural consequences of their own choices. Those struggles are hard to watch but necessary for growth. These tips are from family therapist Janet Lehman:

Parent the child you have, not the child you wish you had. Parents must accept the child they have rather than the child they think they should be. Managing behavioral issues can be easier without resentment from wishing your child didn’t have them.

Let your child experience the pain and discomfort of natural consequences. Accepting the results of the choices we make is a natural part of growing up and taking responsibility for our actions. Parents can’t and shouldn’t protect children from these important lessons.

Worries about judgment, shame and blame from others is not productive. It is stressful when children act out. Worrying about what other people think is not helpful, and it makes a bad situation worse. Be aware of these feelings and develop ways to increase positive self-talk that will help you stay calm for you and your child. https://bit.ly/2qyWAcr