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A Nasty Attack is Nothing More than a Chance to Learn

Last week, the Pittsburgh Tribune ran an article and an editorial on school public relations professionals. Both are posted below. The article was balanced, but the editorial was a degrading attack on our profession. While reading the editorial stings, I have to believe that most people reading this feel that the writer is far off-base. As of Thursday morning, two letters to the editor were posted in response – both supporting our profession and citing what we all already know – that school districts are obligated to inform and engage their stakeholders about how money is being spent, to share NCLB results as well as communicate actions and events to the community.

I know and realize that budgets are tight. Many of our members have expressed fear of losing jobs and we have witnessed some positions get cut in all regions of PA. Perhaps now more than ever, we need to bring the value of our positions into the limelight. At every opportunity, share what your office brings to the table – because you all bring a wealth of value and know-how that no one else in your district can claim. Explain at Principal and Cabinet meetings how you know that people are reading your publications, share the number of hits you are getting on your web site, and share milestones and conversations that you have with various stakeholders. Maybe your schools went green last year and you can share how much paper or time stuffing backpacks resulted in net savings. Share dollars and cents by talking about money raised for your Foundation, grants that were secured, or the alternative streams of revenue that have been created by your office as you launch innovative advertising campaigns. Be a constant advocate for the publications you oversee – whether they are electronic or in print.

I love what Tina from North Hills SD wrote in her response: “The objective is not to “spin” or serve as a “gatekeeper” of information. Rather, our focus is on sharing information with our school communities.” She goes on to cite all that we PR professionals manage in order to share and keep others informed at a time when it has never been needed more. So keep touting that your district website is working and share the number of hits every month with your colleagues, keep bragging about the number of folks reading your Facebook posts, share feedback from the public on your school budget communication tactics, facilitate those community advisory committees, engage senior citizens by sharing information and listening to their concerns, manage an adult education program that showcases facilities, teachers and students, and continue to send out e-mail news blasts, Tweets, community newsletters, annual reports, automated phone messages and texts.

School districts play a vital role in the health and well-being of their respective communities and community members want and need to know about the return on their investment. And feel good about it and your role in your district – you are all valuable and needed!

Article:

http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/news/pittsburgh/s_757759.html

Editorial

http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/opinion/s_759364.html

Response letters to the editor:

http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/opinion/letters/s_760364.html#ixzz1Zzma hOFPW

http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/opinion/letters/s_760365.html

Nicole McGalla, PenSPRA President

Test your Patience with PSSA Scores

PSSA scores were released this week and this always draws attention to schools. Whether your scores increased across the board or you had the performance of a subgroup affect one of your school's overall, you probably ended up frustrated.

Somehow a strong showing on the PSSA's often merits no media coverage at all. "It's not news," an editor told me once. Yet my superintendent and our administration certainly felt it was news! If your good news story is being ignored by your local press, your best option is to make your own news. Make certain you cover the improvement of your district's test scores with each of your communication tools. Keep this good news story front and center on your website in a section where parents and community members are most likely to go for a significant time period. Don't forget that you have a captive audience in your buildings too. Many community members are in our schools for one reason or another. One year we designed 16 by 20 full color posters that celebrated our PSSA achievements and hung one in each school lobby. They shared our good news all year, and cost less than \$50 to print.

If one or more of your schools failed to meet AYP, you definitely made the news. In this case it almost always becomes a story about the small number of students who did not score proficient or above, and the achievements of the greater population are largely ignored. Use your best media training here. Use cold, hard numbers and data to emphasize the more significant achievements of the majority of your students! Be able to sum it up in one sentence. Then, briefly explain the situation that needs improvement. Close by re-stating the overall achievements of the district.

With the spotlight on testing it is a good time to highlight any more authentic assessments your district performs with students, and of course a great time to explain the difference between an authentic assessment and a standardized test. My son is a senior who last week took the SAT's for the last time. Likely this is his last standardized test, but just the beginning of a lifetime of practical, authentic tests where he can prove all that he has learned.

Communicating the New School Financial Reality – PASBO Webcast October 12, 2011 (9:00 – 11:45 AM)

Tightening school budgets are driving a new and challenging financial reality for schools. When difficult decisions need to be made, how do you communicate the reasons and outcomes of those decisions in a way that builds trust and credibility with constituents, colleagues, and staff? This webcast will discuss the importance of having and implementing a communications plan, special considerations for delivering difficult decisions, and present several case studies demonstrating these strategies at work in Pennsylvania school districts.

Register at <http://www.pasbo.org/workshoplisting.asp>. PenSPRA members will receive the PASBO member rate price in the form of a refund after registration. Host LEA Registration (PASBO Member \$100/Non-member \$150) or Guest LEA Registration-You will not receive webcast connection instructions (PASBO Member \$80/Non-member \$120)

Membership reminder

Thanks to those of you who have sent your membership forms in. The deadline to be in the directory is October 15th, so send them along if you haven't! Thanks again.

News from Around the State and Nation

President Obama spoke last week on NCLB on his administration's plans.
<http://www.educationnews.org/education-policy-and-politics/president-obama-on-nclb-waivers-flexibility-full-text/>

One possible positive piece of budget news! Bills are pending in the state house which will remove the prevailing wage from school construction projects. (The prevailing wage generally increases the cost of labor in school construction.)

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/11277/1179611-454.stm#ixzz1ZnzZMT8e>

A look at how to improve education through the eyes of an international expert.
<http://www.educationnews.org/international-uk/the-global-search-for-education-how-to-support-your-education-system/>

