

Negotiations and Communications: Build Your Plan Before Going to the Table



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The complexities of California's public education funding make it difficult to explain school budgets — the centerpiece for negotiations and other "cost" items. Subjects such as class size, transfer rights, salary and benefits can make contract subjects and language hard to simplify, especially since they are often underscored by emotions and politically charged debates.

Two considerations to keep in mind while communicating during negotiations are:

- People hear sound bites: Regardless of the topic, when a subject is emotionally charged and layered with complexities, people typically gravitate toward the simplest explanation. "More work, less pay!"
- The best defense is a good offense: Waiting to offer the background and "big picture" messages until after you have been publicly attacked will position you as defensive.

Building a Strategic Communications Plan

Months before you begin negotiations discussions, outline a district communications plan.

Identify the Key Audiences: Key groups include the governing board, cabinet, site administration, teacher/union leadership, teachers, classified employee/union leadership, parent leaders, parents, city leaders and the media.

Identify the Key Communicators: Designate who has authority to speak to the media, union members, union leadership and other "key audience members."

Demonstrate Respect for Employees: Build a communication process that delivers information in concentric circles, working from the inside out. Begin your communication with the governance team, cabinet and site leaders, and from there move out to reach all employees. Then address the external audiences including parent and city leaders and the media. Keep in mind that administrators, teachers, classified leaders and employees do not want to learn about the budget through their neighbors.

Create Understanding: Union leaders should know the district will be issuing a general budget briefing to all employees which is designed to outline the facts in an understandable format without editorializing or pandering. If possible, allow union leaders to review the briefing and agree to the state and district numbers and projections, as well as the format.

Work Together: If possible, the negotiating team should cooperatively prepare a communication piece that will be issued to all audiences following each session at the bargaining table. Encourage them to contact the district or their union representative with questions or suggestions.

F3 is pleased to offer this information sheet and communications/public relations services to clients. Services range from crisis/media communications planning to strategic communications designed to build confidence in district leadership. F3 Communications Services is directed by a former school board member with over 25 years of media and corporate communications experience.

Six Steps to Strategic Communications

- Step I. Issue a budget fact sheet in advance of negotiations.
- Step II. If possible, issue a bulletin/update/report after each session and make sure union leaders see and “agree” to the piece before it is issued.
- Step III. Do not respond or react to union flyers. You will look defensive and angry. Let the facts that you present through Steps I and II speak for the district.
- Step IV. Resist the urge to respond if the union makes personal attacks.
- Step V. Keep the internal audiences informed. Board members or site administrators should not hear the messages third-hand.
- Step VI. Be positive and show empathy. Demonstrating sensitivity to union concerns is not a sign of weakness; it shows that you see the big picture.

Negotiations: Setting The Ground Rules

Typically, union leadership will argue its right to communicate with its members and try to limit management’s communication to the governing board in an effort to stifle the delivery of facts/information to all employees and the general public.

However, it is important to remember that the governing board is responsible to all taxpayers; therefore, it stands to reason that the board should play a role in keeping the process transparent to the entire community. Factually correct, timely communication is the key to transparency.

Practical Pointers for Communication During Negotiations: Building Confidence in District Leadership

- Speak with one voice. Members of the governing board and staff should deliver a consistent message.
- Be positive. Demonstrate respect for the people who are devoting time and talent to the process.
- Acknowledge that the challenges are numerous and complex, and that you appreciate creative problem solving.
- Avoid offering specific information on negotiations, as you do not want to appear that you are bargaining away from the table. Restrict your comments to the district’s overall goals such as “fiscal solvency” and “advancing 21st century instruction.”
- Remain calm.
- Speak with a tone of empathy and respect for all points of view.
- Remember to refer to your district’s mission, goals and core values. These documents should guide the process and your comments.

Practical Pointers:

What you can say:

- Comment on tone. For example, “the mood is positive,” “discussions are collaborative and collegial” or “the meetings are tense and emotionally charged.”
- Reinforce the district’s goals for student achievement. “We are focused on maximizing limited resources to deliver the best possible education to our students.”
- Respond to union proposals with facts. “They want X percent raise, however, the district budget has been cut X percent. These divergent points present us with a great challenge.” Avoid dealing directly with employees.

What you should not say:

- No disparaging remarks.
- Do not make promises or proposals away from the table.
- Do not editorialize.

Remember to close your comments by thanking the entire negotiating team for their hard work and commitment to student achievement.