

Network

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New Report Proves Negative Perceptions of School Administrators Wrong

As school leaders know all too well, perceptions often become reality when it comes to opinions about schools — and school administrators often take the hardest hits.

You have probably heard them all:

- Too many highly paid administrators just add to the bureaucracy.
- Administrators' salaries would be better spent on instruction.
- Districts are top-heavy.
- Schools should be run more like a business.

Bad Assumptions

The good news is that the facts about school administrators don't match perceptions according to *Answering the Critics of School Administration*, a new book from the Educational Research Service (ERS).

"With the success of school reform efforts dependent on accurate assessment, ongoing communications about the complex issues affecting student achievement are more critical than ever," said John Forsyth, co-author of the new book.

"Oversimplified arguments blaming administrative excess become rallying cries. These criticisms often miss the mark

when it comes to addressing the real issues affecting student achievement," Forsyth continued.

The book shows the facts often directly contradict long-held perceptions about school administrators. One popular criticism is that administrators are an unnecessary burden. Forsyth responds by saying, "Good management is critical to the effective operation of any organization. What organizational endeavor is more important than the education of our youth?" And where school reform is working, school administrators are the key driving force to student and system success.

Another popular target is administrators' salaries. Critics often say administrators' salaries unnecessarily absorb large

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portions of school districts' operating budgets. But the facts say differently. Across the country, combined salaries of central office professionals make up just 2.2 percent of public schools' operating budgets according to the book.

"If you eliminated all the salaries of central office positions, you

would be able to increase spending in other areas by only 5 percent. This refutes the popular claim that investment in administration comes at the expense of instructional efforts," Forsyth said.

Run Like a Business

School administrators supervise more than 15 staff members on average, compared to manufacturing executives who typically supervise about 5 employees, the book shows.

Even when you stack schools' 15 to 1 ratio against others like public administration (4.4 to 1), information/Internet industry (3.6 to 1), and utilities (5.7 to 1), school administrators are over 300% more efficient than these industries, according to the book.

Responding to the book's findings, Forsyth said, "This disconnect between reality and perceptions threatens effective school leadership approaches. That's why it's critical school administrators make a commitment to keeping all members of the school community aware of what the facts are about school administration."

— Larry Lhulier
Editorial/Marketing Specialist

More on This Topic: See page 3 for tips on how to close the Perception/Reality Gap. **Plus:** Get an NSPRA auditor perspective.

Inside:



Bob Noyed has been elected as NSPRA's President Elect. See page six for complete election results.

Good News —The Bad News Is Wrong

Yep, the facts are on education's side. So why do negative perceptions linger? Many reasons abound.

School administrators are visible, public-sector targets and are easy to attack. Some administrators work in school districts with more than 125,000 students, so the potential of ticking off up to a quarter of a million people is great when "bad things happen to good schools."

And even though most school administrators' salaries are far lower than they should be, they still make more money than most taxpayers in many communities. Some political activists seem to work full-time at "piling on" when it comes to bureaucracy bashing. And school leaders are often in the cross-hairs of their political bazookas.

Unfortunately, education leaders do little to refute these charges in a planned, proactive fashion.

Many school leaders think that just doing great work every day will dispel negative perceptions.

Too many educators wait to be attacked before they even think about communicating. We then appear defensive and lose control of our own issues. We will continue to lose the perception-reality game unless we begin playing offense.

Tips on closing the gap on the school administration issue are enclosed on this page. We also included a reality/perception gap scenario from a communication audit. Don't let these situations percolate. Narrow these gaps by taking charge of the major issues in your school community.

Start by learning what the buzz is about your schools. Then chart a proactive approach to set the record straight

— *Rich Bagin, APR*
NSPRA Executive Director

Closing the Reality/Perception Gap

Use the new ERS report as a guide to develop a snapshot for your district. Create generic comparisons with other industries to demonstrate what a bargain education is or develop talking points about what administrators do and how they directly affect student well-being. Even communicate what would happen if they were no longer there.

Plan to proactively use the facts and talking points throughout the year. Don't just "fire back" when attacked. Make the facts part of your year-round message that you work into normal communication vehicles. Here are some other tactics to try:

- Write a "By the Numbers" feature in publications/website.
- List "Frequently Asked Questions" about school administration on a handout. Publish it on your website.
- Create a PowerPoint presentation with facts and figures about your district. Offer it along with a speaker and a handout at PTA meetings, Board of Realtors gatherings, service club presentations, and cable TV shows.
- Develop a "Closer You Get, The Better We Look" campaign. Invite residents to see what school leaders do for their children.
- Highlight awards received by your district and the leaders who oversee those award-winning programs.
- Use the Principal/Administrator-for-a-Day approach to engage community leaders in understanding what administrators do.

Perception-Reality Gaps often surface in communication audits completed by NSPRA. Most audits conclude the on-site work with an exit interview with the superintendent. Many go like this . . .

NSPRA Auditor says . . .

We found that a majority of your external audit participants — parents, Realtors, and business officials — think the district's reputation is slipping based on what they hear from one another in the community. They say test scores are dropping rapidly and that no one wants to teach in the system any more because it's not as good as it used to be.

That's good news, but how in the world can the perception be completely opposite of reality? What have you done to overcome these perceptions? And don't you think this perception will hurt you during the next budget season or bond election? Some people we interviewed even pointed out that they will vote "No" because there is a sense of throwing "good money after bad."

Well, yes, and you also hired NSPRA to let you know that you have gaps in your communication program. Now that we know what the community "buzz" is about your district, and we know that you have the facts on your side, we will come back with some strategies and tactics to help close the gap between perception and reality. But it will need a commitment for proactive communication from you and your board. Otherwise, the gap will remain, support will slide and the negative "buzz" will continue.

Then the Superintendent replies . . .

That can't be! Who said that? Those charges are NOT true! In fact, test scores have risen. Only one school's scores remained flat and that's where we had an influx of students from a third-world country. And we have waiting lists of teachers we would love to hire, but we have no vacancies for them. These folks are just flat-out wrong. WE are right!

Look, we work real hard here and we are making great progress with our students. Isn't that what we were hired to do? Our work should speak for itself!

When will we receive the report? Please list your recommendations in a priority order as we can't do everything.