As competition for students heats up, the nation’s best public school leaders must focus on creating a system of high-quality customer service for students and families.

BY DR. GERALD DAWKINS
Teaching and learning matters. But that’s not all.

Great schools offer great teaching and learning. That’s a given. But, as competition for students heats up across the country, school leaders are increasingly coming to the realization that great classrooms alone aren’t enough to keep families from considering—or worse, from leaving—for newer options with decidedly deeper pockets and more resources.

Recent studies* have shown the decision to choose out of a public school often has more to do with the experiences of parents than those of their children. Schools must continue to invest in great classrooms. But the most successful school leaders know that academics is but one critical piece of the total school experience. To keep families enrolled and engaged, our schools have to demonstrate value in other ways. That includes touting their successes, listening to their communities and providing better, more responsive customer service. Because, yes, schools have customers too.

As a former district superintendent turned advisor, I’ve traveled the country meeting with school leaders. While many do customer service, few have committed to the cultural transformation required to succeed. What follows are 10 essential ingredients, each of which is essential to delivering on the promise of world-class customer service in your schools.

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1. See customer service as a need to have versus a nice to have
2. Move beyond 20th-century thinking
3. Use software as an accelerator, not as a solution
4. Create buy-in at every level
5. Establish clear measures of customer service success (KPIs)
6. Appoint the right champion to lead the effort
7. Support customer service across the school district
8. Remember, you get out only what you are willing to put in
9. Implement solutions with a maniacal focus on fidelity
10. Keep your eyes on the prize
10 Secrets to Developing Exceptional School Customer Service

See customer service as a need to have versus a nice to have

When your schools are understaffed and underfunded, the last thing you want to do is propose another initiative. It is easy to see customer service as a cost—one more program to throw money at. But that’s not the mindset of a leader who understands the impact of their decisions downstream. The most innovative leaders understand the total economic cost of not investing in customer experience. Done right, they know that good customer service and branding will keep families enrolled and engaged, and even bring those who’ve left back. Higher enrollments translate to more funding, which can be used in the classroom, or wherever improvements are needed. This is not an inflated marketing promise of distant ROI. With every $1 invested this year in customer service, your schools have the potential to earn more than $4—money that otherwise might be lost to declining student enrollment and school choice.

For an example of what I’m talking about, read how the Austin Independent School District successfully turned a nearly $850,000 investment into a $4 million net gain for its schools.

CLICK HERE
There's an old saying, “customer service is everyone’s job.” This is a nice sentiment. You want everyone in your schools to approach parents and community members with respect and with courtesy. But if customer service is everyone’s job, isn't it also no one’s job? In today’s world, school leaders must create a system to support a culture of exceptional customer experience.

To create a system of customer service...

**SCHOOL LEADERS MUST**

1. **Be easy, direct and always-on.** Parents and community members should have easy, direct and always-on access to their point of service. That doesn't mean you need to respond to people at 11 o'clock at night. But they should be able to reach you, whenever and on whatever channel is convenient or comfortable for them.

2. **Be timely, every time.** Listening is important. Equally important is that you respond. And that you do it quickly. Whether you respond in one, two or three days is not as important as setting expectations and meeting them. And over time, setting more ambitious goals. One business day is a good ultimate goal to target, but you don't have to start there.

3. **Issue only quality responses.** The quality of your responses—that is, how you reply—matters to people. You can't and don't have to give people everything they ask for. But every response should be at a minimum accurate, complete and courteous. This can't happen if everyone is doing their own thing. You need to train people. And ask your customers to rate their experience every time.
3 View software as an accelerator, not a solution

In many school systems, it is tempting to buy a piece of software and check the box on customer service. But just as software by itself cannot transform teaching and learning in the classroom, it cannot drive a culture of customer service in your schools. That takes intentionality.

Internally, everyone in your district must embrace a customer service mindset and have the right training.

Externally, your community needs to trust you enough to first bring their concerns and questions to you. This takes time. But, if you do it right, parents and others will turn to you before flocking to social media or reaching out to the local newspaper to air their frustrations. When this happens, it’s a game changer for your ability to build trust and engage your community.
Create internal buy-in at every level

Everybody—even many of your best people—can be apprehensive about new initiatives. As a school leader, there’s a good chance that you will come to recognize the importance of strong customer service before your leadership team and way before your staff. What you see as a stand against declining student enrollment or for greater parental involvement will be viewed as more work or more accountability to some. The naysayers might try to convince you that the current approach is working. What they’ll fail to see is that standing pat has significant costs downstream, especially as students leave. Make an unwavering non-negotiable commitment to providing high-quality customer experiences in your schools. Take the time to answer questions, and make sure your staff understand the stakes and what’s in it for them. High-quality customer service leads to more support from parents and the community. That results in more resources for students and staff.
Establish clear measures of customer service success (KPIs)

It’s easy for school boards to get into the weeds when it comes to governance. Every board member anecdotally knows one customer who has had a negative experience with the school district. This is the kind of stuff that grinds productive board meetings to a halt and strains superintendent-board relations. That’s why you need to develop key customer service indicators with your school board. By meeting those KPIs and publicly sharing them, superintendents, principals and others can avoid the trap of governing-by-anecdote.

HERE ARE THREE INDICATORS YOU SHOULD USE TO START:

1. **Trending topics.** These are the most prominent issues that your community is talking about. They’ll likely change throughout the year.

2. **Response times.** The amount of time, on average, it takes you or your team to respond personally to community feedback or concerns.

3. **Experience score.** This is the score your community gives you for the speed, courteousness and accuracy of your responses. It’s the best indicator that their needs are being met.

Sharing these three indicators with the school board and the public will help you avoid distractions and focus on what’s important.
Appoint the right champion to lead the effort

Nothing promises to sink your school’s next initiative faster than failing to appoint the right champion to own it. That champion needs to appreciate the stakes and the urgency driving the changes across the organization. Ask yourself, what is their experience? Can they see beyond tactical decisions to fully understand the strategy? Can they get others to buy in to the need for better customer service? This person should be capable of running a multi-departmental, multi-year project. This person needs to have the experience and the understanding to get the job done over time. If they don’t appreciate customer service in the context of schools, or if they are saddled with other priorities, look elsewhere.
When schools embark on creating a system of customer service, there is an inclination to assign the effort to the communications department. Creating a culture of customer experience requires a system-wide commitment. That means every department has a role to play, both in adopting and implementing the system and in helping to fund it. Take a multi-departmental approach, where a dedicated project lead, perhaps at the level of chief of staff, works across the entire organization to create a virtuous cycle of customer engagement. At a recent meeting of the Council of the Great City Schools, several large district leaders suggested hiring for an assistant superintendent in charge of customer service. This is the kind of top-down and side-to-side commitment that your initiative needs to succeed. Because every department is responsible for providing exceptional customer service, it stands to reason that the expense of the software, implementation, staff and professional development should be shared across the entire organization.
Remember, you get out only what you are willing to put in

If you're considering investing in a system of customer service, you've already identified the problem. The question is whether you're ready to commit to changing your culture. Because that's what this endeavor really amounts to.

BEFORE YOU JUMP IN, ASK IF YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT IS CAPABLE OF MAKING THESE 5 COMMITMENTS:

1. Firm leadership at both the board and superintendent level. Make high-quality customer experience a non-negotiable priority system-wide.
2. Buy-in at the executive cabinet and district staff level. Articulate the stakes early and often.
3. Appointment of a capable senior-level champion. One person to see the project through in the face of obstacles and resistance.
4. Multi-year commitment to training and professional development for all staff. Make sure teachers and staff are engaged in a continuous cycle of improvement.
5. Holding both internal staff and external vendor partners accountable for success. Hold all parties, vendors included, accountable for helping you achieve your goals.
Implement solutions with a maniacal focus on fidelity

An effective school customer service implementation requires but two things at scale: consistency and pacing. Your school or district is unique. But the strategies and best practices required to create a system of exceptional customer service are not. Resist the urge to over-customize your approach. Take time to understand proven practices and make a deep commitment. The transition to a stronger customer-centric culture doesn’t occur overnight. A sound implementation requires persistence. That said, there is such a thing as moving too slow. Have a plan with benchmarks and deadlines and follow it through.

Resist the urge to over-customize your approach.
If you’re staring at budget cuts this year or next, the natural inclination is to cut any program not directly tied to student instruction. As a former superintendent, I can relate to the pressures that produce this sort of tunnel vision. Politically, it’s the safest move. But, in the age of school choice and competition, it’s not the smartest one. Rather than disinvest in customer experience or marketing during times of fiscal restraint, the smartest leaders double down on their investment, capitalizing on broad public support to bring funding back to their schools. Don’t give your competition a window to woo disenchanted families. Show your community that you care, and watch your schools, and your students, flourish.
Join the movement.

Is your school or district losing students to school choice or declining enrollment? Are your parents disengaged? Have you considered how adopting a system of customer service can help you build stronger relationships with families and win back those who’ve left? K12 Insight works with more than 400 school districts to improve the customer experience.

Visit us at www.k12insight.com/customer-service-training
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