

How Wake County is changing the conversation about school customer service



By Corey Murray

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In a district with about 160,000 students and 18,000 employees, school leaders at the Wake County Public School System field hundreds, if not thousands of requests from parents and community members each day. Given the number of conversations taking place at any one time, district officials found it difficult to respond in an organized way.

When parents called the transportation or food services departments it wasn't always clear what was said or who followed up, says Tim Simmons, chief of communications. “Looking at these conversations after the fact, you could see that two or three people might have worked on that same concern without even knowing it,” he says. “Sometimes, the only way we knew an issue got resolved was that no one was complaining anymore.”

At a time when charter schools and other providers are actively recruiting families away from the district, administrators knew they needed a better way to listen and respond to community concerns. Email is great, but it's hard to track, says Simmons. If the chain breaks, there's no way back. The conversation dead ends.

For Superintendent Dr. James Merrill and his team, the need for change went beyond the surface-level limitations of email. The district sought something more systemic—in a sense, a new mindset for how to conduct school customer service.

A team approach

First order of business: link the “contact us” buttons on the central district website to something called Let's Talk!. The solution, from K12 Insight, provides a system and a process for school leaders to listen and

respond to community feedback. When a community member submits a comment or concern through Let's Talk!, their message goes into a universal inbox where it is automatically routed to the right team member to ensure a timely response.

Inside the system, school leaders monitor individual conversations, share notes on feedback and triage communication to provide more accurate answers in less time. An online dashboard enables Merrill and other school leaders to track trending issues, spotlight areas of critical concern and keep conversations moving. Because all communication happens inside Let's Talk!, as opposed to in disparate email threads, the chain never breaks, Simmons explains.

Beyond technology

Simmons says the technology gives district leaders the tools and insights to have deeper conversations about the importance of actively listening to parent, staff and community feedback.

There will come a time when parents and community members disagree with your decisions, says Simmons. “How you say no and that you are courteous and timely about it, goes a long way toward building trust,” to ensuring that everyone who engages with the district walks away with a positive impression, regardless of whether they agree.

Culture shift

While the district is pleased with the strides it is making, Simmons says some school leaders were wary of the approach at first. Most educators understand the importance of responding to parents' concerns. But not everyone likes the idea of tracking or

asking community members to rate those conversations, another feature of Let's Talk!

“No matter how many times we ask parents to rate us on our accuracy and timeliness, there are still parents who rate us on whether we told them what they wanted to hear,” explains Simmons.

While that's a fair concern, he says, after a year of using the technology and having internal conversations about how it is used, resistance has faded. People have started to see the value.

Looking ahead

Across the district, some three dozen central services departments currently use Let's Talk! to track and manage community feedback. Though there have been discussions about extending the technology to individual school buildings, Simmons says the district isn't there yet.

Building principals have different relationships with parents than central office staff, and their system and style of communication needs to reflect that.

In the end, what it comes down to is showing parents and families that you care—and that you are willing to listen.

“We want parents to see our schools as their best, first choice,” Simmons says. Providing good customer service is just one way to do that.

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