

Turn your district into a customer service machine



Why customer satisfaction is a competitive advantage for K12 schools

By Wendy Robinson — District Administration, December 2015

Public school leaders have grown accustomed to the ground shifting beneath their feet.

Budgets shrink year to year. Testing requirements change in a blink. Teacher certification guidelines are revised and rewritten, seemingly without warning.

The one constant we could always rely on was this: Come fall, students would be there, waiting. These days, though, even that's not a given.

More parents are shopping schools. With the growth of charters and the availability of vouchers to attend private institutions, public schools are no longer the schools of default. We need to be schools of choice—and we need to recognize that our schools are among many options available to parents.

Even if we firmly believe that our schools offer the best learning opportunities for students, we realize that other criteria can influence a family's decision.

So, what's the solution?

Experience has taught us that we need to do more to keep families connected to our schools. Some districts hire marketing firms to polish their public image, while others invest millions in advertising.

At Fort Wayne Community Schools in Indiana, while we have increased our marketing efforts, we've also taken another approach: improved customer service. Making the transition from a default backyard institution to a customer-centric destination requires serious operational and philosophical changes.

Revamp the system

At Fort Wayne, we wanted to show our community that we were committed to listening and responding thoughtfully to their concerns. But traditional email and phone systems weren't getting the job done. Too many messages got lost or simply never reached the right person.

Occasionally people would call or visit, and walk away from the experience without answers. We knew our employees were trying in earnest to meet the community's needs, but we didn't have the right systems to ensure we were following through on those expectations.

Enter Let's Talk!, a cloud-based listening station for K12 schools from Virginia-based K12 Insight. The technology makes it possible to solicit community feedback through a button on our school district website. Every comment is automatically routed to the right staff member to issue a response, usually within 48 hours.

On the back end, each interaction is funneled into a dashboard where team members can gauge response times, identify trending issues and flag potential crises in need of fast attention.

No more messages falling through the cracks. No more missed opportunities. If a community member reaches out to us with a question, comment or concern, they expect a response—and we're committed to giving them one.

Create a process that scales

A reputation for good customer service isn't born out of a handful of feel-good

exchanges. Employees at every level must embrace your approach and know how to implement it in the context of everyday situations. Technology can help, but it's just a tool.

The onus is on the district to ensure that a commitment to customer service extends to every faculty and staff member. It isn't enough for the communications office, or the food services department, or the counseling office to be good at customer service. Once an expectation for good customer service is created, your community will expect you to honor it. Everyone is accountable.

Train every member of your team

Be as transparent as possible about your plans for listening and responding to your community. Make sure anyone who interacts with the public receives the education and the professional development to effectively meet your goals.

Every community member should know that you are committed to listening and responding to their concerns. If you have a special process or tool for collecting community feedback, do the outreach. Make sure people know what resources are available to them, and that they use them. Otherwise, what's the point?

Customer service isn't just something you do; if done right, it's what sets you apart.

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