



Boards Making a Difference

Community Relations: More Than Just One Piece of the Strategic Plan Puzzle for the Dubuque Board

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“We realized that not all our kids are realizing their full potential. As a board, we want to make sure as all our kids are coming into our system, we’re helping them reach their full potential and truly are preparing them for the future,” said Dubuque Schools board member Anderson Sainci. Of course all boards want this, but what can they really do about it?



In 2012, the Dubuque Schools Board of Education adopted a five-year strategic plan with a focus on making it easy to understand and devoid of education jargon, centered on student achievement. The strategic plan truly showed the community where the district is today and where it’s headed. It included five key areas: student achievement, student development, community engagement, effective resource management and employee excellence.

“Everything we do should impact student achievement. Once we implemented the strategic plan, we put it into place and have been using it as it should be used—it didn’t just go on the shelf. It’s a working strategic plan that we share with the community,” said Board President Tami Ryan. The board took this community engagement and understanding very seriously.

The board realized that they couldn’t reach the goals alone—they knew they needed to share the plan and engage community members, creating a dialogue. “The citizens own the joint. We say it all the time on the school board. There are 70,000 people in our district and they want to help. The strategic plan represents an agreement with citizens—this is what we’re here to do, where we want to go with their money, with their kids,” said Board Vice President Tom Barton.

EMPHASIS ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS

Prior to 2012, there was a general disconnect between the district and community. To remedy this disconnect, the board and administration has purposefully engaged as many groups as possible, handing out more than 3,000 copies of the plan to Rotary, chambers, boards, parent groups and more. “We are aggressive in making sure we broadcast the plan to as many groups as possible. Board members ask for time on community group agendas. I’ve done Saturday morning coffee sessions with

staff—open mic style, where citizens can ask any question they like. We’ve become intentional in sharing our information and ensuring people feel tied in,” said Superintendent Stan Rheingans.

Another intentional strategy is showing the community that the board is approachable. “We’ve chosen 5:30 p.m. meeting times and we have open forum at the beginning of the meeting so they can give input right away. We have made our website citizen friendly by focusing on how they navigate and easily retrieve information,” said Barton. Additionally, even if a citizen can’t make it to a board meeting in person, all meetings are broadcast live and then archived. Improvements were made to enhance the quality of the meetings and give community members better access. These improvements have paid off—today, the community is supportive and engaged. “We are committed to being wide open and transparent. At the end of the day, the community understands we’re not hiding anything. They are supportive of us because we’re transparent and we’re willing to meet with everyone and listen to them, and give them our side of the story,” said Rheingans.

The board realizes that another important part of the community is district employees—nearly 2,000 of them. The district engages them at the beginning of the year in an opening session, where they share priority initiatives for the year. Employees are well informed and updated so they can talk to their neighbors, community groups and more. “All employees, teachers, administrators, secretaries understand where we’re going and what their role is, which makes them advocates and effective communicators for the district,” said Rheingans.

Within the strategic plan, special attention is paid to community partners, whether that’s community groups, community colleges or local businesses, all with the end goal of ensuring students are future ready. “We all know there’s more jobs out there than there are qualified workers. We’re figuring out how to offer internships, how it fits within our curriculum, partnering with businesses, and giving our students opportunities for hands-on experience in industries where they can eventually have a career,” said Ryan.

The board feels strongly about reaching all audiences within their community, “It starts by having data and by us talking about equity at a board level. It allows us to have the uncomfortable conversations—who are we missing? The data piece itself shows who isn’t maximizing, reaching their full potential. Those kids who are most at risk are kids in poverty and kids of color. We reach out to the community partners that have relationships within these communities to leverage that education, maximizing their full potential, and bring them to the table to help all of our students,” said Sainci.

STRATEGIC CHANGE IN MEDIA RELATIONS AND OUTREACH

Since implementing the strategic plan, the media outlook has shifted—they are now considered the distribution center for what’s happening in Dubuque’s schools. They are treated more like a partner, ready to help spread news. Prior to the strategic plan, messaging was inconsistent because there wasn’t one dedicated media district spokesperson. The board approved the budget and hiring of a full-time communications director to help with this. “We have become very clear with our communications, making sure the message we get out to the community is why we do what we do. We try to tell our story before everyone else can tell it for us. If we don’t tell our story, the community will tell it for us, and it’s not always the right story,” said Ryan.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The original five-year plan ended November 2017. The board spent considerable time updating and rewriting the plan, and approved it in May 2018. “We want to increase student achievement, and the strategic plan is how we’re going to make it happen,” said Rheingans.

The updated strategic plan continues the emphasis on community relations, and the board will continue to prioritize outreach and partnerships. “It takes a community to educate a child. People rely on the district, but we can’t do it alone,” said Sainci.

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