



PARTNER BUILD GROW

An Action Guide for Sustaining Child Development and Prevention Approaches

Binghamton, NY: Using Communication Strategies to Build and Retain Support for Student Services In Broome County, NY

Introduction

Savvy communication strategies, long-standing networks, knowledge of community assets and challenges, and dedication to students have helped Broome County, NY build a sustainable model to benefit the emotional and physical health of children. Encompassing the city and suburbs of Binghamton as well as rural farmland, the residents of Broome County, NY have faced financial hardships similar to those in many mid-sized cities across the U.S. For the last fifteen years, representatives from the education, government, and community sectors of the County have been meeting to discuss and collaborate on school-based efforts to support the emotional and physical health of children. In order to sustain these much needed supports, a coalition connected to the state and local policy environment, and was able to obtain state funding as a Promise Zone¹. The community is now building on past collaborative work and illustrating the benefits of a strong communication plan.

Background

In one of their broadest efforts to date, in 2013 the County received funding from the New York State Office of Mental Health to be the state's fifth Promise Zone – the first to be awarded to such a large area.² Led and organized by a coalition of Broome County Department of Mental Health, Broome-Tioga Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES), and Binghamton University, the Broome County Promise Zone established goals of increasing access to services, improving attendance, increasing family engagement, and improving academic achievement. Using the community school model to organize community resources to promote success for students and their families, the initiative involves many organizations from around the county. With 12 school districts serving over 30,000 students³, a five-year unemployment rate averaging around 9%⁴ and 44% of students receiving free and reduced lunch⁵, the organizations recognize that the only way to provide families with all of the services and resources they need is by collaborating.

Story

While the Broome County Promise Zone has modeled each of the prongs outlined by [Partner Build Grow](#), from Mapping Assets, to Building an Action Team, to Connecting with the Policy Environment, one of their strengths has been in their communication strategies. From the beginning, coalition members have understood the value of communicating to potential funders. Leveraging data that showed the positive impacts previous programs had on the community (a version of the Asset Mapping prong) and demonstrating support from key community members and organizations (including the local Assemblywoman), the team was able to secure Promise Zone funding. Their communications work did not stop there however. They not only realized how essential it was to continue to provide the state administrators and policymakers with positive stories about their work, they understood the need to

¹ New York State Promise Zones provide a framework in which assigned communities can create environments that engage and support school children and their families in their pursuit of success.

² To learn more about this coalition and the strategies it used to receive the designation, see Case Study: Building Community Schools in Upstate New York. [link]

³ Broome County School Districts. Accessed: <http://www.newyorkschoools.com/counties/broome.html>

⁴ Unemployment Rate in Broome County, NY, from 2009 - 2015. Accessed: <https://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/series/NYBRO07URN>

⁵ Poverty Indicators for Children and Youth, Broome County and New York State, 2000 & 2007, p. 15, Broome County, Community Health Assessment, 2010 – 2013. Accessed: <http://www.gobroomecounty.com/files/hd/pdfs/BCCHA2010-2013.pdf>

create support inside and outside of the community. They recognize how beneficial it is to extend their reach beyond the first audience of state administrators and policymakers who had the money to fund them and adapted their message and communication methods to reach a variety of audiences. They do this in numerous ways. They attend and speak at conferences and professional meetings, such as the Netter Center University-Assisted Community School Conference and the Coalition for Community Schools National Conference. They created brochures and a PowerPoint presentation that community groups and individuals can freely access and they established social media networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, to disseminate news of initiative activities. They make a point to illustrate how students benefit from the program and reinforce it with evaluation data. In addition, they have relationships with local news media and prominently feature any clips or stories on the [Broome County Promise Zone website](#).

“I can sense this great hope again that we can do more. There’s an ‘I can do it attitude. We’ve seen that schools are much better connected with all the other agencies and groups... People are coming together in ways they haven’t previously.”
Community Stakeholder

They also use one of the most important skills in communications: listening and responding to concerns of all stakeholders. In one rural community, an initial activity involved visiting the families in one of the school communities to talk with them, help them feel comfortable with the system, and learn about barriers that make it difficult to engage in the school and community. By reaching out and listening to family concerns, they pro-actively showed families that their input is respected and families responded by recognizing the benefit the school had to the community and encouraging attendance. But it’s not just families that stakeholders engaged. According to one school principal, as the administration told staff about community schools and some of the new activities that would take place, they were surprised to receive some push back from teachers. They quickly realized that in their eagerness to proceed, they had neglected to involve teachers in the process. They immediately changed course and prioritized gathering teacher input to understand and address their concerns. Since then, teachers have supported the effort and felt respected. As another principal noted, it is important to check egos at the door and be prepared to really work together. Listening and addressing strengths and challenges in formats that meet the needs of your audience and focusing on the overarching goal of supporting children, is a key to building long-lasting support.

Keys to Success

- Communicate positive stories that show the success of the program
- Listen to constituents, address concerns, and adjust strategies when necessary
- Recognize that you need support from different constituents and audiences, and adapt your message and your communication platform to reach each specific audience in ways that resonate with them
- Use a variety of communication methods: person-to-person, local media, social media, presentations, websites, printed materials

Conclusion

The team in Binghamton clearly recognizes the value of reaching a variety of audiences and spreading their stories of success to continue support. As recommended in [Partner Build Grow](#), they research their audience, ask for input, and address concerns, so that the coalition’s overall message is effectively communicated to each different audience. Their use of various media strategies and their ability to adapt their communication activities to diverse audiences allows the coalition to address and overcome communication obstacles, use terms and language that resonate, and advance targeted goals. They

employed strategic communication not only to obtain initial funding, but also to build continuous support from community stakeholders and ensure program sustainability.

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