Naomi Dillon

# Rules of Engagement

## Using new technologies and creative strategies, districts are rethinking how they reach out to parents, businesses, and community members

Ed Honowitz was a middle school student in Pasadena, Calif., when his district became one of the first west of the Mississippi to be placed under court-ordered desegregation. It wasn't until he was an adult, after returning from college and career stints elsewhere, that he fully appreciated the impact of such a ruling on his hometown.

"We're a tale of two cities," says Honowitz, now a board member for the Pasadena Unified School District. "We've got the Rose Bowl, the Rose Parade, and lots of old money—and we've got a district that is two-thirds free and reduced lunch."

That dichotomy, played out in larger cities across America over the past four decades, has become a joke among locals in Pasadena. The joke, according to Honowitz, goes like this: After desegregation, the city and the school district divorced. The schools got custody of the kids but not enough support.

Reclaiming that support—and the investment and involvement of an engaged community—is critical to a district's success. A 2009 report issued by researchers at Columbia University's Teachers College says family and community involvement have a direct impact on student learning.

"[Federal] policy and media keep isolating our schools, making it appear that the answer to this very complex issue is the teacher," says Martin Blank, president of the Institute for Educational Leadership, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. "Yes, the teacher is the most important in-school factor, but the community is the most important out-of-school factor, and we've got data to support that."

Other data, however, shows that school districts are struggling with how to make it happen. While research corroborates the importance of communication in building strong relationships and support between families and schools, these conversations are often intermittent, one-way, and focused on problems. When you throw in language barriers, varying socioeconomic backgrounds, and logistical constraints, it's easy to understand why disconnects exist between schools and the public.

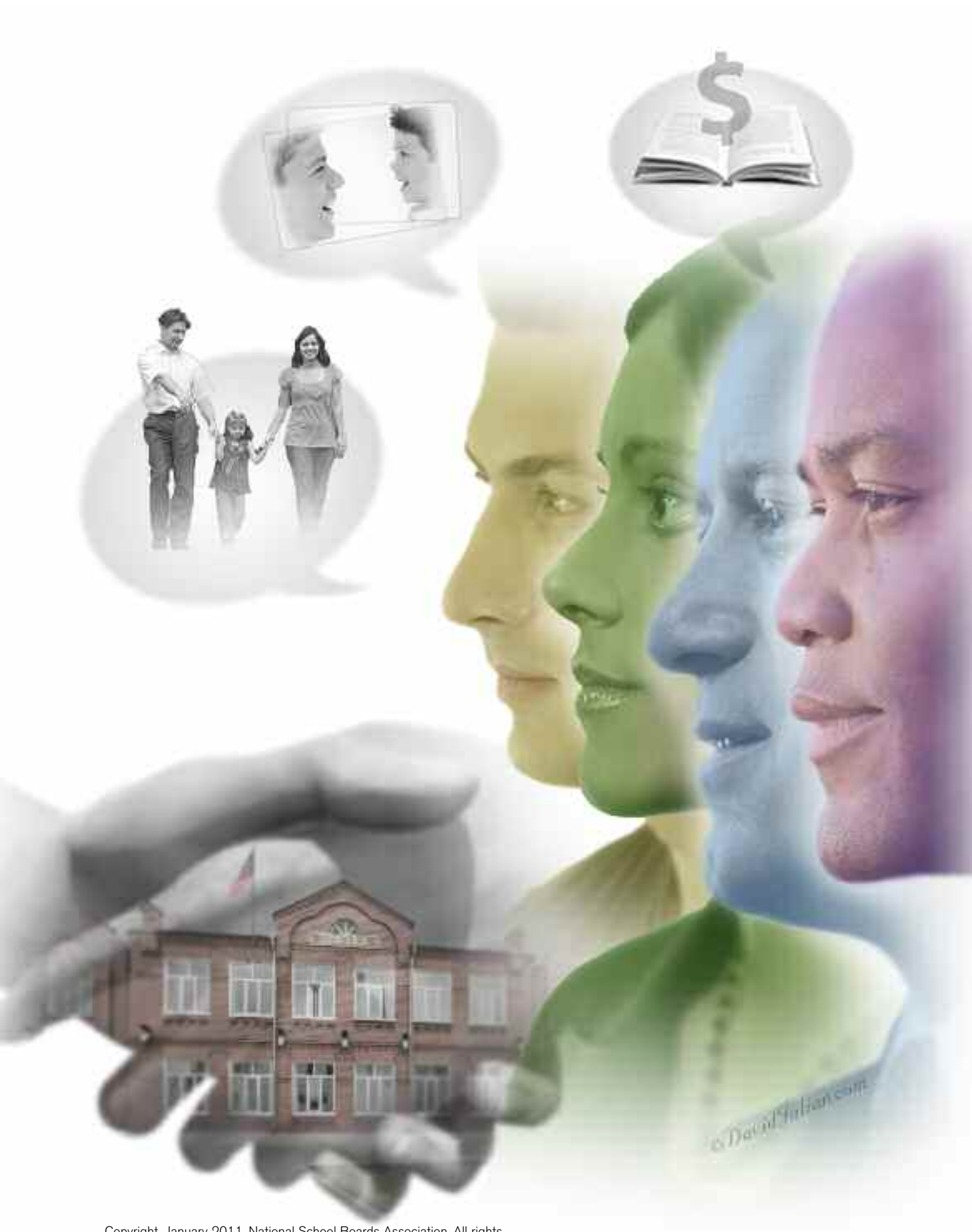
The bottom line: Engaging families and the community—especially in the comprehensive, ongoing, and strategic ways that yield the best results and not the "random acts" that current education policy promotes—is hard work. And it starts at the top.

"It is indeed a challenging thing to work across boundaries, and that's where leadership and school boards have a pivotal role to play," Blank says. "We need people who will be relentless about results and who believe in partnerships as a vehicle to engage the community."

Sometimes, as in Honowitz's case, those efforts start from the outside and work their way in.

### Show and tell

Honowitz joined the Pasadena school board nearly a decade ago, but he's been a public school advocate far longer, founding and leading a myriad of community orga-



David Julian

nizations and initiatives focused on improving the city's schools.

"The way I look at it is you can't just have a group that's going to be cheerleaders," he says. "They don't have the credibility in the community to ask the tough questions. There's a need to have an external accountability mechanism to drive the system."

## The hub of the community

Meet Martin Blank, president of the Institute for Educational Leadership. Typical of the many hats education leaders wear today, he also is the director of the Coalition for Community Schools (CCS), an alliance of national, state, and local organizations that believe schools should be centers of the community.

"A school that is open, where the space and facilities are available to the public and the community, brings health and social services, human capital, and a wealth of knowledge all around the purpose of getting students ready for postsecondary education," he says. "We call that kind of a place a community school."

Sound familiar? It should.

Community engagement is the strategy behind creating community schools, which is both a place and a new way of thinking, says Martin Gonzalez, deputy executive director of the California School Boards Association (CSBA). In true collaborative fashion, the CSBA is extending its work with CCS into a brand-new joint venture with the University of California, Davis (UC).

Funded by a $50,000 grant from the Stuart Foundation, the CSBA and UC's School of Education will establish the California Center for Community Engaged Schools, which will provide a policy framework that can be adapted by schools across the country to fit their needs.

"This is a natural departure from our *Building Healthy Communities* leadership guide because it was all about collaboration around resource issues," Gonzalez says. "I think a lot of districts have reached the conclusion that the problems or issues they are trying to address in school must be done with partners. They are finding they can't do it alone."

Though the center still is very much in its infancy, the CSBA recently released a policy brief on the growing trend of community schools, providing some insight into the kind of guidance that can be expected to come. School boards, for instance, are critical to setting direction, establishing structure, providing support, ensuring accountability, and modeling collaborative behaviors.

"It's being able to help districts in their leadership teams have a conversation about what the concept of community schools is, especially how that needs to be a data-driven conversation," Gonzalez says. "Because data changes the nature of those conversations from one of accommodation to one of need."

For more information, visit **www.csba.org**.

Pasadena's problem is that middle-class and affluent families have left the city and district in droves, taking much of the "accountability mechanism" with them. Today, at least 30 percent of school-age children who live in the district's boundaries attend parochial schools.

"It created this release valve for middle and high school parents to not address the public school system, so part of what I've been trying to do is build connections broadly across the city and the district," Honowitz says.

In many areas, Honowitz and his fellow board members have succeeded.

The district just wrapped up an extensive community-wide strategic planning initiative, inviting and ultimately involving more than 800 people through focus groups, community meetings, surveys, phone interviews, and even an interactive panel discussion broadcast live from a local radio station.

It was a far more sophisticated endeavor than the public engagement campaign Honowitz helped lead as a community organizer, but both efforts revealed the same challenges.

"When we started in the 1990s and did this large-scale community involvement process, the number one issue people had with the district was communication. If you ask today, it's the same issue," Honowitz says. "It's a constant effort to make sure people understand the decision-making process, the issues facing the schools, and have a vehicle for making their voices heard. It's not like you fix it once and you're done."

### The "social" connection

While social media and Web 2.0 tools have made it easier for districts to "connect" with communities, some districts are more willing than others to venture into this new territory.

Dave Doty can certainly understand the hesitancy. For months, the Canyons School District superintendent had been hounded by information technology staff to start a Twitter account. It was early 2009 and Doty was in the midst of preparing to open Utah's first new district in almost a century. While at NSBA's annual conference, he finally relented to his techies' prodding and timidly joined the Tweet crowd.

"I sat there for 30 minutes and I didn't know what to say, didn't know who to follow," Doty says. "I, frankly, didn't get it at first."

But like technology, it didn't take long for things to change, and Doty soon began connecting with other educators across the country. Then he started connecting with principals, teachers, education reporters, and even some parents.

"Then I said, 'OK, I get this now.' It connects me with professional colleagues and people in ways that I couldn't before," he says.

He points to a recent Saturday morning as an example. After checking his Twitter account from his phone, Doty discovered from a high school staff member that the cheerleading squad was washing cars to raise money. He decided to pay them a visit.

"I parked my car, got out, and walked to these two moms, and they were absolutely beside themselves, so I took a picture and tweeted it," he says. "I don't know how many new customers that generated, but those parents and kids thought that was a big deal and I never would've known about it."

Of course, there are some risks in the cyberworld. Doty, who encourages his staff to blog and utilize social media networks, has had more than a few disgruntled parents post unflattering comments on his account.

"I've had some choices to make: do I shut down my account, do I engage, do I ignore? Those are still questions I'm asking myself," he says. "But the days of leading a district from an office and only responding to people that call you are over. These are public, high-profile positions and you might as well engage these tools to engage the community in a positive way."

### Talking face to face

Sometimes, though, good old face-to-face interactions can be just as effective at connecting with the community. Just ask Paul Vranish. You can do so every month at the high school in Tornilla, Texas.

Vranish, the district's superintendent, started the "parent chats" after a huge scandal erupted in his previous school district. A popular employee had misrepresented himself, but rather than fire the individual, the district buckled under community pressure and let Vranish go instead.

"It was easy to leave when they were so obviously wrong," says Vranish, who felt vindicated after learning the employee was later fired. "But the danger in playing the victim is you passively concede control of your destiny."

After reflecting on the episode, Vranish says it was clear why things had spun out of control.

"It occurred to me that so much of what the school administrator does involves personnel, and that's the one thing you're really not allowed to talk about," Vranish says. "Part of the problem is things tend to be controversial when they are, by statute, off-limits, or hard to explain, so I thought: Why not try to establish a climate of trust before things hit the fan?"

Hence the parent chats which—besides providing food, child care, and translators—always include some child-centered entertainment and a platform for community members to voice their concerns. These informal gatherings have helped the district squelch rumors and misinformation, gather good ideas, and, most importantly, bridge gaps in understanding with the public.

"This sounds like a nice thing to do, but you cannot be insincere about hearing what they have to say," says Vranish, who credits successful ballot measures, faster inclement weather procedures, and a safer and more robust transportation plan to these chats. "This can't be just a propaganda mechanism."

### Be deliberate and data-driven

It's exactly the same advice Jennifer Rogers, communications director at the Michigan School Boards Association, gives to districts interested in surveying their constituents, a service the organization provides to more and more districts every year.

"We've always been a big advocate for data-driven decisions, and I think our message is starting to filter out," Rogers says. "Districts understand, now more than ever, they need that input."

But it can't be a shell game. In initial conversations with districts, Rogers is clear that the online survey results must be shared with the public and acted on in some fashion in order to build credibility and trust.

"How they use it is up to them, but I tell them the data they gather must be used and carefully considered," says Rogers, who notes that surveys that are part of a district strategic plan are the most successful.

In Michigan, customer service surveys that ask about interactions and experiences with staff and schools are becoming a popular and integral part of improving community relations. In New Jersey, Rutgers University's Office of Civic Engagement is trying to do more—it wants to improve the greater community.

Part of Rutgers' initiative includes a focus on teaching civic behavior through new courses and curriculum, but the university has taken the endeavor a step further by lending resources and support to various organizations in Camden. Included in that is a coordinated partnership with the city's schools.

"We've always had these pockets of collaboration between the university and the district," says Nyeema Watson, administrative director of the university's Center for Children and Childhood Studies. "But our new chancellor wanted to take a more focused look at these partnerships, understanding that our prosperity is linked to the city."

Watson, a Camden graduate and former school board member, works to build strategic alliances between the university and the district. She says Rutgers' approach represents a considerable shift among universities that want to be seen as anchor institutions in the community rather than as takers that only engage the public when they need to do research.

"How do we get to a point where people in the community see us as a partner?" Watson asks. "How do you build

this level of trust so that we can work in strategic ways to bring knowledge and resources into the schools?"

Certainly, Watson's experience and background serves her well as she tries to bridge these different worlds. In her four years on the school board, Watson became keenly aware of how painfully slow change occurs in a large district, and how a volunteer position easily can become a full-time job.

Maybe it's the stalled economy, a changing job market, or last fall's rash of media events, but Watson believes education is moving into the forefront of national discourse. She just hopes it inspires people to come together and actually do something about it.

"Hopefully what people have come to see is the challenge, especially for urban school districts, is great and it will take some innovative thinking to change the culture and climate of schools to help students succeed," Watson says. "And there hasn't been one spot-on model that can be replicated across the country. Different things will work in different ways, depending on your community's needs."

And the only way to determine what a school, district, family, or community needs to move ahead is to ask.

## What schools are doing

Carlin Springs Elementary School in Arlington, Va., started offering English as a Second Language classes to its large population of non-English speaking families and found that not only did it improve communication, but 95 percent of the parents who took advantage of the classes began attending parent-teacher conferences and intended to be more engaged in their child's education.

In New York City, the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition's campaign to build and repair school facilities resulted in more than 14,000 new seats to relieve overcrowding in the neighborhood's elementary and middle schools. In Chicago, the Community Links High School has maintained a 99 percent graduation rate since graduating its first class in 2006, with 85 percent of its students going on to college.

*ASBJ's* Magna Awards have honored districts over the past several years for their successful community involvement programs, including Texas' Austin Independent School District's UpClose program; the Home School Initiative in Mason County Schools, in Maysville, Ky.; The Community Summit in New York's Bay Shore Union Free School District; the Partners in Education Breakfast in New York's West Seneca Central Schools; the Using Expert Panels for Community Engagement in Poudre School District in Fort Collins, Colo.; and Senior Citizens' School Tours in Missouri's Lee's Summit R-7 school district.

More information about these programs can be found at www.asbj.com/magna, including a searchable database of award-winning and high-scoring programs.

### Have a framework and goals

Soliciting and relying on community input to remove barriers is what started a philosophical shift in Georgia's Clarke County Schools five years ago.

"We called it a 'parentdigm' shift because we realized parents and families were necessary to change the landscape of education in Clarke County," says Monica Knight, the district's director of student achievement and educational equity.

That realization grew in tandem with the district's poverty rate, which currently impacts some 70 percent of the student population of 12,217. Getting around the hurdles inherent in disadvantaged communities would require a new, more strategic approach, which began with a simple name change.

"Parent involvement used to be the standard term, and we moved away from that because we know more than just parents need to be part of the process," Knight says. "And engagement is different than involvement because, just like when someone gets engaged, they are setting a whole different standard. They are ratcheting that relationship up to another level."

Proving the district was serious about moving the community/schools relationship in a different direction began with developing a nuts-and-bolts framework, one that laid out expectations, goals, dreams, and a shared vision.

"We wrote a school district policy that was based on national best practices and leading research in this field," Knight says. The result was an inclusive document that provides all kinds of avenues for the community to become part of the school and the school to become part of the community.

Family engagement specialists placed at each school help build these connections, and surveys are conducted regularly. Questions have been asked about information and services parents would find most helpful, what times would be easier to attend school meetings, and whether parents would be comfortable with home visits from teachers.

"We don't just have stuff to have it. We're really strategic about what we do," Knight says.

And where they do it as well. Last year, the district donated 800 old computers to a community organization that refurbishes them for free or at an extremely low cost to sell to needy families. But when the computers arrived at one of the area's housing projects, district officials discovered it had no Internet service. The district worked with the housing authority to provide that connection.

"Becoming true partners with these organizations has put us in strategic places to work out those kinks for families, which is the whole point of equity," Knight says. "We don't give all neighborhoods Internet access, but we do for the neighborhood that needs it." ■

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