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Common Ground

This study from SchoolCEO examines the working relationship between superintendents, school communications professionals and technology officers—and suggests strategies for more effective collaboration. Synthesizing data from AASA, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), and the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN), we highlight the similarities and differences between these three roles. We also provide case studies from three districts across the U.S. sharing how their central office teams work better together.

Discussion Guide

"In the past decade, online school communications have become a necessary cross-functional duty of every school district in the U.S. … Within these teams, three major positions stand out: the school superintendent, the leading technology officer and the leading communications officer."

- How are these three roles currently structured in your district? Do they work together regularly on communications strategy?

- In what ways do you see the perspectives of these three roles complementing or conflicting with each other in your district?

While some larger school districts have employed comms professionals for decades, the pandemic's forced emphasis on school communications prompted many more to add the role to their teams. … Nearly half of school comms pros come from public relations or marketing backgrounds, and a quarter started their careers as journalists. This gives many comms professionals a perspective that is often missing in district cabinet meetings."

- How do the different professional backgrounds of your leadership team strengthen or challenge your district's communication efforts?

- What unique perspectives does each leader (superintendent, communications director and CTO) bring to your district's communication strategy?

"Each of these three personas brings their own perspective and priorities to the task of school communications. But even if they don't seem like it at first, these priorities often overlap and complement each other. … Their top priorities share a common thread: building a relationship of trust with the broader community."

- How would you describe the current level of trust between your district and community? What metrics or feedback inform this assessment?

- What specific initiatives or strategies has your district implemented to build and maintain community trust?

"Despite their different perspectives, each of these three leaders operates with the same goal in mind: to ensure that their district gains and maintains its community's trust. However, they each see that goal through their own unique lens."

- Can you think of a recent decision where these different perspectives created tension or led to a better outcome? How did your team navigate this?

"Everyone needs a seat at the table… Having access to decision-making spaces also gives each leader the chance to share how their perspective is relevant to the decision at hand."

- How does your district ensure that the perspectives of communications, technology and leadership are all represented in important decisions?

"Interdepartmental communication should be frequent, fluid and grounded in respect… 'Nothing can happen without functional relationships, and that means meeting more than once or twice a year,' Maylahn says. 'It's important to have standing meetings with agenda items, even if tech and comms are already part of a superintendent's cabinet.'"

- What structures or routines do you have in place to facilitate regular communication between these three leadership roles?

- What is one concrete step your district could take to improve collaboration between these three key roles?

For more information on Common Ground
https://www.schoolceo.com/a/common-ground/