



The Importance of Telling Your Story

When is the last time something amazing happened in your classroom? I'll help you out . . . the last time you had kids in your classroom and they were engaged in learning, it was awesome. To think that there are people in this world with the skill level to engage a group of children of varying abilities, backgrounds, races, needs, and interests is extraordinary. The work done in schools all across the world is spectacular. Kids gather . . . learn . . . leave . . . and make the world we live in a better place. So, . . . *amazing* happens all the time.

As lead learners, administrators, and educators, it is our responsibility to transform the thick brick barriers surrounding our school buildings into clear, transparent walls of glass! We should want our community to see all the amazing things happening in school, and we should want our children to have a strong connection with the community around them. A positive and productive home/school

connection rooted in strong two-way communication is critical to the success of all students and schools. In this day and age of Common Core standards, educator evaluations, value-added measures, and the high-stakes testing craze that consumes our schools, we cannot lose sight of what matters most and why we entered the world of education—to make a difference in the lives of children. Together, with the families of our students, we must collaborate to help our children learn, grow, and develop the skills they need to become successful adults who contribute positively to the world!

Based on our various conversations with numerous other educators from across the country, communications between home and school seem to be inconsistent—at best. In some cases, parents get a monthly newsletter, which is fine except it is hard to talk to your child about something they did weeks ago. In other settings, parents have to rely on interrogating their child to find out a little bit about what is happening in school. Are we letting others tell our story through monthly, or even less frequently distributed, newsletters or fragmented communications with families? We really don't understand how this is possible in 2014 when telling our stories and branding our schools should receive the highest priority and is a story that we can accomplish through so many different means, resources, and platforms!

So, we have a few questions for you . . . think about them carefully because they will serve as the foundation for this journey. Why do we work so hard to keep everything hidden in our classrooms and in our schools? Why not share all of the amazing things happening in our spaces with the parents and community? Why not spotlight the successes (and challenges) that our children are experiencing each day at school? As parents and family members, we want nothing more than to know what our children are learning about in school and how they feel about their learning experiences and about themselves as learners. As educators, one of the highlights of our day is sharing all of the awesome learning and teaching happening in our spaces—whether through an e-mail to parents, tweets throughout the day, or a blog post, we want the entire community to know that incredible things are happening in

our school every minute of the day. Why? So, we can begin branding our school and telling our story!

We want to ensure that OUR voices are the ones telling OUR story—we cannot let anyone else tell our story for us!

The idea of branding schools isn't about selling kids or making false promises; it's about promoting the amazing things happening in our schools for those who don't have the opportunity to experience them on a daily basis. The percentage of people in your community who have kids in schools is relatively small. Only 20 to 30 percent of our communities are made up of households with students in our buildings. Those percentages reflect the huge void of people in the community who have any knowledge of what goes on in your school building. Telling the story of the wonderful things happening in schools to the kids who see it all the time is simply not enough. Students understand the experience because they live it . . . we need to make connections to everyone else because the 70 to 80 percent can serve as an incredible asset to the 20 to 30 percent who walk through the hallways. That large percentage is the group that normally tells the stories of their community and their experiences with the school system. Schools have the opportunity to define their space, provide an identity to those who live within their boundaries, and become a model for communities to support. Some community members come to you . . . they show up at games, concerts, school plays . . . and when they do, the performances on courts, fields, and stages is only part of the story. The feeling they have when they leave your building is the one that gets talked about at dinner tables, local restaurants, and at work the next day. Conversely, other community members do not participate, but if both community segments are speaking the same language and identify with your brand it helps build a great deal of social capital to celebrate the wonderful work of kids. These efforts shape perception and inform reality!

As we consider the power of perception informing reality, let's take a look at Tony's transition from classroom teacher to building administrator.

“People’s perception becomes their reality and so we must shape the perception to create the reality we want people to have when they think of us.” My superintendent, who hired me for my first administrative position, used to say this to me on a daily basis. Initially it was rooted in the fact that I didn’t necessarily wear a suit or shirt and tie each day to school and he felt strongly that the way I looked shaped the way people viewed me and interacted with me. They had a perception of me that spread through word of mouth and thus became the reality. I was still relatively young at the time and would always fight back because I argued it shouldn’t matter what I looked like, but instead my words and actions should matter. Eventually I started to think about the perceptions I created solely based on the way someone looked and I realized the only way I was going to get people to hear my words and attend to my actions was by creating a certain perception (that may or may not have been related to my appearance) and in turn my reality.

This idea came back to me about a year ago when I heard Eric Sheninger (@NMHS_Principal) speak about using the power of social media to tell our story and “brand” our schools. Brilliant—absolutely brilliant! Think of the Golden Arches—everyone knows about McDonalds and what a deal it is to eat there. Think about Apple—everyone knows they are always looking for the next iPhone or iPad—they are innovators and risk takers! Last summer I was in Aruba and they have branded themselves as “One Happy Island.” You know what? EVERYONE perceives this place as one happy island. Branding is key. Telling our stories is key. Eric was 100 percent right, and I knew that I had to get behind the idea and tell our story—I wanted to influence the perception of our school by sharing the daily realities. I wanted to help brand Cantiague Elementary School as the best elementary school on the planet. Why should we allow people to create their own perceptions, which are often rooted in misinformation, based on word of mouth, or whatever is published in the local paper?

Branding, which typically is a “business world” term, is exactly what our schools need today. There is so much bashing of public education in the media today, and the landscape of public education is not a pretty one, but as educators (superintendents, classroom

teachers, support specialists, or the lead learners of the building), we still control most of what happens in our schools. And since we control what happens in our schools (even with state and federal mandates and policies, the final execution is our call), and we know that there are awesome techniques, approaches, and programs unfolding in our schools, let's spread the word; let's brand our schools; let's fuel the perceptions; and let's create our realities.

In case you don't believe that branding and telling your story are important, let's look at some of the research that exists related to the power of branding. When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more. Furthermore, when schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections aimed at improving student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). We know that by telling our story, we engage our communities on a whole different level. As spotlighted above, when communities are engaged and connected, we see a positive impact on student achievement.

CHAPTER 1—TWO TAKEAWAYS & A TIP

- **Takeaway #1**—The idea of branding schools isn't about marketing kids or making false promises . . . it's about promoting the amazing things happening for those who don't have the opportunity to experience them on a daily basis.
- **Takeaway #2**—As lead learners, administrators, and educators, it is our responsibility to transform the thick brick barriers surrounding our school buildings into clear, transparent walls of glass!
- **Tip**—We know there are awesome techniques, approaches, and programs unfolding in our schools, so let's spread the word and start branding our schools. Decide on the platform, resource, or tool you want to use to tell your story and start shouting it from the rooftops!