team up for schools

Oregon PLAYBOOK

Improve public perception and support for K-12 schools

A play-by-play guide to help teachers, administrators, classified employees, parents and school board members work together.
INTRODUCTION

In Oregon, there is a “good news-bad news” gap between the actual performance of schools and students, and the public’s perception of school and student performance.

Here’s the good news: By almost every academic measure – state test scores, national test scores, college-entrance exam results, new and increasing standards for graduation and performance – Oregon students and schools are doing better and expecting more today than ever before. What’s more, they are continuing to improve, year after year.

And the bad news: According to a handful of recent statewide polls, Oregonians don’t recognize that their public schools and students are doing better and better.

In the wake of these survey results, seven statewide organizations joined forces to consider causes and cures for the “reality versus perception” gap related to student and school performance. The result of their collaboration is this TEAM UP Playbook.

TEAM UP is based on the research-supported premise that we – teachers, classified employees, administrators, school board members and parents – already exert significant influence on public perception of schools. The problem is, we are nearly as likely to (unwittingly, of course) use that influence to our detriment, rather than our benefit. A collaborative process designed to correct that problem is where TEAM UP comes in.

The Chalkboard Project, the Confederation of Oregon School Administrators, the Oregon Department of Education, the Oregon Education Association, the Oregon PTA, the Oregon School Boards Association and the Oregon School Employees Association encourage school districts to use this playbook. Let’s all stand shoulder-to-shoulder in developing and implementing TEAM UP Communications Plans. Let’s learn to use our influence for the benefit of students and schools. Together, we can make a real, positive difference in public perception of Oregon students and schools. All we have to do is, TEAM UP!

This TEAM UP Playbook contains a “Play-by-Play” guide and all the resources you need to implement TEAM UP in your district – including ready-to-use computer presentations, sample surveys and communications plans developed during TEAM UP pilots in Canby and South Lane school districts, and templates for you to use in conducting research and developing plans.

Don’t hesitate to contact TEAM UP Oregon if you have questions or need additional information.
What do Oregonians want from their schools?

An analysis of statewide research conducted in the past three years suggests that, when it comes to their K-12 public schools, Oregonians want to believe that:

- Schools and students are succeeding, academic standards are high, and schools are preparing students for college and the workforce.
- Parents are contributing to student success.
- Community members are involved in schools, and students are involved in community service.
- Districts are spending money wisely – in ways that maximize teaching and learning.

What do Oregonians perceive about their schools?

Despite the fact that Oregon schools are meeting the public’s desires better than ever before, Oregonians don’t think they are. Instead, what Oregonians perceive is this:

- Almost half think schools set expectations too low for students. *(Source: 2004 Employers for Educational Excellence survey)*
- More than half think a high school diploma does not mean students are ready for college or work. *(Source: 2004 Employers for Educational Excellence survey)*
- Nearly half are unable to identify a single positive thing about their local school. *(Source: 2004 Employers for Educational Excellence survey)*
- They are divided about the cause of the school funding crisis in Oregon. About half think schools don’t have enough money. The other half think schools don’t use existing resources efficiently. *(Sources: 2004 Chalkboard Project Survey and 2005 Stand for Children survey)*
- More than four out of five think lack of parental involvement is the biggest obstacle to student success. *(Source: 2004 Chalkboard Project survey)*
- On average, they estimate that more than one-third of district budgets are spent on central administration. *(Source: 2005 Citizen for Oregon’s Future survey)*
**Why these public perceptions? In part, the answer is “us”**

Why these public perceptions? Why now, when, by almost any objective measure – including state and national test scores, SAT and ACT results – Oregon students and schools are performing better than ever? Why now, when standards and expectations are higher than ever? Why now, when more than two-thirds of school budgets go to teaching and helping students, and only about three percent goes to central administration (source: Oregon Department of Education, 2003-04 Audited Expenditures)?

The reasons are many. Among them are the effects on public opinion of: 1) federal and state report cards and test scores that unfairly stigmatize many schools as “failing,” 2) the constant drumbeat of budget cuts, class size increases, program reductions, school closures, and 3) conservative politics and talk radio, and the effects of the media’s emphasis on the sensational and the negative.

Perhaps most significantly, there are the effects of the not-always-positive messages delivered – intentionally or not – by those of us closest to schools. Recent national research shows that nearly half of all messages coming from staff members about schools are negative (source: Banach, Banach and Cassidy). Related research shows that negative messages are repeated much more often than positive messages. And when those negative messages come from credible messengers – and no messengers are perceived as more credible when speaking about schools than teachers, classified employees, administrators, school board members and parents – their impact is undoubtedly greater.

**How are “we” reinforcing public perception?**

What kinds of messages are internal audiences sending? Recent COSA research shows that Oregon’s internal school audiences (that’s us: teachers, classified employees, administrators, school board members and involved parents) share – and unwittingly reinforce – many of the general public’s views about schools (Source: Bringing Oregon’s Education Community Together, COSA, 2005):

- On average, we think districts spend five times (16 percent vs. 3 percent) as much on central administration as they really do.

- We, too, say that greater parental involvement is needed. In general, we believe parents are either less willing or no longer have the time to be involved in their students’ education, compared to the past.

- We agree that expectations for students are often too low – but more for behavior than for academics.

- We believe in high standards, but we believe that the focus on state testing and AYP takes up too much time and de-emphasizes subjects that aren’t tested, is too time consuming, and sets up a no-win situation for schools that leads to low staff morale. We strongly believe that, without more funding, expectations of meeting higher standards, as well as continued improvement in student performance, cannot be achieved.

- We believe schools need more money, but some aren’t sure we’re spending the money we receive as wisely as we should. More than a third of us said we would rate our district’s spending choices as so-so or poor. Almost half couldn’t think of instances in which we were happy with how our district spent money.
Why these internal-audience perceptions? And why do so many negative messages come from staff? Again, the reasons are many. Among them are: 1) continual budget cuts affect staff morale and lead to distrust of spending decisions, 2) AYP and state assessment reports are sometimes disheartening and often misleading, 3) federal and state mandates put increasing pressure on shrinking numbers of staff, and 4) as budgets have dwindled, fewer and fewer resources have been available for public relations programs, resulting in more and more missed opportunities for positive external and internal communications.

**How do “we” become a more positive force in improving public perception?**

Research clearly shows that teachers, classified employees, administrators, school board members and involved parents are powerful messengers for schools. Overall, however, we haven’t taken advantage of that fact. Perhaps that’s because these internal groups don’t perceive themselves as key influencers of public opinion, or they don’t believe that spreading positive news about schools will improve the situation. Perhaps it’s because they simply don’t understand their power as messengers about Oregon’s public schools. Perhaps they feel that spreading positive messages about schools is not “telling it like it is” in terms of the issues they face related to decreasing budgets and increasing workloads. Or perhaps they are concerned that Oregon taxpayers will be less likely to approve additional funding if they perceive that schools are succeeding with the limited resources currently available.

TEAM UP Oregon partners believe that, while we may not be able to change how media report on schools, or how state and federal agencies report on schools, or how much state funding is allocated to schools – at least not yet – we can change what about schools and how we say it. Through collective action, locally and statewide, we can determine how to talk about our districts’ successes, our schools’ accomplishments, our students’ achievements. We can identify state, district and school challenges and communicate plans for overcoming them. We can agree on key messages to share with the public about our schools, and then, collectively and consistently, share them. We can improve the conversations about schools that internal audiences have while in line at grocery stores, on the sidelines at soccer games, or with neighbors over the backyard fence. By speaking thoughtfully and positively (and accurately) about schools, each of us – and, together, all of us – can influence public opinion about schools.

**TEAM UP is the answer**

TEAM UP Oregon answers a call to action from teachers, classified employees, administrators, school board members and involved parents. In COSA’s 2005 interviews of internal audiences, their mandate was clear. Nine out of ten said that it is “very important” that school groups “team up” and adopt a “united voice” to overcome negative perceptions about schools. They called for “positive public relations and marketing” for schools, and they expressed a collective desire to “help spread the good word” – but to do so, they said, they need to be armed with more information about district budgets, the right stories to tell and messages to use, and effective ammunition to debunk myths and rebut misinformation.

TEAM UP can do all that. It can bring us together too. All we need to do is turn the page ... and call the first play.
Determine if TEAM UP is for you
(at 15:00 weeks to go)

Recruit your district’s TEAM UP Squad
(complete task with 13:00 weeks to go)

Facilitate your first TEAM UP meeting
(complete task by 12:00 weeks to go)

Conduct local research
(complete task by 9:00 weeks to go)

Examine and incorporate the research
(complete task by 8:00 weeks to go)

Share TEAM UP throughout your district
(complete presentations by 5:00 weeks to go)

Brainstorm the elements of your TEAM UP Plan
(complete task by 3:00 weeks to go)

Develop your TEAM UP Plan
(complete task by 1:00 week to go)

Implement your TEAM UP Plan
(0:00 weeks to go ... you’re ready to play!)
**PLAY# 1**

**Determine if TEAM UP is for you**

**Assemble** a small (about 10 people), representative group of your district’s potential TEAM UP collaborators (teachers, administrators, classified employees, school board members, involved parents).

Together, **review and discuss** the presentation, “Shall We ‘Team Up’?” The presentation shares state and national public opinion and communications research related to schools. It explains the TEAM UP project’s key concept: “We can improve public support for schools simply by improving the messages we share about schools.” And it lays out the steps for developing and implementing a TEAM UP Communications Plan in your district.

After your group has reviewed the presentation, **contact** TEAM UP Oregon if you have questions or need additional information.

With your group, **decide** whether your district is ready to TEAM UP. The statewide TEAM UP partners encourage every district to embrace this project. We believe that its implementation will enhance public support for your district and, collectively, public perception of all Oregon schools. But the choice to TEAM UP is **yours**.

When you are **ready** to make the commitment to TEAM UP, **call the next play**.
Recruit your district’s TEAM UP Squad

Befitting the spirit of collaboration that is the essence of TEAM UP, consult leaders at all levels and among all groups in your district in the selection process for your district’s TEAM UP Squad.

As much as possible, fill your squad from a variety of schools, departments, levels and roles. TEAM UP squads need to be diverse enough to represent the various points of view in among your district’s employees, school board members and parents. They also need to be large enough (often 30 members or more) to communicate information and solicit input throughout your district.

Statewide TEAM UP partners include the major Oregon organizations (OEA, OSEA, COSA, OSBA, Oregon PTA) that represent teachers, classified employees, administrators, school board members and parents. The statewide partners of TEAM UP Oregon are happy to support you in promoting participation in the project.

Schedule the first meeting of your district’s first full-squad TEAM UP meeting, then call the next play.
Facilitate your first TEAM UP meeting

At your district’s first full TEAM UP meeting, review and discuss the presentation, “Let’s ‘Team Up’!” Much like the “Shall We ‘Team Up’?” presentation you viewed in PLAY #1, this presentation shares public opinion and communications research related to schools, explains the TEAM UP concept and outlines the process to come.

During the meeting, develop your squad’s e-mail list and share the expectation that members will continue to work between meetings via e-mail discussions, as well as in other forums.

As outlined in the presentation, conduct the “warm-up drills” -- the small-group exercises designed to prepare your squad to successfully run upcoming plays.

As outlined in the presentation, discuss the next play -- the local research phase of the project -- and, as provided in the presentation, solicit ideas for data gathering in addition to those already planned via TEAM UP.
Conduct local research

Gather local data about student achievement, school success, parent involvement, community involvement, community service performed by students and other areas identified by your TEAM UP Squad. (You may also want to refer to Chalkboard’s Open Book$ Project for your district’s basic spending information.) This data will be used to inform and develop your TEAM UP internal survey, as well as to provide information for the development of your district’s TEAM UP Communications Plan.

Assess your district’s internal communications systems by using the TEAM UP Internal Communications Checklist. Designate a sub-group of your squad to complete the assessment. Share the sub-group’s draft checklist results with entire squad via e-mail and ask for feedback. Modify the checklist to reflect consensus.

Using the TEAM UP Survey Guide and the TEAM UP Sample Survey, develop and conduct a survey of your internal groups. Involve your TEAM UP Squad in the creation of the survey, sharing and modifying drafts via e-mail. Use an electronic instrument (such as Survey Monkey or Zoomerang) to survey your internal groups.

When you have completed the research, call the next play.
Examine and incorporate the research

At your district’s second TEAM UP meeting, examine the results of your research. **Look at the local data** you gathered. **Consider** the completed **TEAM UP Internal Communications Checklist**. **Review and discuss** the results of the **TEAM UP Internal Survey**.

In preparation for the next play (presenting the TEAM UP Project and the results of your research to all internal groups), **determine** which parts of the research should be included in your upcoming presentations. Which results support the TEAM UP concepts of student and school success, parental involvement and community involvement? What surprises you? Concerns you? Encourages you? On what points is there the most consensus? The least? Are there strong beliefs that can be used as a foundation for this project? Misperceptions that can be corrected? Which results might you be able to use as messages or themes as your squad develops the TEAM UP Communications Plan?

**Incorporate your research** into the “**Let’s TEAM UP!**” (version 2) presentation.

**Review and rehearse** the presentation, then **call the next play**.
Share TEAM UP throughout your district

Schedule “Let’s TEAM UP!” presentations for all staff and parent groups, and at school board meetings and other gatherings so that all members of your internal groups (teachers, administrators, classified employees, school board members, involved parents) have the opportunity to participate.

Take particular care to include classified employees, as they often have schedules and responsibilities that preclude participation in staff meetings. Involvement of all internal groups is essential for the success of the TEAM UP Project.

Have TEAM UP Squad members deliver your research-enhanced “Let’s TEAM UP!” (version 2) presentation at all scheduled meetings. As part of your team at each presentation, include squad members who are viewed as “one of us” – someone who does the same job or works in the same school or department, for example – by the assembled group.

When you have completed the presentations, call the next play.
At your third TEAM UP Squad meeting, share the feedback generated at the presentations held throughout your district. How was TEAM UP received by staff, parents and school board members? What were the audiences’ reactions to your survey and other research results? What did you learn from small group exercises?

Distribute and review the TEAM UP Communications Sample Plan (you may do this prior to the meeting so that squad members can preview them).

Brainstorm the key elements of your communications plan: goals and objectives, messages, strategies and action plan, etc.

Form a subgroup of your TEAM UP Squad to draft your district’s communications plan, then call the next play.
Develop your TEAM UP Plan

Using the TEAM UP Communications Plan Template, draft your district’s TEAM UP Communications Plan. Write the plan based on the research, the feedback and input you received at TEAM UP presentations throughout your district, and the discussions at your TEAM UP Squad meetings. Adopt objectives that are achievable and focused on TEAM UP concepts. Remember, TEAM UP’s impact comes through helping teachers, classified employees, administrators, school board members and parents to respect (and make the most of) their power to influence public opinion.

As you write your plan, don’t hesitate to contact TEAM UP Oregon for assistance.

Your subgroup may also find it helpful to refer to the TEAM UP Resources Web page, which offers a wide variety of resources that may assist you in developing your communications plan.

Review, discuss and modify the plan at a fourth meeting of your district’s TEAM UP Squad. When your squad has finalized the plan, call the next play.
Launch your TEAM UP Plan on a district-wide stage -- such as at your back-to-school, all-employee gathering.

Implement the plan throughout the year, holding meetings of your TEAM UP Squad as necessary to stay on track or to make mid-course adjustments, if needed.

Any time you wish, feel free to contact TEAM UP Oregon for advice or assistance.

Remember that TEAM UP is a multi-year endeavor that will have its greatest impact over time, as teachers, classified employees, administrators, school board members and parents continue to make good use of their power to influence public opinion. Near the end of the first year of your district’s TEAM UP Communications Plan, evaluate and modify the plan for year two. Continue to build Ongoing effort, over time make big difference.