

NSPRA This Week – Tip of the Week

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What Parents Really Think About School Newsletters

We organized parent focus groups to identify what parents liked and didn't like in their school newsletters. Over 200 Fairfax County Public Schools parents were surveyed in face-to-face meetings conducted by trained group facilitators in 2001-2002. Here are the results:

What parents say about school newsletters

- The calendar is the most powerful tool for information delivery.
- Information must be prioritized and categorized.
- Information must be concise (bullets, graphics, pictures).
- Parents do not read the principal's column in its present form.
- Many prefer electronic delivery of school information.

How to incorporate parents' suggestions

1. **The calendar is the most powerful tool for information delivery.** Parents said if they only read one thing, it's the calendar. Parents want "a calendar that looks like a calendar," a monthly or bi-weekly view.
2. **Information must be prioritized and categorized.** Newsletter reading style is similar to newspaper reading: People scan for information. Group similar information. Establish regular column headings (e.g., coming up, last month, need to know, etc.) and keep them in the same place each issue. Deciding what information does not go in the newsletter is as important as information you select to include. Use your compass as your guide.
3. **Information must be concise (Use bullets, graphics, pictures).** The *USA Today* approach of short articles, bulleted information, graphics and pictures makes information delivery more effective. Less is often more. A brief summary of information is a good approach in the newsletter with further description available on the school web site.
4. **Parents do not read the principal's column in its present form.** Today's parents expect to be engaged and addressed in language they understand. Using educational jargon, long sentences and paragraphs, and approaching topics from a philosophical bent, contribute to reader apathy. Instead, develop a consistent approach with the column reflecting the newsletter purpose (teaching parents positive ways to interact with their child's education; establishing justification for school pride; providing information to help parents truly understand what's going on at school).

- 5. Many parents prefer electronic delivery of school information.** Avoid pitfalls (list maintenance, confusion, duplication) if you seek to satisfy this request by e-mail. An alternative is to create a seamless approach between the newsletter and school web site. Create newsletter categories to mirror web site categories. Develop a dynamic site that encourages frequent return.

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