

CASE PROBLEM 6

Forestalling Classroom Cutbacks

The Situation:

High Plains, a community of approximately 150,000, is the business center for one of the nation's most productive agricultural areas. Sociologists would probably describe it as a conservative, middle-to-upper class agribusiness and light industrial community. Five years ago the state university, located in a nearby much smaller city, collaborated in establishing a research park in High Plains, and it is attracting young entrepreneurs and scientists interested in working with animal proteins, animal pharmaceuticals and grain-based compounds for industry.

The High Plains school district has a student enrollment of 35,000, kindergarten through high school. In the past six years, enrollment has been dropping, 150 to 250 each year. City and school authorities expect this trend to continue. There is a financial effect – the amount of money schools may raise by local property taxes and receive from state funds is calculated on a head-count basis. Per-pupil allowance is about \$5,000. Losing 200 students cuts the school budget by a million dollars a year. The district is operating 35 elementary schools, ten middle schools and five high schools. Racial/ethnic composition of the student body, like the total population, is 55 percent white, 30 percent Hispanic and 15 percent black, Native American and Asian.

For the first few years of declining enrollment and funding the school district “tightened its belt” to run more efficiently. For the past two years the elected school board has cut course offerings, activities and materials to maintain a balanced budget. Test scores are beginning to show the effects of hard-pressed staff. The board refuses to dip into the reserve funds set aside for “emergency.” Now it has announced it will cut 20 teaching positions at the end of this school year, although the average class size in elementary schools is now 28 students per teacher – generally considered too high for effective instruction in early years. The savings in salary and benefits will nearly balance the anticipated shortfall. The board perceives that the community is adamantly opposed to any new taxes and that the state “instructional hardship” committee will not see justification for granting additional funds. State law has a provision for a one-cent local-option sales tax earmarked for schools, if voters approve, but the board has never considered an election for it.

You have just been employed as the first executive director of the High Plains Educators Association, which has 1695 members out of a professional staff of 1930. One of your assets is a strong track record in media relations.

High Plains has four television stations – three network and one educational – and 11 radio stations – three network affiliates and eight niche broadcasters such as country music, Hispanic, black and gospel. The morning newspaper also publishes a weekly free-distribution “shopper.” Another weekly with a circulation of 2,000 is oriented to the black community and other minorities.

The Situation, continued:

Your High Plains Education Association has a public relations committee of five members. Traditionally committee members have served one year each, generating no policies or continuity. This year's committee is inexperienced, but they and the association officers have concluded it is time to take action to restore instructional quality.

Read all following steps, then proceed.

Step One

Describe the formal and informal research that is needed. Identify a source of information and rationale for each activity that is recommended.

Findings from your research:

- Of adults in High Plains, 14% completed elementary grades or less;
18% have some high school;
27%, four years of high school;
41% attended college.
- The community is relatively “young” – median age is under 30, and only 6% are over 65 – about half the national rate.
- Business leaders recognize that funds for research-park projects are a small but noticeable boost to the economy, and they want to encourage growth of this kind of activity. They recognize that quality of education will be a factor in attracting young professionals to move to the area.
- In parent conferences, teachers and principals hear many complaints about paying student fees for materials formerly provided by the district, about the lack of former programs in art, music and drama, and the lack of up-to-date equipment for students to acquire computer skills and learn how to do research on the Internet.
- It is estimated that the local-option sales tax would easily generate enough money to retain the 20 teachers, restore the program and activity cuts made in the past few years, and upgrade technology and scientific equipment in school buildings.
- The intercept surveys indicate that many parents and grandparents think the schools are outdated and not adequately preparing students for the world they will graduate into. “High Plains deserves better schools,” they say.
- Senior citizens would rather see the extra sales tax than a “hardship” increase in property taxes, especially since food and medicines are exempt from the sales tax.
- Retailers do not foresee losing business due to an increased sales tax – competing communities already have it, and major purchases such as farm machinery are exempt.
- Staff who participated in focus groups -- and came to recognize that they outrank news media in credibility -- expressed willingness to contact five-to-ten friends and neighbors each in support of the sales tax, if given talking points and small factual handouts.
- Minority representatives are especially vocal about wanting quality in education, which they see as the route to opportunity and prosperity for their children.
- The Taxpayers Association will not obstruct the sales tax levy if it is assured of adequate reporting of how the money is allocated directly for instruction and equipment.

- The university Extension Service will design and process a telephone survey, and train volunteers to make the calls, if officially requested by the school board.
- Step 2:** In light of what you have learned, draft a broad goal for your communications effort – the end result you will hope to achieve for the community and the school district.
- Step 3:** Identify five (5) key publics, audiences or constituent groups to be included in your communications plan.
- Step 4:** Select one of those groups. Write one short-term and one long-term objective for your communications plan to address that target group and work toward your goal.
- Step 5:** Write two strategies to address that group, telling how you will work toward your objective.
- Step 6:** Write your main message for that group at this time.
- Step 7:** Identify three tactics or tools you will use to carry out your strategies. Identify which strategy each tactic is intended to carry out. (Your tactics may be the same for both strategies; they may be different.)
- Step 8:** Determine a spokesperson for each tactic.
- Step 9:** Estimate the costs associated with each tactic, including out-of-pocket expense, staff or volunteer time and in-kind donations.
- Step 10:** Draft a timetable for your communications plan. Set up a Gantt chart or some other device to show concisely how your plan will proceed.
- Step 11:** Consider how and when you will evaluate progress toward your short-term and long-term objective, and add that to your timetable. Where will you provide an opportunity for correcting your course, if that appears strategic?
- Step 12:** Determine how and when you will evaluate progress toward your overall goal, and add that to your timetable.