

Leading With Grit and Grace Through Turbulence

Bargaining ended at 2:30 a.m. Finally, we had reached an agreement after a six-day teacher strike. At 7 a.m., we briefed media (and an entire community via livestreaming technology) that the school year would begin soon.

Over the next three years, we went on to forge strong partnerships with our teachers. Together we developed race and equity teams in 40 schools, planned districtwide professional development and turned evaluation into a professional growth tool.

This capsulized summary comes from my four-year tenure as superintendent in Seattle, Wash. It's representative of the challenging times these are for public education leaders. Expectations for student learning *by all students* continue to rise while available funds don't keep pace with the demands. School system leaders face pressures to balance operating budgets, keep teacher salaries competitive and invest more in student achievement.

Education Week's Quality Counts report last year gave 26 states "F" grades for inadequate and unequitable spending in local school districts. And 2018 also saw nearly 400,000 teachers on strike. More teachers

took part in labor stoppages in the past year than in the last 25 years combined.

Competing Priorities

Superintendents are typically the only ones who see the big picture. Teachers see the shrinking value of their salaries and the mounting demands. Board of education members and civic leaders expect the top leader to hold the fiscal line. Principals and parents want to see investments in textbooks, computers and staffing. Community members want to minimize their school tax liabilities.

With so many competing priorities, it's virtually impossible for any superintendent to achieve a "win" for all.

A 27-year veteran of the superintendency details the actions that sustained him through work stoppages, budget crises and the pressing issue of the moment

BY LARRY L. NYLAND

These competing pressures can and do keep us up at night, especially during budgeting and bargaining. In the midst of the maelstrom, it is easy to lose heart, to worry about personal survival and the continued sustainability of one's school district, both financially and relationally.

Yet contentious teacher strikes and stressful budget struggles are survivable. Indeed, some superintendents may lose their jobs due to budget deficits and labor stoppages that leave a rift. But far more surmount the same issues and move forward to lead their schools exceedingly well.

Sustenance Actions

What accounts for the difference? It comes down to how these critical issues are handled by leadership. Having led five school districts in the Pacific Northwest over 27 years, I've learned some hard lessons through the impact of four strikes and untold rounds of budget crises. These are some of the lessons that can sustain us in turbulent times.

► **Communicate, communicate, communicate.**

This must happen the most even when you feel least inclined to do so. We need to hear a message at least four times before any given message begins to resonate. Ask yourself, "Who

am I communicating with and what do they need to know?"

Communicate early and often (weekly is ideal) to reinforce your key messages. Point all of those messages back to your website as a central hub. And remember to keep sharing the 99.5 percent — the good things happening daily in classrooms across the district.

Without constant communication, rumors prevail. In the heat of bargaining or a strike, expect to hear counter narratives. Respond. Keep communicating. Share your confidence in the process and in the people. Share your commitment to continued discussions and a fair resolution. Speak your empathy: "We will get through this and get back to learning. We care about our people and are committed to bargaining in good faith."

My goal during a six-day teacher strike in Seattle in September 2015, and subsequently dealing with \$70 million in budget cuts, was to be visible and communicate weekly. For me, that meant showing up at late-night bargaining sessions; taking the high road and always communicating positively. Later, when dealing with budget consequences of the settlement, that meant asking the community for budget input; reporting back on that input; and meeting regularly with key stakeholders to update them.

When the contract and the budget were finally settled, parents and teachers said, "Thank you for keeping us informed."

► **Frame the issues.**

When in the midst of crisis, share the big picture and explain the situation. During the teacher strike, my words went something like this: "Our teachers deserve more money. We all want the best teachers for our kids that money can buy. And we must be fiscally responsible with hard-earned taxpayer dollars."

► **Identify key values.**

Discuss school district values well in advance of contract bargaining and budget season. Engage the board and community. Choose values that you can act on and implement.

Think carefully about how your value statements will hold up through the decision-making process. Statements like "Put students first" sound good, but they may draw fire if classroom cuts do become necessary. Something like "make sustainable reductions across all sectors while minimizing cuts to student learning" may be more nuanced and defensible. We acknowledge that cuts to student learning may be needed while stating we value student learning and will minimize those cuts.

► **Engage stakeholders.**

Take simplified budget worksheets to schools, PTAs and business leaders, and ask where they would make spending reductions. Make clear you are gathering feedback, not asking them to vote. You want their input, but it will be the board of education that decides.

Yes, cuts to administration almost always will rise to the top of stakeholder preferences. Show that reductions in administrative costs won't

Member of the Seattle Education Association went on strike in September 2015, which was one of the turbulent times Larry Nyland faced as superintendent of Seattle Public Schools.

Strike image to come



Larry Nyland outside district headquarters in Marysville, Wash., where he was superintendent for nine years.

even begin to balance the total need. At the end of the process, it helps to show that percentages of administrative reductions were as big as or greater than cuts to other parts of the budget and student learning was protected to the extent possible.

► **Explain the process.**

Start early. Clearly communicate how the school district's budget process works. Be transparent. Explain the problem. Engage the stakeholders. Report back on what you learned. Share progress frequently. Repeat these steps as needed.

How you communicate matters. In the end, you want stakeholders to know decisions were made based on the school district's key values. And by explaining the impact throughout the process multiple times in advance of a decision, you minimize surprises.

► **Be visible.**

Go everywhere and anywhere to talk budget. Schedule lots of meetings and publicize them widely. Use social media to report on when and where you were, and what you talked about and heard from others.

For everyone who shows up, another dozen may not take the time to come, but they will remember they

were invited. Let everyone know you care, you take this seriously, you're listening and you're engaged.

► **Tell your story.**

If you don't tell your story, someone else will — and it might not be a story you recognize. Communicate consistently. When you can't talk details, explain the process and share your values. Be empathetic.

Today's parents get their news from the internet (42 percent) and social media (22 percent) and generally not newspapers (8 percent), according to a survey by the Pew Research Center. Make your district website the go-to spot for the most current and complete news. Use e-mail and social media daily to point to your website.

► **Meet often with key partners.**

During our \$70 million budget reduction, I met often with labor partners, parents, principals and civic leaders. I often had to do so on a tight schedule to meet deadlines for media releases or a board meeting. Let partners know they are important and you are doing everything possible to inform them and engage their input.

Make principals your most important communication partners. They live on the front lines, hearing from

teachers and parents daily. Meet with them often to impart key messages and current information, and express appreciation for their work.

During a work stoppage, district leaders tend to meet with principals every morning. They are your messengers to teachers, staff and parents. Arm them with the relevant information they need to be effective partners in managing and serving these relationships.

► **Lead your team calmly and with clarity.**

In times of crisis, pressures mount. Board members, administrators and union leaders feel the heat. Prepare the people you rely on. Call them frequently. Schedule extra meetings. Answer their questions. Affirm your messaging.

Call on your leadership team to model positive comments and work together to share good information. Call out naysayers who seek to undermine the process of fairness and equity. Leaders are known for what they support ... and what they tolerate.

► **Demonstrate grit and grace.**

In times of change and crisis, we all fear for the future. Keep your own batteries charged up. Meet with colleagues, family and friends who fuel and support you. Rest when you can, eat well and take steps to protect your health.

► **Sustain hope.**

Avoid demonizing others. Take the high road. Remind others often: "We will find a way through this. We will continue to do good things for our kids. We must and we will. Our kids are counting on us." ■

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