

Muhammed Chaudhry

Widespread newsroom cuts across the newspaper industry combined with a fragmented local public school governance system creates a daunting challenge for the education community to keep the public well informed on the specific needs and challenges our local schools face. Information gaps with the public create challenges specifically in terms of public school accountability, reform and advocacy efforts.

To bridge this information gap, the goal for the education community, from school districts to non-profits, should be in moving the broad public awareness on general education issues to focus on information that is specific to their community. Statewide test score averages tell one story, but the efforts of one local school to turn around academic performance is more compelling, and has a better likelihood of getting local citizens involved to ensure that school's success.

When we examine broad public awareness and feelings about education, we can see that the public is receptive to improving education and investing more resources in public schools.

A recent survey by the Public Policy Institute of California showed that 63% of Californian adults felt that more funding would lead to higher quality K-12 education. In that same survey, 59% said that the California's school system was in need of major changes. So we see a sentiment that education needs more resources, that we need broader changes, but there are no vehicles to produce that action.

Where's the call to action? As long as the education issue can be seen as a large, nebulous problem, there's not likely to be a call to action.

Declining Media Resources, Fracture School Governance Environment

Making this tall order even taller is the fact that our traditional media does not have the capacity to educate the public on localized public education issues—especially when considering the fragmented local governance system for our schools.

In Santa Clara County, there are 33 separate school districts (not counting the County Office of Education); and in our county's largest city alone, San Jose there are 19 separate school districts.

That's 33 different information centers, all speaking to different audiences about different things. That's 33 different school boards (approximately 165 elected officials) and 33 superintendents for the public to hold accountable.

How can a community grapple with such numbers? And conversely, how can the education community engage the public at-large given these dynamics?

What occurs is that there is no cohesion of message on public schools in general regarding its challenges, successes, or needs. There is not one body, a clearinghouse, articulating here's what our schools need; here's what our teacher's need; here's where we've been successful; and here's where we're struggling. In fact, that was part of the impetus behind launching the Silicon Valley Education Foundation—to create a focused voice for our schools' needs that transcends district boundaries.

This is not to say that the highly localized governance structure is a good or bad model. Simply, it makes providing specific information to a boarder audience much more difficult.

So, left to tackle this fragmented system is the local news industry, which has been rocked by major newsroom cutbacks. Consider the San Jose Mercury News, our only major daily paper for the San Jose area. The Mercury News has gone from nine reporters covering education to one reporter and one editorial writer. Their staffs have been cut by nearly 50%. It's impossible for them to continually provide highly localized information on specific school districts, no matter how hard they try.

The electronic media industry is no better capable of doing the job. There are four major networks that cover the entire Bay Area population, which now exceeds six million people. Providing strong localized coverage of our schools? Impossible.

With such a large market, and so few resources, it's a struggle for the news media to cover education in depth; it's a struggle to provide very localized information to their readers. And even if they could, it's not the news media's function to move citizens to take action.

Solutions—Become Content Providers & Connect Stakeholders

If we want to engage citizens in the process of change in our education system, we must do three things: **Inform**, **Inspire** and **Involve**. We must **Inform** the public of the challenges and opportunities our schools face. We must **Inspire** them to believe that there are real solutions to our education problems and that through their action, we can implement those solutions. Finally, we must **Involve** the public into action on the information we are able to deliver to them.

Informing comes first. And that comes by getting information out. Where we've seen traditional media struggle, SVEF believes there is opportunity.

The information market is a buyer's market. People want their news and information when they want it, and they want to choose where they get it. If the problem is a lack of content for localized education information, the answer is becoming content providers.

One of the biggest opportunities that we see serves the interests of both the education community and media. An organization like SVEF takes on the role of "reverse reporting." We create the content and help the news media place it through the use of on-

line blogs or dedicated space for subject areas such as education.

It's no different than the OP-ED section in the printed paper. We can create a constant stream of information that an outlet, like the Mercury News, can use to draw readers. We can make it topical and compelling to readers, but we also ensure that it is localized and thus relevant to our audience. The Mercury News, in our example, plays less of a role of "reporting" information and more the role of "connecting" readers to information.

From a business standpoint, we effectively "cross-market" to drive traffic to each others' websites. People interested in education learn about education information and issues relevant to them, learn about the Foundation and at the same time make the Mercury News their dedicated site to visit to get the latest on local schools and education trends. We, in essence, strive to drive "clicks" to each others' sites.

Increased traffic leads to increased revenue, which in turn should provide a more stable revenue source to devote to news coverage.

How does a non-profit become a content provider? We take advantage of the talent pool that surrounds us. Cutbacks in newsrooms have created a pool of highly qualified content creators and writers—and we're taking advantage. SVEF has hired a seasoned veteran Mercury News reporter to help us create content. Specifically, she helps us "translate" the complex education issues our schools face into content that is meaningful, yet easily digestible to the masses.

In fact, we believe that becoming content creators will be a matter of survival for most non-profits. We're already adjusting our hiring practices to put a greater emphasis on effective writing skills, from junior level positions to senior management. If we cannot make our information relevant and break through the information clutter, we will not survive.

One of the ways we can go beyond "informing" and into inspiring stakeholders that change is possible in education; and involving them in the process is by connecting them together.

The proliferation of social networking tools, such as Facebook, provides us with a pathway to make this challenge that public education has always struggled with solvable. We can effectively use social networking tools to create an infrastructure to connect people with similar interests for a common cause, and to become a virtual community of mutual assistance: Teachers helping teachers with lesson plans; Parents, principals, teachers sharing information on school information.

In a world where both parents work, the traditional PTA model doesn't work for everyone. We have to make information sharing and mobilization quick and easy if we want to engage parents and the public.

With some initial effort, we can organize "social networks" around every school in the County. For the most part, the technological infrastructure is there. Access to the Internet, whether at home, at the office or at the local public library continues to grow in Silicon Valley by leaps and bounds.

The task will be showing parents and the public how to effectively use social networking.

With minimal effort, parents, teachers and principals will be able to keep each other informed on what's happening in our classrooms, on the school campuses and in and around the community. Further, groups like SVEF can become a resource for school-based communities on programs that can help their schools, education trends and best practices research.

And by connecting the school networks together, we can build a grass roots juggernaut which would have previously taken thousands of hours and dollars in organizing resources to build.

Imagine the possibilities if we set the most modest goals. We have 396 schools in our county. If we network just 15 parents or community members at each school site in the county, we would have connected nearly 6,000 people. Now imagine how easy the group could launch 6,000 e-mails to the Governor to fight for education resources in the budget, to tell the Legislature to pass the budget, or to advocate on a specific issue at a specific school district.

Additionally, by selecting two site leaders at each site, we will begin building leadership capacity through social networking. In our Santa Clara County example, that's nearly 800 parents or community members gaining leadership experience.

It's a few quick clicks of the mouse, and the sheer volume of the effort will grab policy makers attention. Through social networking, we connect people with common interests AND make it easy to stay informed and take action.

Whether it's searching for volunteers for the science fair, or asking parents to contact the Governor or their school board, by becoming content providers, we can use social networking to make it easier to inform the public on information relevant to them and involve them in the advocacy process.

Our public schools face significant challenges, yet, there is significant public support in general to assist our schools. The challenge, in this ever changing information age, is providing information to our community that will keep them informed and inspire them to take action to improve education quality. The education system and education boosters alike must adapt to the changing information markets to earn the support and the eventual efforts of our communities.