

How Districts Can Provide Better Customer Service

By Tiah E. McKinney

When thinking of public school districts you typically do not associate them with the term 'Customer Service'. You simply don't think of school districts as being customer service providers. Yet, in this era of increased accountability created by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, an ensuing competitive climate for schools has also been created. Schools receiving federal support are required to report Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and publicly post scores on 'high stakes' tests, thereby, enabling comparisons to be made. Today, public school districts are competing against charter schools, home schooling and school voucher programs for student enrollment. The reality is that parents, more than ever before, have numerous options to consider for obtaining the best quality education for their children.

Nowadays, characteristics of high performing schools or school districts go beyond a rigorous curriculum and accelerated programs. According to the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, with twenty years of research on school performance, provides a concise list of common characteristics that exemplary schools share: 1.) A strong cadre of leaders providing support for the goals and expectations of the school and school community; 2.) a shared understanding of goals and expectations for all involved in the school system; 3.) high academic standards clearly defining what students are to know and be able to do; 4.) procedures for purposeful collection and analysis of data on students, programs, and staff; and 5.) strong relationships with family and community partnerships (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2005).

As alternative options to public schooling become available to parents and schools compete for the same number of students, accordingly, public schools must possess a competitive edge that will set them apart. Moreover, U.S. population trends show a steady migration to the South and Western regions of the country (U.S. Global Change Research Information Office, November 2004), while in the Northeast and Midwest regions, the population is dwindling. Furthermore, data shows that the U.S. is undergoing at least two major shifts: a significant change in its geographic distribution and a similarly important change in ethnic composition. For this reason, excellent Customer Service may just be that winning ingredient!

What exactly is Customer Service? *"Customer Service is a phrase that is used to describe the process of taking care of your customers in a positive manner"* (Customer Service Manager Group, 2004-2005), used in an educational context, customers refer to students, parents and also to internal partners i.e. school staff. Moreover, 'Customer Service' is:

- Any contact, whether active or passive, between a customer and a company that causes a negative or positive perception by a customer.
- Understanding who the principal customers are and be able to identify their needs and expectations and what constitutes positive customer satisfaction.
- Placing emphasis on "excellence" and "speed of response" in work performance.

Customer Service consists of various facets; part of it creates and maintains a professional environment that supports continuous improvement for all; another creates an inviting atmosphere where *all* staff is knowledgeable, caring, and parent/student-friendly; still another seeks to understand the customer's needs and how to effectively meet and exceed their expectations. This undertaking is not something that should be taken lightly nor is it something that is merely left to chance, but rather one that is the outcome of deliberate planning and training. Just as teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors and administrators undergo specialized training for curriculum development, assessment, and implementation of best practice strategies, public schools and districts should be just as adamant and include 'Customer Service' training for all staff as evidenced in school improvement plans.

Some Customer Service topics to consider may include, but are not limited to:

- ***Benefits of Excellent Customer Service*** – Key skills and attitudes necessary to effectively meet the needs of the customer.
- ***Time Management*** - Time management principles and specific tools that assist in maximizing the use of time. Place emphasis on how to prioritize, identify time wasters, delegation and goal setting.
- ***Decision-Making and Problem-Solving*** - Learn to make effective and quick decisions for customers and apply problem-solving techniques that help customers; and improve the performance of your organization.
- ***Stress Management*** – Identify and handle stress in the workplace.
- ***Understand the Importance of Attitude*** - Key skills to maintaining a positive attitude at the workplace. Focus on how attitudes are communicated, the three types of attitudes, and how to adjust one's attitude and raise the attitude of others.
- ***Communicating with People***- Focus on verbal and nonverbal communication skills; improving interpersonal skills, listening skills, telephone communication and how to effectively communicate with internal and external customers.
- ***Dealing Successfully with Difficult Customers & Defusing Anger***- Focus on the three conflict handling modes, how to deal with difficult people and how to bring out the best in others.
- ***Conflict Resolution*** – Learn the meaning of conflict, the causes of conflict and strategies for resolving interpersonal conflict.
- ***Team Building*** - Focus on understanding the characteristics of successful high performance teams, defining leadership skills necessary to manage these teams and identifying specific activities to set the stage for high performance team success.

In this highly competitive marketplace, successful businesses work hard training their staff in all facets of Customer Service to build and retain their coveted customer-based. Conversely, for the field of Education, the time is now long over due for a paradigm shift to occur. It is essential for public schools to ensure that they are providing the highest level of Customer Service for their most valued clients, students and parents. The following are a few recommendations, provided by the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, for putting Customer Service into an educational context:

- Display signs to greet families warmly at the school door, the central office, and the classroom in the languages spoken by the community.
- Create a school-based 'Family Resource Center' to provide information; links to social services, and opportunities for informal meetings with staff and other families also contributes to a family-friendly atmosphere.
- Schools should communicate regularly with Parents (or other responsible family members) about information important to student success.
- Schools should inform families about standards and how they relate to the curriculum, learning objectives, methods of assessment, school programs, discipline codes, and student progress.
- Sharing information can be accomplished through the usual means of newsletters, handbooks, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, home visits, homework "hot lines", the Internet, e-mail, and voice mail.
- Translations should be made available, to ensure non-English speaking parents are fully informed. Personal contact, whether by telephone or in person, is the best way to promote two-way communication.
- Schools should provide professional development opportunities for teachers and other staff in the cultural and community values and practices that are common to their students and their families.

Looking ahead, when excellent Customer Service is a top priority, along side a rigorous curriculum, accelerated programs, and highly-qualified staff, public schools will not have to worry about losing their students to other schooling alternatives. In the final analysis, parents will be standing in line to enroll their children!

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