

Working with school boards and administrators



» MIKE TARANTINO, director of maintenance and operations, Poway (CA) School District.

THIS IS A VERY BROAD SUBJECT and is highly subjective. We all know no two people are alike and this holds true for school board members and administrators. All of us involved with K-12 schools should know that boards' and administrators' number 1 goal is education; what we have to make them understand is that a safe and aesthetically pleasing school is paramount to teachers, students and the community.

There has been a lot of research on the correlation of well-maintained schools vs. student achievement that dates as far back as the 1920's. Let's face it, we have come a long way since then, however, one thing remains: schools are the hub of the community and are not just a place for education to occur but also a place for children and adults to play.

Did you know that children spend up to 24,000 hours at school (K-12)?

With that introduction, I can only relate my relationship with my school board, administrators and the community and how it

came about. I have broken this out in to several key headings and subheadings.

Communication. GET OVER YOUR FEARS! The school board, administrators and community members are all human beings. After all, they hired you to do a job. Do not be hesitant to approach them with an idea that could benefit the school community. Remember that a majority of their time is spent on improving education and your sports fields may be the furthest thing from their mind but remember to relate your idea to how this will enhance the learning quality of the children, improve staff morale and provide a recreation area for the community.

Become visible. Attend school board meetings. Yes, these are usually held in the evening, but deal with it and go. Make weekly meetings or do a weekly report to your supervisor, director or superintendent, let them know what you are doing to improve the school community. Attend local youth and or adult recreation meetings, offer to present at these meetings and most importantly, listen to their needs. Make sure to follow up with requests from these groups because no one likes being ignored.

Visit your school sites and make sure not to ignore anyone. Visit with the coaches, teachers, principals and the children. Everybody's opinion is important and everybody wants their opinion heard. I have learned more from coaches about the little things in the way to prepare their field for their particular team than I have from any book. I like to call communication the art of listening, understanding and then responding; do this and people will begin to recognize you and what you do.

Documentation. School boards, admin-

istrators and community members are results driven and want documentation or proof. Document your successes to better handle the "what have you done for me lately" syndrome. Take pictures of your projects start through finish, include team work in the pictures, include equipment used owned, rented or borrowed. Finally, write a report to go with the pictures along with costs of the project. Have an end goal in mind. This could be as simple as showing what you can do to improve the school community or as ammunition if you want to purchase a piece of equipment, for example, document the rental cost vs. purchase. Provide a cost analysis if this is your goal. Show man hour savings and the number of additional projects you could complete with this particular piece of equipment. Here is an example:

A 10-acre field will take the 60-inch deck mower approximately 3 hours and 15 minutes. An 11-foot deck mower will mow the same 10 acres in approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes, a 2 man/hour savings per 10 acres. If the operator mows 100 acres the savings will be 20 man hours.

Twenty man hours x \$480 (20 hrs. x \$24.00/ hr.) per 100 acres x 52 weeks equals \$24,960 per year. The 11-foot deck mower could pay for itself in approximately 2 years, or a gain of 1,040 man/hours per year.

DOCUMENT YOUR FAILURES

I know what you're thinking, I can't show my failures. Yes you can, but you need to show and let the school board, administrators and the community know what you learned from that mistake. Some of my biggest successes came from failures.

Use tools that are available to you, like

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soil sampling and the Playing Conditions Index (PCI). I cannot believe how many of us don't use these FREE resources, yes free. Wait a minute soil sampling cost money, you say, but if you talk to your suppliers many will offer this service to you for free. I perform soil sampling once a year on my high profile play fields and every other year on my multi-use recreational sports fields. These soil samplings dictate what needs to be done on my fields and in many ways provides documentation for budgeting purposes (fertilizers, soil penetrants, etc.).

The PCI is simply a great tool provided by the STMA. This is documentation at its best. If you haven't used the PCI, you should. The PCI can provide documentation on the safety, playability and aesthetic quality of your sports fields. I have begun to document other information on the PCI. I now record weather, products used (fertilizer, pesticides), seed variety if a renovation; topdress material, irrigation schedule, suppliers etc. If you can, include pictures with the PCI when submitting this documentation to the school board, administrators and the community.

Maintenance standards. If you don't have them, develop them and share them. These are simple maintenance guides, the "what we are going to do and the when we are going to do it." These standards answer our customers' questions and lessen the amount of phone calls to the school board and the administrators from our customers, the schools and the community. These standards need to be shared with your staff; they will serve no purpose if your own staff doesn't know what they are.

Get out of your box. With the state of the economy many of us are being asked to do more. Jobs are being eliminated and those survivors are taking on additional responsibilities. As budgets continue to tighten, sports turf managers are now often being asked to become facility managers, especially at K-12 facilities. I hope you view your stay at your organization as an educational adventure and a means to grow. You should have been watching your peers manage facilities so that you were ready to advance or simply help out with a problem/crisis that wasn't yours to manage.

The natural disasters that plague our

country are a good example—would you sit back and watch as your facilities were being destroyed or would you be on the frontline? When rebuilding occurred did you just worry about your sports fields or did you assist in bringing normalcy to your facility? School boards and administrators are well aware of those that support this type of effort, while you may not get the "thank you"

you were looking for, believe me, your actions or inactions are noticed.

Although every situation is different, you must be able to adapt to your situation. It is all communication. ■

Michael Tarantino is director of facilities for the Poway School District, Poway, CA, and sits on the STMA Board of Directors.

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