

THE ABCs OF TELLING YOUR SCHOOL'S STORY

Dr. Joe Sanfelippo

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Managing Resources, Engaging Families and Communities



Editor's Note: Dr. Joe Sanfelippo is the Superintendent of the Fall Creek School District in Fall Creek, WI. The Fall Creek School District was named an Innovative District in 2016 and 2017 by the International Center for Leadership in Education. Joe holds a BA in Elementary and Early

Childhood Education from St. Norbert College, a MS in Educational Psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, a MS in Educational Leadership, and a PhD in Leadership, Learning, and Service from Cardinal Stritch University. Joe is also an adjunct professor in the Educational Leadership Department at Viterbo University. Joe has taught kindergarten, second and third grade. He was also a school counselor and high school coach prior to taking on an elementary principal position in 2005. He has served as a principal in suburban and rural Wisconsin.

Joe co-hosts the Successful Schools Podcast, and co-authored *The Power of Branding: Telling Your School's Story*, *Principal Professional Development: Leading Learning in a Digital Age* and *Hacking Leadership: 10 Ways Great Leaders Inspire Learning That Teachers, Students and Parents Love*. He was selected as 1 of 117 Future Ready Superintendents in 2014 and 1 of 50 Superintendents as a Personalized Learning Leader in 2016 by the US Department of Education. He attended summits at the White House for both distinctions. Joe has been a featured speaker in multiple states in the areas of Telling Your School Story, Advancing the Use of Social Media for School Leaders, Creating a Culture of Yes, and Personalized Professional Growth for Staff.

Dr. Joe Sanfelippo will be a keynote speaker at the 2020 AWSP/WASA Summer Conference! Learn more at www.aws.org/SC20.

Fall Creek Wisconsin, population 1,355, is the home of the Fall Creek Crickets. Yes, that's the mascot: The mighty Crickets. We are also home to 825 storytellers in grades K-12. All of their stories have value, and it is our job to bring them to the world. We take an ABC approach to connecting to our community to help change the narrative of our school. To do this, it was important for us to find our Audience, Build our brand, and Celebrate kids.

FIND YOUR AUDIENCE

According to statista.com, 78% of adults have a social media profile of some kind. As a district, we needed

“After surveying our community we found that adults preferred Facebook, students preferred Instagram, and alumni preferred Twitter. So, that is where we engage socially.”

to find where those profiles lived. After surveying our community we found that adults preferred Facebook, students preferred Instagram, and alumni preferred Twitter. So, that is where we engage socially. We don't have to be present in every social media platform, just the platforms that are relevant to our people. Once we found where people lived, we started engaging them online through social media contests. Here's a glimpse of what we did.

THROWBACK THURSDAYS

Connecting to the community means valuing the world they lived in before they left school. We honor tradition by making those who came before us proud. Part of that is taking them along on the journey. Posting pictures from years gone by to a current social media platform helps connect the past to the present. All of those pictures come with a story. Start the story on

Continued on page 24

the platform and then allow people to contribute to it. A community telling a story is a powerful connection tool and celebrates everyone involved.

WHAT IS THE VISION?

In the first two weeks after we started our social media presence, the response was not overwhelming. We had a few people follow our feeds on Twitter and Facebook, but the vast majority of people were not aware of our social media presence. That changes substantially when we started to have conversations about school, rather than posting what was happening. On a warm night in 2011, we engaged in our first interactive post on Facebook. The post was simple: “The first 5 people to find Dr. Sanfelippo at the football game tonight and tell him the vision of Fall Creek Schools will receive a t-shirt.” The response was phenomenal.

As I walked into the game, I saw kids running from across the field as fast as their little legs would carry them. They screamed, “We’re a community that works, learns, and succeeds together!” I handed out t-shirts to the first five people and had a wonderful time at the game, feeling great about the response to the post.

The following week we went through the same process. As I entered the game something different happened. Again, the kids came running as fast as they could, but I looked behind the kids and couldn’t believe what I saw. The adults were sprinting to get in front of the kids and they were screaming as they ran, “We’re a community that works, learns, and succeeds together!” People often want to be connected to a greater entity. When we are all carrying the flag it becomes lighter and our voice is much louder.



Dr. Joe Sanfelippo inspires school leaders to tell their story.

“ Putting the hashtag on apparel and giving it to the community at events built a tremendous amount of momentum for our district.”

BUILD YOUR BRAND

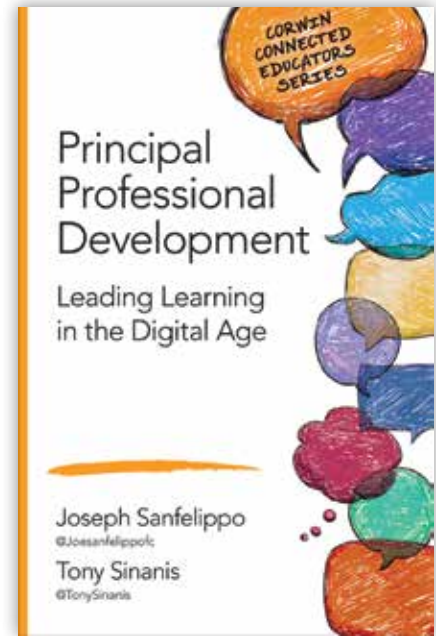
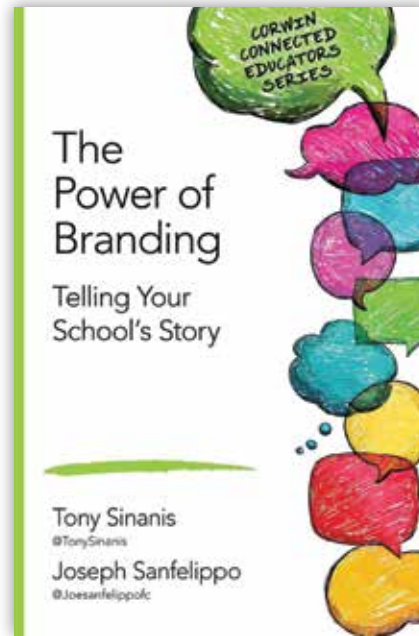
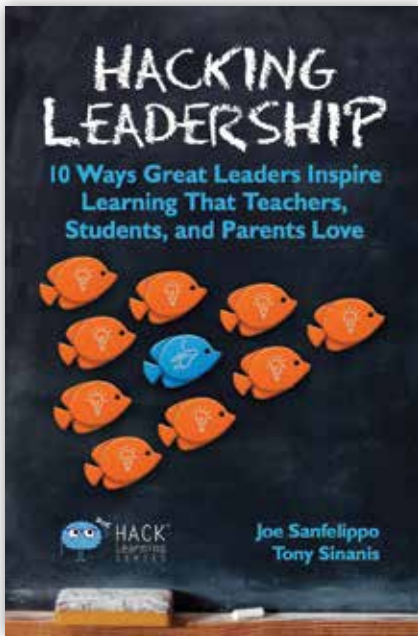
The term “brand” can definitely have a negative connotation, but we believe it is what people say about you when you are not there. Promoting the positives helps shape the narrative. Building our brand through a message or social media hashtag has helped us share the work of our kids in multiple areas. Putting the hashtag on apparel and giving it to the community at events built a tremendous amount of momentum for our district. We also added a “Where in the World is Fall Creek Pride” virtual map and told our community to take pictures in their Cricket gear on vacation so we can spread the message. It has allowed us to show off a #gocrickets item in all 50 states and beyond. We have tried

to turn those “Go Crickets” moments into a “Go Crickets” movement, and that movement makes our group feel like they can accomplish anything.

LEVERAGE THE VOICE

Six of our teachers attended a conference in Orlando to present on a professional growth that put the ownership of learning on our staff. They developed the whole model, created ownership capacity with our teachers, and they were now being recognized as a District of Innovation by the International Center for Leadership in Education. They were excited to be there and share their stories with the world. What they were not prepared for was the response from those who attended the conference. As they walked through hallways and attended sessions, donning their Fall Creek t-shirts and backpacks, people at the conference would yell “Go Crickets!” at them on a regular basis. At first, they were a little alarmed, but after it happened a few times I saw one turn to a colleague, smile, and say, “they know us.”

The sense of pride they all felt at that moment helped me understand



Dr. Joe Sanfelippo is co-author of several books on storytelling and leadership.

that this movement was about much more than a mascot or a saying. It was about value...and on that day our people were valued. They started to send messages to their colleagues and tell them what was happening. When they returned to the school district we asked them to do their presentation for the board of education. As they finished their presentation one of the board members asked how their trip went. One member of the team looked at her colleagues, then at me, then to the board member and said, “We felt like rockstars.”

CELEBRATE KIDS

The work done in our schools is amazing if you think about it. We educate ALL kids, we move them academically and emotionally, we provide a safe haven for those who need it, and celebrating that work should be at the forefront of what we do as school systems. As a board, we set a goal of seven to 10 non-athletic positive posts per week. Our community knows that space is to celebrate and we want everyone to join us on the journey.

We provide the opportunity to connect and through that connection, we develop a great deal of social capital with the people in our world. That social capital is pivotal for trust. A picture, video, or post can have a profound impact on emotions. The world has, and will always belong to the storytellers.

TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY

We tend to talk about hope a lot. We have hope that the narrative of our schools will change. We hope people will tell great stories about the time they spent in our buildings. We hope when those that did not have a great experience provide their opinion someone will step in and talk about the positive aspects of their own experience.

Hope is great and we all need hope, but hope doesn't change narratives — the action does. We need to make a commitment to the kids, colleagues, and community members that put their heart and soul into the work to make the world a better place. I truly and honestly believe people want to celebrate the work that happens in

“ If we provide a sense of pride and understanding that our voice is stronger together, the narrative will change.”

schools, I just don't know if they have the context to do so. Our job is to provide the context and if we remain unapologetically optimistic about the work done in schools the narrative will change.

If we never give up the opportunity to say something great about the people who work with our kids and the work that those kids do, the narrative will change. If we provide a sense of pride and understanding that our voice is stronger together, the narrative will change. The world belongs to the storytellers and it is time to write ours. ■