

THE SCHOOL LEADER'S DEFINITIVE

# GUIDE TO

## QUALITY CUSTOMER SERVICE

WHY K12 COMMUNITY SATISFACTION IS CRITICAL AND HOW TO MEET THIS URGENT NEED



### INSIDE THIS GUIDE



Why bad service is hurting our schools.



The importance of setting goals.



How to create a service culture.

# INSIDE THIS GUIDE



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Families have options. Don't lose out to the competition.  
Become *the* school district of first choice.



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Commitment isn't enough. Set goals. And stick to them.  
Start with these three steps.



## **CHANGE THE CULTURE** ..... 13

Set the right tone. Lead by example.  
It's time to get everyone on board.



If you like what you see here—  
and we hope you do—reach out  
to us at **[www.K12insight.com](http://www.K12insight.com)**  
for more information or  
call us at **703-542-9600**.  
We'd love your feedback.

# FELLOW SCHOOL LEADERS,

Every day, you go to work in the shadow of incredible adversity. You have the toughest job in America. But you do it anyway—because you know what it means to make a difference in the world.

As a former educator and superintendent of school districts in Michigan and Louisiana, I've been where you are now. I know what it means to pour your heart into every challenge, knowing full well that funding and resources will not keep pace with effort.

But I'll tell you something: The culture to which we've resigned ourselves—the infighting, the bureaucracy, the complete lack of authentic communication between schools and communities—doesn't make our jobs easier. I spent more than three decades poking my head into classrooms, searching for solutions to problems that nobody, myself included, knew how to solve.

It wasn't until I stepped outside my career as an educator that I started to realize the right path forward for schools.

That path begins not in the classroom, but outside of it—with exemplary customer service.

## Creating a service culture

In the previous 30 years, the business world has developed the systems, processes and professional development to promptly respond to customer feedback. These systems make it possible to manage and contain crises, while pushing relentlessly forward in pursuit of other business goals.

I know what you're thinking: *Schools are not corporations. We have different goals. Our challenges are vastly more, uh, human.* I agree. In fact, I think the human nature of schools amplifies the need for empathy and straight talk between educators and parents.

Communication only works when people feel heard, and when all parties—be it parents, teachers, students or staff—resolve to find solutions to common problems. There is no reason why debates about basic necessities such as school technology or school bonds or transportation, should end up costing a good school leader her job. But it happens. And it speaks to a lack of effective communication.

It isn't just your reputation that's at stake. Alternative and charter schools are creating stiff competition for students. If your school or district fails to offer parents and families what they want, they'll enroll their students elsewhere, taking precious per-pupil funding with them.

For the better part of our careers, we knew customer service as a slogan, a phrase—like happiness. In 2016, customer service is as tangible as the bricks in our school buildings. We can touch it and feel it and know it. More important, we can measure it.

Do you have the systems, processes and professional development to make customer service part of your district's DNA? This guide will help.

All the best,  
Dr. Gerald Dawkins  
SVP, Superintendent  
and District Relations



**As you read this guide, consider the following questions:**

- 1. What do you really know about the preferences of your community?**
- 2. What do you plan to do with that information?**



# WHY IT MATTERS

## The Customer Experience

THE BEST K12 SCHOOL LEADERS GO ABOVE AND BEYOND TO MEET THE NEEDS OF parents and community members, because they recognize that stronger customer service and student achievement go hand in hand. When parents, students, and staff feel valued, educational engagement ticks higher—and that leads to better results.

High-quality customer service can mean the difference between retaining or losing students. It's a way for school districts to distinguish themselves in an increasingly crowded market. But these changes are harder for most schools than many people realize. Customer service is not part of the traditional DNA of public education. Getting there, requires a tectonic shift in mindset.

“We have to understand that we do have customers—we're not a monopoly just because we are the public school system. We have to treat our customers the way customers want to be treated anywhere in the world,” says Dr. Wendy Robinson, superintendent of the Fort Wayne Community Schools (FWCS) in Indiana.

Robinson has challenged faculty and staff at every level of her school community to become more customer-centric. In addition to new technologies that help schools measure and respond to feedback, the district now offers training to integrate customer service into the school experience.

FWCS is not alone. Across the country, educators are embracing community experience and satisfaction as a critical strategy in the fight to keep families from defecting for newer alternatives, be it charter schools or magnet programs. Losing students is tough enough. Losing the per-pupil funding that follows them is devastating. And a quality education alone, while essential, isn't the difference maker it once was. Read on to find out how to make customer service part of your school district's culture.



**We have to treat our customers the way customers want to be treated anywhere in the world.”**





## AUTHOR AND CUSTOMER SERVICE EXPERT **MICAH SOLOMON** SAYS A CUSTOMER-FOCUSED APPROACH IN SCHOOLS IS ESSENTIAL —FOR **3 REASONS**

# #1 Choice creates options

Online businesses and brick-and-mortar stores have long recognized the value of exceptional customer service. If customers don't feel they're getting what they need from a product or a brand, they can stow their checkbooks and credit cards and take their business elsewhere. Thanks to the veritable explosion of online retailers, there is no shortage of consumer options. With the rise of school choice and charter schools in public education, school decision makers are faced with similar market forces.



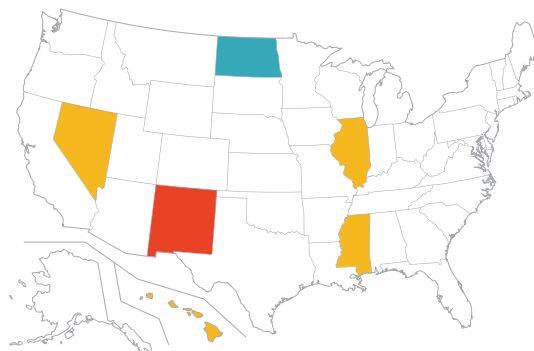
The economic implications of a free-market school system are transformative—but recent reports suggest public schools are largely unprepared for an increase in competition. Consider the Los Angeles Unified School District. (LAUSD). School officials report that enrollment in the nation's second-largest school system has dipped more than 20 percent in eight years. That's a loss of more than 100,000 students, reports Southern California Public Radio. The drop can be attributed, in part, to a modest decline in the area's school-age population, but even the most optimistic officials concede that many families are simply opting for alternative forms of education.

Each student defection costs LAUSD an estimated \$10,000 in per-pupil funding. Do the math, and the challenge before school leaders in the City of Angels and elsewhere across the country is sobering.

## Perception is Everything

A recent Gallup poll reveals what Americans think of the nation's public schools:

### ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

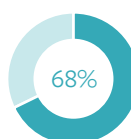


Satisfaction in K12 public education ranges from a  
▲ **high of 87% in North Dakota** to a

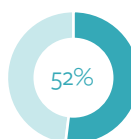
▼ **low of 41% in New Mexico**

▼ Five states—Illinois, Hawaii, Louisiana, Nevada, and New Mexico—have **satisfaction rates below 50%**

### CHARTER SCHOOLS MOVING IN



More than two-thirds of Americans (68%) **support the idea of charter schools**, according to the poll.



Slightly more than half (52%) **believe students receive a better education at charter schools than traditional public schools.**

What do you think? Are perceptions of public schools in your community changed or changing?

**Want more? Read the full survey:** <http://bit.ly/1THTwjW>

Source: State of America's Schools, 2014

**WHY IT MATTERS**

## #2 Expectations have changed

Choice creates competition. But that's hardly the only reason for educators to focus on customer service. In the age of social media, today's connected consumer simply expects more from their local schools, says Solomon.

"If Starbucks can be polite to you and keep the line moving, if Amazon can get something to you in eight hours and cheerfully accept returns, it affects the kind of customer experience you expect in all arenas," he explains. In most cases, parents and community members don't just want a higher level of customer service from schools, they demand it.

## #3 Nobody's fooling anybody

Whatever efforts your school or district makes to engage its community had better be sincere, says Solomon. Parents and community members know the difference between platitudes and genuine commitment.

"Most parents have involvement in office work or with other organizations of all types, so they understand how an administrator should act toward them, how a customer-facing website should function, and so forth," he explains. "They probably understand this better than they understand what constitutes effective versus ineffective pedagogy. So the kind of service parents get from their children's schools is extremely important."

Simply put, customer service isn't something schools can pretend to do well. There's a standard—and, increasingly, parents and community members expect schools to meet it.

### A Parent's Choice

#### Customer service, the difference maker

St. Louis, Mo.-based parent Kate Casas wrote in the *Huffington Post* about why she chose to send her daughter to a charter school—and customer service was the deciding factor.

"My husband and I must have toured 20 schools ... in our quest for the right place for Sophie. What I learned from these experiences was that as a parent it did not matter how great the school did on standardized



**At SLLIS, someone answered the phone every single time I called."**

tests, how diverse it was, what credentials the teachers had or where it was located if there were no systems in place to ensure excellent customer service. I wanted to know the people working for the school wanted my daughter there

and cared what my concerns were. I needed them to respect my time and my intelligence. Most importantly, I didn't want to hear 'that's just the protocol ma'am.'

"The best example of customer service was at the St. Louis Language Immersion School (no surprise this is where Sophie ended up). At SLLIS, someone answered the phone every single time I called. The online form for scheduling a tour was intuitive and it worked.

When we arrived for the tour, the staff was happy to see us and they wanted to answer our questions. They were more than willing to allow us to bring Sophie to sit and observe a classroom and were prompt with all our follow-up questions and concerns."

**Read the full article in the *Huffington Post*:**

<http://huff.to/1WJHCJd>





# CUSTOMER SERVICE DOS AND DON'TS

There's a right and a wrong way to do it



## **DO** streamline

Customers today expect self-service options, writes author and customer service consultant Micah Solomon for Forbes. They don't want to repeatedly fill out forms with information they've already provided.



## **DON'T** make customers ask about things they can find online

Post answers to frequently asked questions on your website, including the contact information for all appropriate contacts. Also, make sure customers receive an automatic confirmation when they submit a form or question, so they don't have to call to confirm that you received it.



## **DO** learn to apologize

"Things will go wrong," Solomon says. "Prepare for this, emotionally as well as operationally." Sometimes, you're just apologizing for the situation, and not for something you've done wrong. "It doesn't matter," he says; "an apology is still of value."



## **DON'T** blow the "hello before the hello"

Hellos and goodbyes are key moments in customer service. Many organizations neglect what Solomon calls the "hello before the hello," or the first impression created before someone walks through the door. Is information easy to find online? Are office hours posted correctly and in a visible place? The details matter.



# SET GOALS

## A Strategic Approach

FORT WAYNE IS AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT WITH ABOUT 29,000 STUDENTS, making it one of the largest in the state. “For a good three decades, we have seen ourselves as needing to compete—even before this current choice movement became so popular,” explains Superintendent Robinson. Engaging the community is one of the school district’s three primary strategic goals, along with academic achievement and fiscal responsibility. In nearby Illinois, the 28,000-student Rockford Public Schools made customer service a top priority. “Our vision is that we want to be the first choice for families,” says Public Information Officer Earl Dotson, Jr. “And customer service plays a big role in that. Our message is: We’re here to serve, and we’re going to measure ourselves on how well we do.”

In both cases, school leaders say it’s critical to ensure a commitment to service at every level of the school system, from the central office to the classroom.



**Our message is:  
We’re here to  
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## READY TO MAKE CUSTOMER SERVICE A PRIORITY IN YOUR SCHOOL SYSTEM? HERE ARE **3 STEPS** YOU CAN'T SUCCEED WITHOUT

### #1 Listen to your community

Parents and other stakeholders want to know that their opinions matter. That means finding effective ways to listen and respond to community feedback.

In Fort Wayne, Robinson has committed to giving community members a voice in the decision-making process.

In [an article in District Administration](#), Robinson discussed the need to go beyond traditional forms of communication. Email and phone messages are great. But, alone, they don't get the job done. Messages go unanswered. Calls get lost. Say nothing for the many new ways that community members connect with schools—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on.

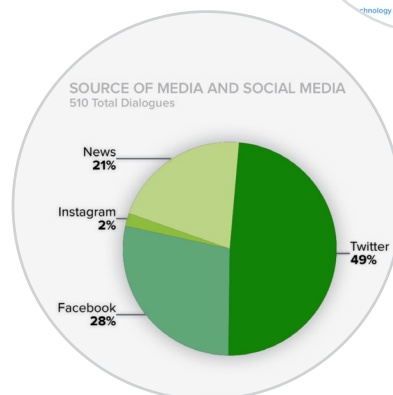
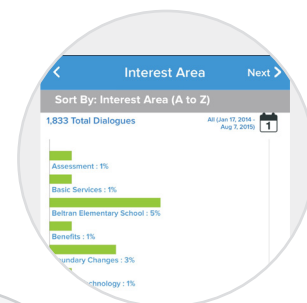
Robinson suggests creating a system and a process for reaching out to and connecting with community members that can scale across the district.

“It isn't enough for the communications office, or the food services department, or the counseling office to be good at customer service,” she writes. “Once an expectation for good customer service is created, your community will expect you to honor it. Everyone is accountable.”

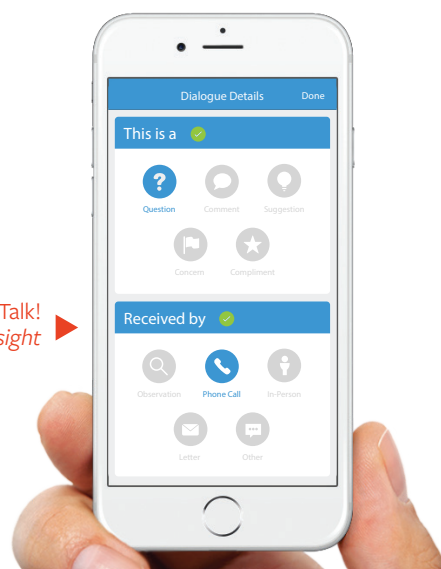
Fort Wayne has accomplished this by making customer service training a requirement for public-facing employees. The district also uses Let's Talk!, a cloud-based communication solution from Virginia-based K12 Insight, to build stronger relationships with parents, teachers, students and staff.

The technology works by instantly routing community feedback from every channel—be it the district website, social media, email, phone conversations, or in-person meetings—to the right person in the district for a timely response. On the backend, school leaders leverage data and information from each conversation to make smarter, more informed decisions.

**Learn more about how Let's Talk! helps school leaders in Fort Wayne and elsewhere. See the sidebar on page 12.**



Let's Talk!  
from K12 Insight



**SET GOALS**

## #2 Recognize different stakeholders

It is impossible to respond to everyone the same way.

"You have to understand that you have more than one set of customers," Robinson says. "We see ourselves having several communities, starting with our internal community of employees. If we don't make sure they are engaged and informed about what we're doing, they tend to send the wrong messages."

Students are customers as well, she explains: "Sometimes people overlook the fact that students have opinions. Then we have our whole parent community, and the community of people who don't have kids or a connection to the schools but are taxpayers. Finally, we have our political community."

All of these groups are essential, and none should be overlooked when considering how to create better experiences.

To get a sense for what different stakeholder groups are thinking and feeling, Fort Wayne conducts annual stakeholder surveys, using K12 Insight's Engage software. "In our climate surveys, we interview students, parents, and staff members," Robinson says. "We expect schools to take that information and use it in their planning, to address weaknesses and reinforce strengths."

### Not all school surveys are created equal

Want to learn more about how K12 school districts are using Engage to increase stakeholder participation? Visit [www.k12insight.com/engage](http://www.k12insight.com/engage)

## #3 Never assume

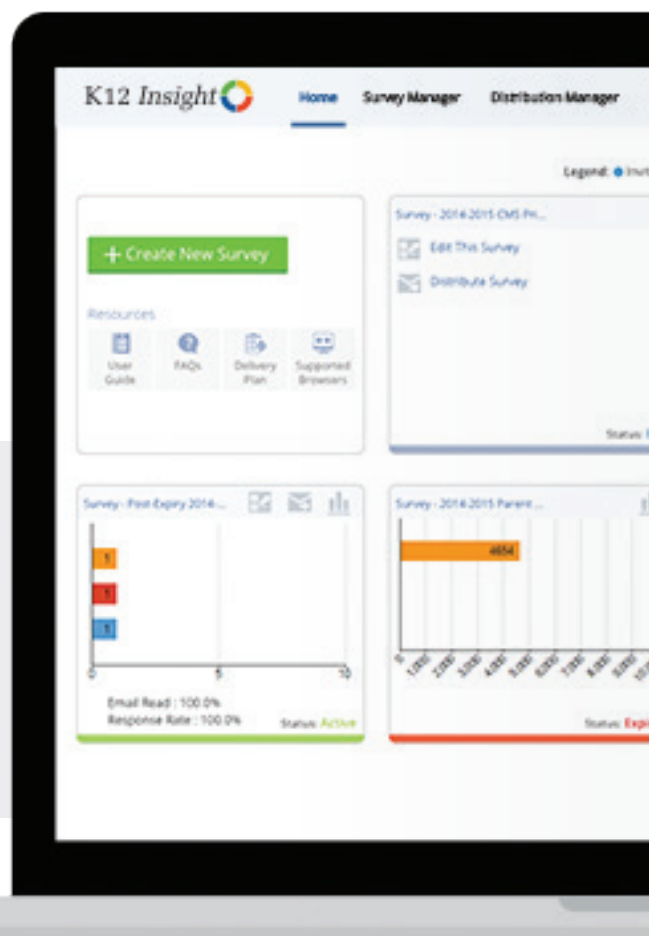
Superintendents and other school district leaders should never assume they know how their stakeholders feel about an issue. Instead, they should take the time to find out.

"Don't make assumptions about what parents want or what students think is fair, and don't starting planning until you have asked your customers for their opinions," Robinson says.

If you include stakeholders in everything you do, from the beginning, you are more likely to earn their trust.

What is your school district doing to include community members in critical conversations?

▼ Engage from K12 Insight



# Questions, Comments? Let's Talk!

Better customer service in K12 schools often starts with better responsiveness—and technology can help.

The **Fort Wayne Community Schools** in Indiana and **Rockford Public Schools** in Illinois both use Let's Talk!, the cloud-based communications solution from K12 *Insight*. Let's Talk! provides a 24/7 platform for community members to ask questions and receive timely feedback from school leaders on key issues.

When FWCS had to cut \$2.5 million from the district's transportation budget last year, administrators immediately turned to Let's Talk!

Rather than make important decisions in a vacuum, the district committed to including its entire community in the process. “We pushed out information through Let's Talk!, and provided opportunities for people to give feedback,” explains Superintendent Dr. Wendy Robinson.

District officials read every instance of stakeholder feedback and responded to the messages with personal replies, some from Robinson herself.

The result? FWCS school leaders were able to implement difficult cuts and, in some cases, significant policy changes, with minimal pushback from the school community.

Rockford also uses the technology to engage stakeholders ahead of important decisions.

Public Information Officer Earl Dotson, Jr., says the technology demonstrates the district's commitment to engaging its school community on any issue, big or small.

“We made our website mobile-friendly—and Let's Talk! is the first thing people see when they log on,” Dotson says. Now, when parents or community members do have a question or a concern, they know exactly where to go.

**For more, visit K12 *Insight* at [www.k12insight.com/lets-talk](http://www.k12insight.com/lets-talk)**

## Fort Wayne Community Schools (Indiana)



## Rockford Public Schools (Illinois)



**97%** School leaders would recommend K12 *Insight* to a colleague

Source: 2015 Client Satisfaction Survey, K12 *Insight*



# CHANGE THE CULTURE

## Create an Exceptional Culture

EXCEPTIONAL CUSTOMER SERVICE NECESSITATES AN OVERHAUL OF SCHOOL DISTRICT culture and a total commitment from leadership.

"It starts at the top," says Rockford's Dotson. "Our superintendent gives an annual message to staff at the beginning of the school year. This year, he gave that message clearly: We want to be seen as more customer service-oriented."



We want to  
be seen as  
more customer  
service-  
oriented."



SETTING THE RIGHT TONE AND LEADING BY EXAMPLE ARE THE FIRST STEPS TO CREATING A CULTURE OF GREAT CUSTOMER SERVICE IN ANY SCHOOL SYSTEM. HERE ARE **3 MORE**

## #1 Set clear expectations

In Rockford, educators developed a district-wide process for customer service—so that everyone would know and understand their roles and expectations.

“We identified the team leaders in each department who would be primarily responsible for responding to questions and comments,” Dotson explains. Administrative assistants are on the front lines of our communication efforts, responding to queries and feedback within 48 hours at the latest—and if they need to get answers from their supervisors, they can. Meanwhile, top-level leaders deliver bad news and are available for questions in the event of a controversy or crisis.



## #2 Ensure follow-through

It's important to follow through on your promise to better serve the community. “Do what you say you're going to do, and hold people accountable,” says Dotson. “Be diligent about making sure people respond to inquiries within the prescribed time.”

Don't lose it on the handoff, adds Micah Solomon, the marketing consultant. Often a district employee will field a query and promise a response, then hand that query off to another employee to fulfill the request. There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, so long as the customer's needs are communicated and the new owner follows up on the original request with a valid response.

## #3 Measure the results

The only way to effectively ensure high-quality service in any school system is to benchmark your efforts against a set of standards, says Solomon. Every school should find a way to gauge improvement over time.

Personally test your district's customer service tools and solutions. Evaluate the quality of each response. When you fill out an online form or post a comment on your district website, for example, how long does it take for someone to issue a reply? Note the timing and the tone of the message. Was it helpful? Did you get the information you were looking for? Or, were you left with more questions? If so, dive deeper to identify the problem.

# 3 MYTHS ABOUT CUSTOMER SERVICE

For years, K12 school leaders shunned the idea of parents and community members as “customers.”

Education purists viewed schooling as less a commodity and more an inalienable right.

Success was something students earned by showing up and trying hard.

In many ways, that's still true. But service is also important, thanks in large part to the flurry of options created by school choice. Learn to serve your community better by debunking these three myths.

**1**

## **Schools don't have customers**



It bears repeating: Schools do have customers. Failing to realize this, puts your school or district at a disadvantage. Rather than taking for granted that students will show up at your doors each spring, take a look at what local charter schools and other schools of choice are doing to attract students and families. Be more responsive to students and parents and demonstrate the many ways your school has distanced itself from the competition.

**2**

## **Negativity will dominate the conversation**



Some school leaders hesitate to commit to customer service for fear that inviting community feedback will open up their school or district to a steady stream of negativity. The thinking is that parents and community members only reach out when they're upset, or angry. Creating a soapbox to complain is not good for anybody. But that thinking is short sighted. You're going to field complaints, whether you invite feedback or not. Rather, the goal is to create an environment for constructive criticism, occasional compliments and more inclusive decision-making.

**3**

## **It will detract from classroom time**



Another popular myth: Some educators contend that the time it takes to respond to community feedback is time better spent in the classroom. Teachers and administrators are already overworked. Do they really have time to respond to every single comment, good or bad, from parents and community members? Customer service does take time. The good news: if done right, most of that investment can be divvied up across teams, so no one person is saddled with the burden of reaching out to parents, teachers, taxpayers, and so on.



# GO AND SERVE

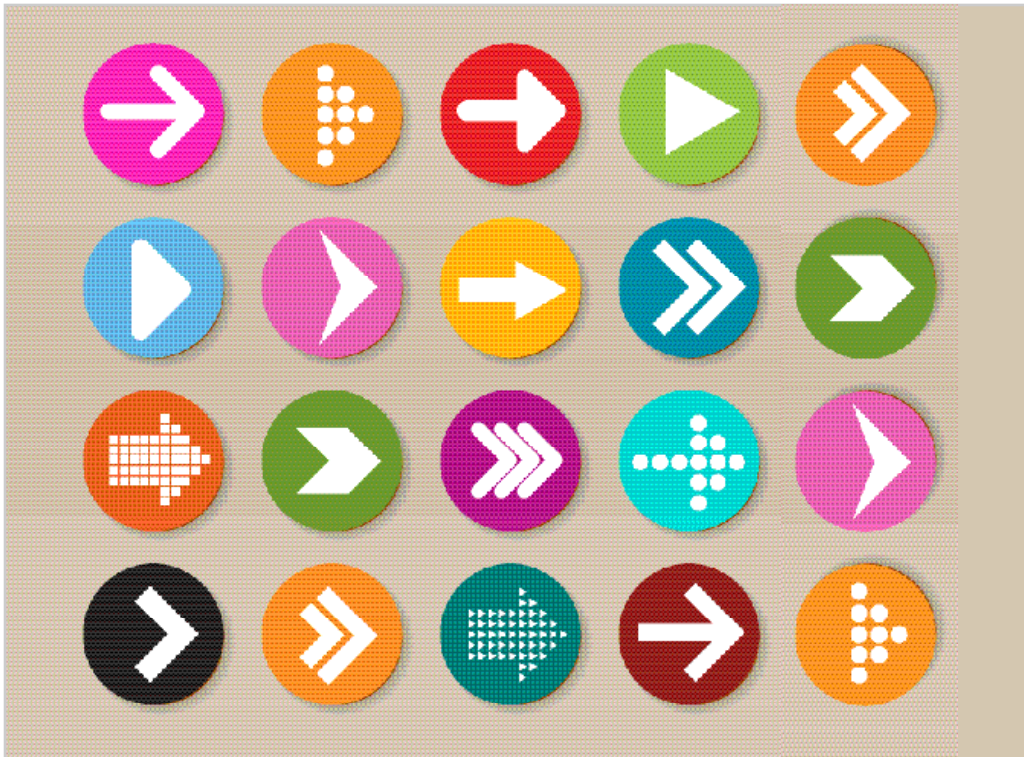
CREATING A CULTURE OF STRONG CUSTOMER service in the nation's K12 schools is critically important. But even the best school districts can't put a smile on everyone's face—and that's not the point, explains Robinson. "Our goal is not to make people happy; it's to make them well informed," she says.

There will come a time when you have to make decisions that people don't agree with. The key is to be transparent and include community members in your thought process. If you can explain how

and why you arrived at your decision, and give your community an opportunity to contribute to the conversation ahead of any significant changes, you can create an environment where schools and communities work better together.

It's not a choice; it's a matter of survival, says Robinson. "If you don't listen to, inform, engage, and understand your customers, you run the risk of becoming obsolete..."

...as if you didn't already have enough motivation.



JOIN THE MORE THAN **30,000** SCHOOL LEADERS  
WHO TRUST K12 *INSIGHT* TO HELP THEM BUILD STRONGER  
RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS, TEACHERS, STUDENTS AND STAFF.



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