



Dealing with Nasty Rumors

In most communities the position of superintendent is high-profile. As a result, baseless allegations or unpleasant rumors or even outrageous gossip can appear out of nowhere and attract interest. Sometimes they begin with an unfortunate misunderstanding. Other times they are planted by envious rivals, disgruntled employees, or even someone who is just plain spiteful.

Dealing with ugly rumors or unfounded accusations is challenging at best. Confronting an assumed source typically results in denial and too often it can generate even more interest. Still, it's important that ugly and hurtful talk be put to rest before it can damage your career.

As a rule it is best to pause, resist the temptation to react too quickly, and instead take time to carefully and cautiously formulate the best possible response. Time provides an opportunity to get emotions under control, strategy can be critical, and success is paramount.

The first and most critical step is to assess whether the allegation, if ignored, could do any damage. Next is to assess the magnitude of the problem; determine whether it was one brief comment under the breath or a detailed account that is gaining traction. New superintendents are often more vulnerable than those who have had time to build political capital.

Experts generally advise rebutting allegations that undermine integrity or ethics because they are not only offensive and insulting, they can ruin a career.

If it is clear that a rumor has the potential to do serious damage, careful planning and execution can actually transform a negative into a positive.

This involves sincerely delivering a carefully worded rebuttal in the right place at the right time. An effective way to introduce your comments is to explain to your audience that what they think is very important to you.

- Take care to avoid appearing defensive; disappointment is a much better message.
- Be brief and succinct; steer clear of a long, detailed explanation.
- Avoid bitterness, counter-accusations, petty remarks and self-pity.
- Resist the temptation to engage in a discussion; it is nearly always a big mistake.
- Focus on refuting misinformation or explaining a misinterpretation; mentioning unrelated issues are likely to confuse and sidetrack.
- Stay away from even hinting at a possible source; it is not worth provoking a public reaction or exposing yourself to potential liability.

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Your goal is to explain your need to comment, make your point, and move on. In the best scenario your audience will see a polished, forthright professional who feels they are important and deserve an explanation, and they will be left with substantial reason not to believe what they may have heard.

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