

CASE STUDY:

Opposition in the Media

OVERVIEW: The International Academy (IA) is a public, tuition--free high school for students of 11 Oakland County school districts, collaborating in consortium with university and business partners. Located in Bloomfield, Michigan, the IA has been offering the IB Diploma Programme since 1999 and has been ranked by *Newsweek* magazine as one of the best public high schools in America.

Conflict

In March of 2005, the local Bloomfield newspaper, *The Observer & Eccentric*, ran an op-ed piece titled, "International Academy has an anti-American basis." The article made the claims that IB programmes promote "one-world government under the aegis of the UN, Gramsci-style Marxism, disarmament, radical environmentalism, moral relativism and pantheism/New Age religion" while undermining "national sovereignty, individualism" and so on.

Response

IA Principal Bert Okma's response to the opposition was quick and relatively easy to implement because he was prepared and had a method of response. Also, he had actively cultivated and maintained support for the IA through his relationships with parents, administrators, and local decision makers.

Although the op-ed article was the first time IA was criticized in public, Okma had already fielded many concerned calls. When the IA was founded in 1996, parents called him and were suspicious of the implications of the word "International" in the school's name. Would the school be some sort of UN school? Would American history be taught? Okma spent considerable time on the phone fielding such questions from a worried parent. As he participated in open meetings with the community regarding his school's IB authorization, Okma decided that he and his colleagues needed a playbook of some kind that would have concise answers to the questions they were receiving over and over again, as well as an outline of what to do if and when a public attack via the media was launched against the IA.

In order to create this playbook, he contacted the IB North America office and asked for hard facts and figures to counter claims, such as the role UNESCO had in the funding of IB. With these facts, he was able to draft substantive responses to many of the erroneous claims against the IB. Once completed, the playbook was distributed to teachers, superintendents, and local administrators.

As his first step in response to the negative article, Okma notified colleagues and peers of its existence and thrust, and provided them a copy of his playbook to help prepare them for any responses from their own constituencies. He reached out to groups that included educators at the IA, local opinion

leaders, such as the editor of the local newspaper, and Oakland county government representatives. Okma also notified the IB North America office in New York.

Okma did not convene any special meetings regarding the article. He felt such a response would be too much. He did, however, immediately communicate with parents of IA students by sending out a notice informing them of his own forthcoming letter to *The Observer & Eccentric* and encouraging them to write response letters detailing their experiences with IA to the editor of the newspaper. Okma's response was published a few weeks after the original op-ed piece, as were several letters from the parents of IA students extolling the excellent education their children were receiving.

Don't keep your head down and don't sit back. Go to parents, go to opinion leaders. Don't hide from it, but meet it head on with real, direct facts.

**—Bert Okma, Principal,
International Academy**

Students at IA explored the issue in their Theory of Knowledge classes, but beyond that, the issue quietly and quickly died. Okma attributes the lack of sticking power of the accusation to not only his swift, head-on response, but also to the enormous amount of goodwill the school already had within the community. He has worked tirelessly to maintain a dialogue with parents through monthly meetings, an email list, and a newsletter, while also keeping in contact with local government officials, superintendents, and other school administrators. Creating, cultivating, and maintaining this network of contacts is hard work for an already busy principal, but Okma stresses how this proactive work has been essential to maintaining a positive profile for his school within the community and has greatly added to the success of fundraising and sponsorship-seeking initiatives.

When asked for advice for other schools facing similar public opposition, Okma responded, "Don't keep your head down and don't sit back. Go to parents, go to opinion leaders. Don't hide from it, but meet it head on with real, direct facts."

Conclusion

The accusatory op-ed piece against the IA was out of the blue, but principal Bert Okma was prepared for it and moved quickly and efficiently to squelch the opposition. He recommends to fellow principals the following steps:

- Create, cultivate, and maintain relationships with parents, students, local government, business leaders, and other community groups.
- Don't wait for conflict to arise to decide how to respond. Have ready answers for many of the common complaints lodged against the IB and distribute them to your colleagues.
- If you face opposition in a public forum, immediately notify your colleagues, your community, and the IB North America of the nature of the opposition and your proposed course of action.
- Respond quickly and thoughtfully and enlist others, such as parents, to respond as well.