

3 CHAPTER

Legal and Ethical Aspects of Public Relations

CASE STUDY: MAYNARD CONSTRUCTS A SCHOOL WEB PAGE

During his employment interview for the principal's position at Silver Creek Elementary, Maynard Richards told the superintendent, Dr. Margaret Weigand, and the school board members that his computer skills were excellent. This claim impressed the interviewers because the previous principal basically had no such skills. As a result, teachers were not encouraged to use computers to augment instruction and technology was not used to enhance communication between the school and community. For example, the school's Web page was nothing more than a drab listing of basic information that had never been updated since it was created a decade ago.

After beginning his new job, Maynard knew that Dr. Weigand wanted him to develop a better school Web page. So, he searched the Internet looking for good ideas. He eventually focused on two Web pages, one developed for a suburban Chicago elementary school and the other for an elementary school in southeastern Iowa. He eventually decided to adopt the format used in the former. He then applied the exact design, including all graphics, to his school's Web page. He did this convinced that the material was not copyrighted because he could not find evidence to that effect on the other school's Web page. He was thus satisfied that he was free to use it. Therefore, he simply inserted names, titles, links, and so forth and uploaded the new page for his school.

The new Silver Creek Elementary School Web page drew praise not only from the superintendent, but also from school board members, school employees, and other district residents. The superintendent was so impressed that she offered Principal Richards a \$1,000 stipend to help improve the Web page for the district and for the junior-senior high school.

Approximately 3 months later, Dr. Weigand received a registered letter from the superintendent of the elementary school whose Web page had been copied. The following were pertinent aspects of the letter:

- ◆ The layout and graphics contained on the Silver Creek Elementary School Web page had been copied without authorization.
- ◆ Authorization was required because the material in question was original and copyrighted artwork.
- ◆ Dr. Weigand was asked to either remove the artwork from the Silver Creek Web page immediately or pay a \$3,000 fee for authorization to use it.

After reading the letter, Superintendent Weigand called Principal Richards and shared the content with him. Maynard responded that there was no validation of a copyright on the other school's Web page; thus, he assumed the material was in the public domain and he was free to use it. The superintendent then asked Maynard if he was aware that all original work on the Internet was covered by copyright law. He said he did not know. Both administrators now realized that using the Internet appropriately to communicate with stakeholders required more than computer literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Applying PR appropriately and effectively requires more than good intentions. As the case study demonstrates, not understanding legal aspects of mass communication elevates risk in administrative decisions—and high-risk decisions are likely to result in harm to the school, to the decision maker, or to both. Moving the legal and ethical dimensions of PR from the realm of good intent to verifiable practice, however, requires administrators to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable practices (Tilley, 2005). The purpose of this chapter is to provide knowledge that makes it more likely that they will do so.

Administrators not only need to be concerned with personal behavior, they also have a responsibility to be concerned with employee behavior; and this duty is particularly important in the realm of PR. Thus, superintendents and principals need to know what is legal and what is ethical and they must educate their colleagues to ensure that this knowledge is applied across communicative activities. This chapter examines both legal and ethical aspects of PR.

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- ◆ Define negligence and explain why it is legally relevant to PR.
- ◆ Define defamation and explain why it is legally relevant to PR.
- ◆ Explain why free speech, privacy, religion in public schools, community values, and copyright are legal issues relevant to PR.
- ◆ Define ethics correctly and explain the importance of ethical standards in professions.
- ◆ Explain why efforts to establish professional ethics for administration generally and for the application of PR specifically have become increasingly important.

LEGAL DIMENSIONS

As described in the previous chapter, both legislation and court decisions have set in motion social changes that in turn have fundamentally altered school–community relationships. For example, U.S. Supreme Court decisions on topics such as school desegregation, religion in public schools, rights and freedoms of teachers and students, sexual harassment, race discrimination, and gender discrimination have had important and lasting ramifications. And the No Child Left Behind Act and other laws set parameters for accessing, exchanging, and applying data on students and employees (Potter & Stefkovich, 2009). Although federal and state legislatures and courts have always influenced education policy, the quantity and depth of these interventions accelerated substantially during the last half of the 20th century (Tyack, James, & Benavot, 1987; Yudolf, Kirp, Levin, & Moran, 2002). As a result, administrators have had to pay considerable attention to determining if their behavior and decisions are legal (Kirp & Jensen, 1986).

Tort Liability

Many aspiring administrators fail to recognize how often districts and schools are involved in litigation. Imber and Thompson (1991) estimated that in the early 1990s, one lawsuit was filed annually against a school in the United States for every 3,500 students attending public schools; this estimate only pertains to litigation in which schools are defendants. The greatest exposure to lawsuits in the area of school PR is in the category of tort law.

In an action based in tort against a district or school, the injured party (plaintiff) seeks a judgment holding the institution or one or more of its employees responsible for the consequence of a wrongdoing. Tort law imposes liability on schools for injury or harm to individuals using the school, including students, parents, and outsiders injured at school. By allowing compensation for such injuries, tort law in effect requires schools to take appropriate steps to provide a safe and orderly environment. There are three major categories of tort law: negligence, intentional torts (including defamation), and strict liability. The categories of negligence and intentional torts are especially relevant to school PR.

Negligence. The most prevalent tort action pursued against schools and school personnel is negligence. This offense may be defined as conduct falling below an established standard fixed and imposed on the parties by the law, common or statutory, that results in injury (Keeton, Dobbs, Keeton, & Owen, 1984, p. 288). Negligence is applicable to all human behavior. The test commonly used to determine negligence is based on a construct created by the courts; it is based on a hypothetical person who "has never existed on land or sea: the reasonable man of ordinary prudence" (p. 174). This "reasonable" person conducts himself or herself in an ideal manner; he or she is a community standard. Although the reasonable person operates as a community model, his or her conduct varies appropriately based on the circumstances surrounding that conduct at any given time. In a negligence lawsuit, the question becomes this: Would the reasonable person have been expected to foresee and, as a result, to have been able to take action to prevent, the injury that occurred? An affirmative answer to the question suggests the defendant in a negligence action was negligent.

There are four elements in a cause of action for negligence:

1. There must be a duty of care between the plaintiff and the defendant.
2. There must be a breach of the duty of care by the defendant.
3. The defendant's breach of duty must have been the proximate cause of the resultant injury to the plaintiff.
4. The plaintiff must have suffered actual loss or damage as a result of the injury. (For liability to be proven, all four elements must be shown by the plaintiff.)

In the realm of practicing PR, administrators and other employees commonly encourage and allow stakeholders to be in district-owned properties as visitors, users (e.g., recreational programs), or program participants (e.g., committee meetings). Administrators who have responsibility for such properties have a duty to maintain them, including the equipment in them, to ensure proper and safe conditions. Thus, school officials can be held liable to an injured person if it is shown that they knew or should have known of an unreasonably dangerous or hazardous condition and failed to take

steps to eliminate it. Courts impose a high standard for the proper maintenance of school facilities and equipment, and concomitantly, the judiciary has looked favorably on schools that have developed preventive maintenance programs that provide for regular facility and equipment inspection.

Most states have developed special liability rules concerning owners and possessors of property and buildings and their duty toward occupiers of the property (premises liability). Individuals who enter the property of another are legally classified according to the level of duty owed them as trespassers, licensees, or invitees. A trespasser is an individual who enters the property of another without a privilege to do so or without consent from the possessor. A licensee is a person who enters the property of another with permission (express or implied). An invitee is an individual who is invited (express or implied) to enter and remain on the premises of another for a particular reason. Invitees include individuals on premises as members of the public for purposes for which the property is held open to the public (American Law Institute, 1986).

Traditionally, most individuals, other than students, parents, and employees, entering a school are considered licensees. Examples include community groups and organizations using the school facility as a meeting site. A school district owes a licensee only one duty: to warn him or her of concealed dangerous conditions of which the school district has actual knowledge. A school district owes a greater degree of care to an invitee than it does to a licensee. School districts that make facilities available to groups and individuals run the risk of creating invitees out of groups traditionally characterized as licensees. A school district owes an invitee a duty to exercise reasonable care for his or her safety and to take reasonable steps, including regular inspection of the premises, to make sure the premises are safe for the invitee. This heightened duty to invitees means in practical terms that school employees must, among other things, be vigilant in mopping and drying slippery floors, in removing dangerous snow and ice from entrances and sidewalks, in adequately lighting halls and parking lots, and in providing or increasing security measures when attacks on school invitees are foreseeable. These precautions are generally met when school is in session, but they become problematic at other times when community groups are allowed to use the facilities.

Interpretations of due care and adequate supervision depend largely on the circumstances surrounding an injury. The traditional standard of care and supervision applicable in most situations is the level of care and supervision an ordinary, reasonably prudent person would exercise under the circumstances. However, when supervising students during school functions, school personnel are held to a higher standard of care and supervision than is the ordinary, reasonably prudent person. In general, school district liability for injuries sustained by individuals other than students is decided within the general and special (premises liability) tort liability framework.

Crime committed in the nation's schools emerged as a major concern during the 1990s. By the end of that decade, students, ages 12–18, were victims of about 880,000 nonfatal violent crimes while at school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). School authorities have a legal obligation to maintain safe and violence-free environments. The duty to provide adequate supervision and security extends to parents and citizens invited to school. Consequently, administrators should take precautionary actions if assaults on school property are reasonably foreseeable. Safety measures might include warning the public,

increasing on-campus security, providing crowd control at sporting events, regulating access to buildings, and installing metal detectors and surveillance cameras (in the worst situations). The legal reasoning applied in school violence cases appears to be grounded in whether or not a school could reasonably have foreseen a violent act and prevented injury under all the circumstances in which it occurred.

A 1998 case illustrates a school's duty to maintain a safe environment. A student's mother brought an action against a school district and school officials, arising from the death of her son, who was attacked and stabbed in a classroom. The mother contended that despite previous student violence at the school, nothing had been done to implement security or safeguards beyond hanging a "No Trespassing" sign near the front door. The court agreed and found that the school district was not immune from a negligence suit where it had neither adopted nor implemented any security policy, procedure, or safeguards (*Brum v. Town of Dartmouth*, 1998).

Districts and schools commonly enlist adults as volunteers. For example, senior citizens may serve as readers in primary classrooms or assist in the cafeteria and media center. Volunteerism has relevance for PR because it nurtures goodwill and creates ambassadors of goodwill. At the same time, however, adult volunteers expose the school to liability. Recognizing this fact, many districts have adopted relevant policies; as examples, they have set behavioral expectations for volunteers and require them to pass a criminal background check. Such policies demonstrate that school officials have taken action to reduce liability. A New Jersey case provides an example of why it is prudent to be proactive. In this case, a volunteer swimming instructor sexually molested an 8-year-old student at a school-sponsored event. The student's parents sued the school district, claiming negligence. In ruling on the lawsuit, the court evaluated both the action taken by the school board and the action taken by the swimming program coordinator. Applying the "deliberate indifference" standard, the court ruled in favor of the defendants (school board) because evidence showed that an official policy for screening volunteers had been adopted and applied (*C. P. v. Piscataway Township Board of Education*, 1996).

Several *defenses against negligence-related liability* are available. The most common are (a) contributory negligence, (b) assumption of the risk, and (c) governmental immunity (Alexander & Alexander, 2001). To prove *contributory negligence*, a defendant (district, school, or employee) must demonstrate that the plaintiff failed to exercise reasonable care for his or her own safety and that failure contributed to the plaintiff's injury. Contributory negligence is a potent defense for educators because, if established, this defense totally excuses them (or their employer) from liability. Because of the harshness of the "complete bar to recovery" rule of contributory negligence, the majority of states have adopted the defense of *comparative negligence*; it permits damages to be apportioned according to the assessed degrees of fault of all parties. In some states where comparative negligence has replaced contributory negligence, however, the comparative fault provisions do not apply to tort claims brought against government entities, including school districts (Cambron-McCabe, McCarthy, & Thomas, 2004).

Another defense available to schools is the defense of *assumption of the risk*. It involves a plaintiff's consent or voluntary acceptance (express or implied) of a specific risk or danger of which the plaintiff has actual knowledge. Assumption of the risk operates to relieve a district or school of liability even if the district or school has created the risk or danger.

The doctrine of assumption of the risk has been frequently and successfully raised in sports injury cases. For example, the defense has been deployed successfully in lawsuits regarding injuries sustained at school-sponsored sporting events, such as when a spectator is struck by a foul ball at a baseball game or a spectator is hit in the eye by an errant tennis ball (Korpela, 1971).

Prior to 1970, litigation against public schools and most government entities was limited or entirely prohibited by the doctrine of *governmental immunity*. In the United States, this legal concept is based largely on English common law, exemplified by the ancient maxim that “the king can do no wrong.” The prevailing doctrine in the United States has been that both the state and the federal governments are immune for torts committed by their officers and employees unless the government consents to such liability. The *doctrine of sovereign immunity* was traditionally extended to school districts in most states for injuries to individuals that were caused by the negligent acts of government employees. Governmental immunity for school districts in tort actions still exists under common law, even though judicial actions have partially eroded the vitality of this doctrine in most states (Cambron-McCabe et al., 2004).

In many states where governmental immunity does not protect school districts from tort liability, state legislatures have enacted laws that limit damages awarded to an injured party as a result of governmental negligence. Some states have statutes (tort claim acts) that require compliance as a prerequisite to recovery of damages. By engaging in risk management, administrators can transfer risk from the school district and its employees to an insurance company. Consequently, districts should purchase all-risk property insurance, comprehensive liability insurance, and errors and omissions liability insurance for teachers, administrators, and school board members (Kowalski, 2006).

Protection for educators against personal liability varies across states. For tort liability purposes, state laws typically distinguish between *ministerial functions* and *discretionary functions*. The former involve compliance with mandates of legal authority not requiring the exercise of judgment (e.g., following state child abuse laws); the latter involve the exercise of professional judgment, formulation of school policy, setting of goals, and planning. States often permit immunity from torts in relation to discretionary acts, but hold school personnel responsible for ministerial acts (e.g., failing to report child abuse as required by a state law).

Defamation. The most relevant tort related to PR is defamation. This law involves communication and pertains to an injury or invasion of a person’s interest in his or her good reputation, name, and character by a false and defamatory communication concerning that person (American Law Institute, 1986). Defamation also can be an offense against a legal entity other than a person, for example, against a corporation (Moore, 1999). The offense can occur in written form (*libel*) or in verbal form (*slander*).

In seeking to keep the community informed of programs, needs, and problems, school officials may use various communication methods and channels. School PR, applied correctly, is a two-way, symmetrical process; therefore, school officials and personnel are encouraged to exchange information with various stakeholders openly and continuously. At this level of communicative interaction, misinformation, propaganda, and false statements may occur, even when unintentional.

Cases involving alleged defamatory communication among parents, students, citizens, and school authorities and related to school matters have been litigated, but proving defamation is difficult. Two defenses are possible: an *absolute privilege* and a *conditional privilege*. The former completely excuses what may be considered a defamatory statement. Statements made in the performance of legislative, judicial, or executive duties and in official proceedings are usually covered by this defense (American Law Institute, 1986). Accordingly, statements made by school board members and superintendents in the course of evaluating school personnel are often protected by an absolute privilege (Reutter, 1985).

A conditional (or qualified) privilege excuses defamatory speech made in good faith and without malice. This legal concept, used extensively to defend school officials and employees, arises from common law and is pertinent to communications between parties sharing an interest or duty. The judiciary, noting the public's interest in education, has extended the qualified privilege to teachers engaged in evaluating students and to school administrators engaged in evaluating teachers and other employees (Reutter, 1985). This defense also is available to parents in relation to communication with school personnel about teacher performance and other matters directly bearing on the welfare of their children at school.

The Supreme Court in *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964) ruled that the First Amendment requires that a "public official" who files a defamation suit against critics (for example, individuals or the press) of his or her "official conduct" show that the defamatory statements were made with "actual malice" and that the defendant(s) made the statements with knowledge of their falsity or with reckless disregard of whether they were true or false. The courts have been divided on the issue of whether school administrators and teachers who have been defamed are public officials within the meaning of *Sullivan*. While the judicial trend has been toward not considering administrators and teachers as public officials, school board members, superintendents, and principals have been considered public figures (Alexander & Alexander, 2001). When viewed as private citizens, teachers need only prove that defamatory statements made against them are untruthful.

In disseminating information about the school to the community through the mass media, the *Sullivan* (1964) ruling concerning defamatory communication is applicable. In the aftermath of *Sullivan*, defamation liability is extremely difficult to prove against the media when the defamatory communication concerns a public figure or official. This in no way, however, obviates the need for school officials to practice honest, well-researched journalism.

Constitutional Torts

Constitutional law also is relevant to PR. Examples include issues pertaining to (a) student discipline; (b) freedom of speech, religion, assembly, and the press; (c) voting rights; and (d) invasion of privacy, due process, and equal protection. School personnel who interfere with individual federal constitutional rights may be liable to the party injured in an action known as a *constitutional tort*. Constitutional torts protect and secure individual rights under the U.S. Constitution from being restricted by state laws. As is the case with other legal actions, the number of constitutional tort actions brought against schools (or school

personnel) has increased dramatically over time. The legal authority for maintaining a constitutional tort against a school district is found in the *Civil Rights Act of 1871*, which was codified in the federal laws as Title 42 of the U.S. Code shortly after the Civil War. Congress intended that awards under this law would deter the deprivation of the constitutional rights of newly freed African American citizens.

The provision of Title 42 most often used by plaintiffs to bring constitutional tort actions against school districts is 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Section 1983 provides in part:

Every person who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom or usage, of any state or Territory, subjects or causes to be subjected any citizen of the United States or other person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws shall be liable to the party injured in an action at law.

In *Monell v. Department of Social Services of New York* (1978), the U.S. Supreme Court held that Section 1983 suits could be brought against government units, including school boards. However, the Court held that government bodies cannot be held liable under Section 1983 on a respondent superior theory, whereby employers are liable for the acts of their employees. Therefore, school districts are liable under Section 1983 for a constitutional wrong committed by an employee only when the employee's action represents well-established custom or official policy of the school district.

In *Wood v. Strickland* (1975), a case involving student discipline, the U.S. Supreme Court held that individuals, including school board members, could be held liable for committing constitutional torts. Before *Wood v. Strickland*, school employees had been completely immune from Section 1983 actions. However, in this case, the Court granted school employees "good faith immunity." The Court said that a school board member or school employee loses the immunity and may be liable for damages under Section 1983 if "he knew or reasonably should have known that the action he took within his sphere of official responsibility would violate the constitutional rights of the students affected" (*Wood*, p. 322). In *Harlow v. Fitzgerald* (1982), the Court explained that as long as a school employee's action does not "violate clearly established statutory or constitutional rights of which a reasonable person would have known" (p. 818), he or she will not be held liable under Section 1983.

The number of student-initiated Section 1983 lawsuits against schools and school personnel dramatically increased during the 1990s (Alexander & Alexander, 2001). Many of the cases involved charges of sexual misconduct, peer-to-peer sexual harassment, enforcement of "zero tolerance" policies, and student-to-student violence that purportedly was not prevented by school officials.

Political Speech

As described in Chapter 1, an effective PR program requires ongoing communication between school personnel and external publics. In applying this process, administrators, teachers, and other employees may express views on matters related to schools that differ from official positions taken by the school board and superintendent. Although employees who do this are likely to view their comments as constructive and necessary, board members and the superintendent may disagree. When such disagreements occur, an employee's right to criticize becomes an intricate issue.

Prior to the 1960s, public employment, including that of teachers, was considered a privilege, rather than a right. Accordingly, teachers were expected to limit and give away their First Amendment rights to their employers. However, during the 1960s, with the public's attention focused on individual rights, the courts determined that the "privilege doctrine" was inappropriate, and the relationship between teachers and school boards began to change (Alexander & Alexander, 2001). The U.S. Supreme Court in *Pickering v. Board of Education of Township High School District 205* (1968) established the legal principle that public school teachers have the First Amendment right of freedom of expression. In *Pickering*, a school board terminated the employment of a teacher for writing a letter to a local newspaper criticizing the school superintendent and school board for spending public funds on athletic programs without informing the district's taxpayers of their decisions; the letter was published. The Court applied a "balance of interests" test and ruled in favor of the teacher. In so doing, the Court recognized the right of teachers as citizens to express their views on matters of public concern. A teacher's right of speech and expression, however, is not unlimited. If comments seriously damage the relationship between employer and employee or are deliberately or recklessly false or seriously impede the educational mission of the school, then the exercise of such speech may be grounds for dismissal (Kowalski & Benway, 1979). However, the burden of proving any of these matters rests with the employer (i.e., the school district).

Where an educator's First Amendment right is at issue, the judiciary uses a three-step analysis:

1. The court must determine if the teacher's speech is constitutionally protected. Here the court determines whether the statements made by the teacher, taken as a whole, are on a matter of public concern.
2. The court must ascertain whether the school board's dismissal was motivated by the teacher's exercise of his or her First Amendment rights.
3. The school district must be given an opportunity to demonstrate that it would have taken the same action in the absence of the teacher's constitutionally protected conduct.

A federal district court used this three-step analysis to determine that a school district's policy prohibiting criticism from staff members other than to the person being criticized, the principal, or the superintendent or at a school board meeting was unconstitutional. As written, the policy prohibited speech that numerous courts had already determined was protected. The court found that this policy failed to narrowly define criticism and that the *Webster's Dictionary* definition of criticism included activity that the school admittedly did not seek to prohibit; therefore, the policy did not provide employees with fair warning as to what could and could not be said (*Westbrook v. Teton County School District*, 1996).

Privacy Rights

Although the U.S. Constitution does not expressly mention privacy, the U.S. Supreme Court has interpreted this document to include a fundamental right of privacy. A teacher's conduct outside the classroom may be the basis for cancellation of his or her contract or

other disciplinary action. The problem in cases involving protection of personal privacy is to arrive at a balance among the privacy interests of the teacher, community morals, and the school's interest in maintaining an appropriate educational environment. Teachers have been discharged from public school employment for matters arising in their private lives that conflict with community sentiment.

Four separate torts have been associated with an invasion of privacy. According to Moore (1999), they include the following:

1. *Appropriation*—illegally using a person's name or likeness for benefit or advantage of another;
2. *Intrusion*—illegally violating an individual's physical solitude or seclusion;
3. *Public disclosure*—illegally revealing objectionable private facts about an individual; and
4. *Damaging publicity*—illegally placing an individual in a false light in the public eye.

Although any of these torts may be applicable to districts and schools, those related to objectionable facts and damaging publicity are especially noteworthy.

States commonly have tenure laws that variously set forth grounds for terminating teachers. Immorality is one common reason for dismissal that often leads to conflict between privacy rights and community values. In an often-cited case involving allegations of teacher immorality, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court defined immorality as "not essentially confined to a deviation from sex morality; it may be such a course of conduct as offends the morals of the community and is a bad example to the youth whose ideals a teacher is supposed to foster and to evaluate" (*Horosko v. Mount Pleasant Township School District*, 1939, p. 868). Indeed, there have been a number of cases in which the dismissal of tenured teachers or administrators for immoral behavior has been upheld even though sexual behavior was not involved (e.g., purposefully telling untruths about a school superintendent and cheating on employment-related examinations) (Kowalski & Benway, 1979).

In 1974, on the basis of widespread allegations of abuse and misuse of student records, Congress enacted the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act* (FERPA, 2000, commonly referred to as the *Buckley Amendment*). The handling of student records by school officials was criticized on several grounds, including the release of information to third parties such as police, news media, social service agencies, and vendors without the consent of parents; failure to provide parents with access to records; and maintenance of inaccurate records. In response, Congress passed legislation that provided substantive and procedural safeguards for the privacy rights of students and their parents. FERPA grants parents and students, 18 years of age or older, a legal right of access to such records. Within a reasonable period of time from their request, parents must be allowed to inspect and review (and make copies at their own expense) all records directly related to their child. In no event may the school stall for more than 45 days from the parent's initial request for records. With respect to inaccurate records, FERPA provides parents with an avenue to amend records, and if not satisfied, parents may request an impartial hearing on the issue. Parents may also file complaints concerning violations of FERPA with the U.S. Department of Education. Schools found not in compliance with FERPA face the ultimate sanction of losing federal aid (LaMorte, 1996).

FERPA mandates that most data contained in student records be kept confidential. Personally identifiable information contained in school records may be released only with written consent from the student's parents. The most common exception to rules regarding confidentiality is that student records may be made available to school officials, including teachers within the school district where the child attends school, who have legitimate educational interest in the student. Schools must keep a record of individuals and agencies that are given access to the records of a student. Under FERPA, public schools may release general information to the public, including a student's name, address, telephone listing, date and place of birth, major field of study, participation in activities and sports, dates of attendance, and degrees and awards received.

In addition to the privacy rights protected by FERPA, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA, 2004) contains specific confidentiality requirements covering the records of students with disabilities. Moreover, most states have enacted legislation according to confidentiality rights in records containing personal information kept by state agencies, including public schools. In some instances, state privacy statutes grant more privacy rights to students than does FERPA. The U.S. Supreme Court recently weighed in on a FERPA issue. The Court determined that the practice of students grading other students' papers does not violate FERPA. The Court emphasized it was answering the narrow question of whether peer grading violates FERPA (*Owasso v. Falvo*, 2002).

Religion and Public Schools

The relationship between religion and the public schools is an extremely important, delicate, and controversial issue in the context of PR. Wide-ranging issues of community concern such as prayer, Bible reading, the distribution of religious materials, student-initiated devotional meetings on school property, and the use of school facilities by religious groups are among the thorniest church–state separation issues.

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution provides that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The majority of church–state cases involving public education arise under this Establishment Clause. In most church–state cases since 1970, the U.S. Supreme Court has applied a three-part test derived from the Court's ruling in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971). Although the so-called *Lemon Test* has been criticized by some respected jurists, the Court has not eliminated the test from Establishment Clause adjudication. This test includes the following standards:

1. The governmental action or statute must have a secular purpose.
2. Its primary effect must neither advance nor inhibit religion.
3. The governmental action must avoid excessive governmental entanglement with religion.

In two landmark decisions in the early 1960s, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down school-sponsored Bible reading and daily prayers. The decisions were and continue to be controversial and unpopular with certain segments of the public. Supported by popular opinion, almost half of the states enacted legislation permitting some form of prayer (e.g., silent meditation or voluntary prayer) in public schools. In *Wallace v. Jaffree* (1985), the Court found an Alabama statute calling for a daily one-minute period of silence for meditation or prayer

to violate the First Amendment. However, the Court suggested that a statute authorizing a moment of silence for meditation or prayer during the school day might pass constitutional muster if the state legislature's intent in passing the law was not motivated by a religious purpose. In 1997, the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals said that public schools may begin each day with a state-mandated moment of silence (*Bown v. Gwinnett*, 1997). However, the U.S. Supreme Court held that a school district's policy of permitting an invocation over the loudspeaker before football games, by an individual elected by the student body, violated the Establishment Clause (*Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe*, 2000).

Graduation exercises also have become a subject of legal controversy. A national debate over having prayers at graduation erupted after the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Lee v. Weisman* (1992), struck down school-arranged, clergy-led invocations and benedictions. The prayers contested in *Lee* were designated nondenominational and given by a local rabbi who was invited by the school principal. The Court found the active participation of school authorities in organizing the prayer, the students' susceptibility to peer pressure, and the importance of graduation ceremonies to students (resulting in coercive pressure to attend) coalesced to create a violation of the Establishment Clause. However, the Court left unresolved the constitutionality of student-organized and student-led prayers at graduation. Indeed, in 1993, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review a Fifth Circuit decision that let stand a Texas policy permitting student-initiated invocations and benedictions at high school graduation ceremonies (*Jones v. Clear Creek Independent School District*, 1992). The Eleventh Circuit subsequently held that a school district's policy of permitting a graduating student, elected by classmates, to deliver an unrestricted message of her choice at the beginning and/or closing of the graduation ceremonies did not on its face violate the Establishment Clause (*Adler v. Duval County School Board*, 2001).

Students, community groups, and organizations often request the use of school facilities for religious purposes. Legal precedent for such requests has been established by several cases. In 1990, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the *Equal Access Act* (1984), which permits student-initiated religious groups to meet on school premises during noninstructional time. In deciding *Board of Education of Westside Community Schools v. Mergens* (1990), the Court found that a public high school with at least one student group operating outside the prescribed curriculum must recognize a wide array of groups, regardless of the philosophical, political, or religious content of their members' speech.

In *Lamb's Chapel v. Center Moriches School District* (1993), the U.S. Supreme Court held that a school board's refusal to permit a church access to school facilities, after hours, to show a film series on family and child-rearing issues was unconstitutional. A close analysis of the case reveals that the Court ruled narrowly on the issue of public access to school facilities for religious purposes.

The U.S. Supreme Court also upheld the right of an outside adult-led group to actively preach and provide religious instruction to elementary school students on school grounds immediately after the school day. The Court affirmed the right of the religious club to be on school grounds on the same basis as any other club or activity (*Good News Club v. Milford Central School District*, 2001).

One other volatile church-state separation issue involves the distribution of religious literature by students on school property. Beginning in the late 1980s, most courts have held that students have a free speech right to distribute religious materials on school property.

Schools maintain the right to set reasonable rules regarding the time, place, and manner of distribution of religious literature on school premises (*Harless v. Darr*, 1996; *Peck v. Upshur County Board of Education*, 1998). Despite substantial previous litigation, lawsuits involving religion and the public schools continue to be filed. In many of these cases, political issues have been infused. For example, community standards and preferences are often weighed in relation to individual constitutional rights (Cibulka & Myers, 2008; Zirkel, 2008); when this occurs, tensions between societal interests and individual rights are fueled (Levin, 1999).

Community Values and Curriculum

Curricular decisions also can ignite legal disputes. The role of the community in shaping the public school curriculum has long been recognized (e.g., Tyler, 1949). Primarily after 1970, and especially during the 1990s, parents and interest groups aligned with myriad causes attempted to influence the content of programs provided by public schools. According to the Office for Intellectual Freedom, there were close to 5,000 challenges to materials in schools or school libraries between 1990 and 2000. Approximately 1,140 challenges were made to “sexually explicit” material and 1,013 to material considered to use “offensive language” (Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2002).

The Seventh Circuit upheld a school board in a case where parents attempted to prevent the elementary school from using the *Impressions* reading series as the main supplemental program in Grades K–5. Parents contended that the reading series violated the First Amendment by promoting wizards, witches, and other creatures with supernatural powers, thus indoctrinating children in anti-Christian values. The court reiterated that schools have broad discretion in curriculum matters and that courts should interfere only where constitutional rights are directly implicated. The court rejected the notion that stories with witches, goblins, and Halloween violated the Establishment Clause, holding instead that Halloween is an American tradition and is a purely secular affair (*Fleischfresser v. Directors of School District 200*, 1994).

Courts have granted school boards and administrators broad discretion to determine curricular matters. However, such discretion is not absolute because the courts also consider the constitutional rights of students, teachers, and parents. Most state legislatures have granted primary responsibility for public school education to local school boards, which generally have considerable power in regulating the instructional program. Although local school authorities have broad powers concerning curriculum, textbooks, and other educational matters, the U.S. Supreme Court made it clear in *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pica* (1982) that books may not be removed from a school library by school officials if they are motivated by an intent to suppress or deny access to ideas with which they disagree. At the same time, the Court maintained that school boards could remove books from a school library if motivated by the “pervasive vulgarity of the book,” its “educational unsuitability,” or its “bad taste” or “irrelevance,” or by age and grade inappropriateness. Alexander and Alexander (2001) warn that the direction of the courts in the 1990s on issues related to the curriculum

appear[s] to place less emphasis on a broadly conceived standard that secures the expansion of knowledge preventing the “casting of a pall of orthodoxy” and allows more flexibility in allowing curriculum decisions to be made on the basis of local school board judgment and possibly, local political pressure. (p. 289)

Copyright

The dissemination of information about districts and schools via print, audio, and visual media activities is an integral part of PR. In preparing such materials, school administrators need to know and understand copyright law. Copyright protects the ownership and use of original works of authorship and provides the creator of an original work control over many activities, including the right to reproduce, distribute, display, perform, adapt, and translate the work (17 U.S.C. §§ 101 *et seq.*).

When the U.S. Congress passed the *Copyright Act of 1976*, substantially amending the *Copyright Act of 1909*, the concept of copyright became more comprehensive and complex. Federal protection now applies to any original work, fixed in any tangible form of expression. Registration of the copyright with the U.S. Copyright Office is not a condition of a valid copyright; however, registration is a prerequisite to filing a copyright infringement action. Copyright law extends to such items as literary works, computer programs, multimedia works and lyrics, dramatic works, graphic and sculptural works, sound recordings, and audiovisual works. Significantly, copyright does not cover ideas, procedures, and concepts (17 U.S.C. §§ 101, 102).

The 1976 copyright law places some limitations on the exclusive rights enjoyed by copyright owners. Section 107 of the act sets forth the “fair use” doctrine, a component that is particularly relevant to educators. This doctrine states in pertinent part that “the fair use of a copyrighted work, including such use by reproduction for purposes such as: criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use), scholarship or research is not an infringement of copyright” (17 U.S.C. § 107). Further guidelines for educators regarding the reproduction of multiple copies of copyrighted works for educational purposes (cited by courts) are found in *Classroom Guidelines of the Fair Use Doctrine* (1976). These guidelines represent part of the legislative history of the 1976 act, but are not considered part of the law. They permit educators to make multiple copies (not to exceed in any event more than one copy per pupil in a course) for classroom discussion, provided that the copying meets the tests of brevity and spontaneity and the cumulative effect test and that all copies contain a notice of copyright. It is clear that the copying of anthologies containing substantial portions of copyrighted books or articles without the permission of the copyright owner even for educational purposes violates the fair use doctrine (*Basic Books v. Kinko's Graphics Corp.*, 1991). Many persons wrongly assume that they can use up to 10% of any document without consent; in truth, there is no specified amount “either [in] statute or in case law” (Moore, 1999, p. 523). Often publishers state their standard for fair use either in books or other publications or on their Web page.

Computer software also may be protected under the copyright law. The owner of a copy of a computer program may make copies of the program only when the new copy is created as an essential step in using the program in conjunction with a machine or when the new copy is for archival purposes only. All archival copies of the program must be destroyed when the program is no longer used (17 U.S.C. §§ 117, 2002). It is clearly illegal for a school to load a copy of a program on one machine and “boot” that copy into the fixed memory of its microcomputers. The state of the law in the area of computer software is complex and rapidly evolving. School districts are well advised to inform teachers and students of the changing law regarding the use of copyrighted software.

The Internet has become a major instructional tool in schools all across America. The Internet and the World Wide Web have generated an array of additional copyright concerns. Daniel (1998) summarized copyright law as it impacts Internet use by schools, and he suggested that the following provisions be included in acceptable use policies:

1. Students may use computing facilities for educational purposes only. Acceptable use of the Internet refers to activities that support teaching and learning.
2. Students must observe standard copyright restrictions, which are the same as for printed materials.
3. Students may not send or receive copyrighted material without permission.
4. The unauthorized installation, use, storage, or distribution of copyrighted software or materials on a school district computer is prohibited.

Moore (1999) identified several major *defenses to copyright infringement*. One is called innocent infringement, and it is used typically by a person who uses copyrighted material without permission on the basis of a good-faith assumption that the work is not copyrighted because a copyright notice is not visible. Other defenses center on the nature of consent (e.g., there is a dispute between plaintiff and defendant regarding the consent agreement) and expiration of copyright (e.g., there is a dispute between plaintiff and defendant regarding the legality of the copyright at the time the material was used). As shown in the case study at the beginning of this chapter, copyright issues, and especially those involving cyberspace, are not always clear. For example, using artwork, organizational plans, and content from another person's or organization's Web page without permission can result in a serious legal problem. The safe alternative is to obtain written consent from the copyright holder and consult with legal counsel for the school district regarding your actions.

ETHICS

Ethics are commonly described as a set of nonlegal standards that guide human relationships. Professional ethics represent the consensus of experts on the human responsibilities and obligations for practitioners in a given profession. References to ethics suggest that the term relates to moral action, human character, and a sense of duty; that it pertains to what is fair, equitable, good, and professionally right, conforming to professional standards of conduct.

The distinction between illegal and unethical behavior is exemplified by copyright violation and *plagiarism*. The former, already discussed, involves the use of protected intellectual property without permission and outside the fair use standard. The latter involves stealing and passing off the ideas or words of another as one's own. For example, assume a student plagiarizes by copying a term paper that he or she bought from a college student. If the copied term paper is copyrighted, then the student has broken the law and the ethical code of the school. In this case, he or she could receive a conviction and be expelled or suspended from school. If the term paper was not copyrighted, the student can still be expelled or suspended for breaking the school's code of conduct even though the act was not illegal.

Ethics in School Administration

During the past several decades, American educators have shown a growing interest in, and a genuine concern for, ethical and moral practice. Textbooks on ethics for administrators (e.g., Begley, 2004; Rebores, 2001; Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 1988), the inclusion of ethics courses in educational administration preparation programs, and a proliferation of articles devoted to administrative ethics (e.g., Glanz, 2008; Sergiovanni, 2005) evidence the added attention that has been given to this topic.

Essentially, all decisions made by district and school administrators have had an ethical component because they were “rooted in moral codes and cultural values” (Crowson, 1989, p. 418). In the past, however, superintendents and principals responded to moral dilemmas by relying on principles shared by all or most stakeholders in homogeneous communities. For example, ethical standards for teacher behavior were set mainly by community standards. Primarily because of the social and political changes described in the previous chapter, such conditions no longer exist in many school systems. Today, most administrators experience “dilemmas or value conflict situations where consensus cannot be achieved” (Begley, 2009, p. 30). Consequently, the need for profession-based ethics, standards that have universal relevance and applicability, has intensified.

A line separating legal and ethical issues in school administration is neither crisp nor clear (Kowalski, 2003). Incident-specific legal issues related to teacher dismissal, values in-oculation, freedom of the press, student discipline, the Internet, parental rights, copyright infringement, student and teacher privacy rights, student and teacher free speech rights, compliance with federal and state laws and regulations, and teacher evaluation also pose ethical questions (Moore, 1999). In addition, policy and governance matters relate to ethical and moral choices.

Starratt (1991) contends that the educational program “is supposed to serve moral purposes (the nurturing of the human, social and intellectual growth of the youngsters)” (p. 187). Summarizing the role of ethics in school administration, Reitzug (1994) adds that administrator dispositions toward ethics affect the entire school. As an example, principals often determine which ethical issues they will analyze, and their choices influence school culture and character.

One of the most cited ethical typologies for school administrators was developed by Starratt (1991). His framework includes three perspectives for identifying, evaluating, and making ethical decisions: the ethic of critique, the ethic of justice, and the ethic of caring.

1. *Ethic of critique.* An examination of the structural (managerial) issues involved in educational administration, such as bias in the workplace, is central to this ethic. Primary issues include the use of power, subordination, and discrimination.
2. *Ethic of justice.* This ethic is concerned with values such as individual rights, the common good, and democratic participation in school governance.
3. *Ethic of caring.* This ethic emphasizes human connection and relationships. The ethic of caring provides a perspective for dealing with a school's internal and external constituencies, and as such, it is especially pertinent to public relations.

The Josephson Institute for the Advancement of Ethics (Josephson, 2002), an organization providing materials and workshops for school administrators, identifies six pillars of character in relation to making ethical decisions:

1. Trustworthiness (including honesty, integrity, reliability, and loyalty)
2. Respect (including civility, courtesy, and decency; dignity and autonomy; tolerance and acceptance)
3. Responsibility (including accountability, pursuit of excellence, and self-restraint)
4. Fairness (including impartiality and equity)
5. Caring (including compassion and respect)
6. Citizenship (including democratic principles)

Ethics in PR

The search for the meaning and the practice of ethics in any profession generally begins with an examination of the profession's *code of ethics*. An ethics code is a set of standards and guidelines aimed at promoting the ideals of social responsibility within the context of a profession. From the standpoint of school administration generally and PR specifically, it is important to note that most of the professional mass communications organizations have ethical codes. Compliance with these codes is generally voluntary. Both the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) have established ethical principles for communication professionals.

The PRSA's Member Code of Ethics identifies six standards of practice:

1. Protect and advance the free flow of accurate and truthful information.
2. Foster informed decision making through open communication.
3. Protect confidential and private information.
4. Promote healthy and fair competition among professionals.
5. Avoid conflicts of interest.
6. Work to strengthen the public's trust in the profession (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.).

The entire code is available on the PRSA Web page at <http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/>.

NSPRA adopted its code of ethics in 1981. This document stipulates that PR specialists working with schools should:

- ◆ Be guided constantly by the pursuit of the public interest through truth, accuracy, good taste, and fairness; follow good judgment in releasing information; not intentionally disseminate misinformation or confidential data; avoid actions that lessen personal, professional, or organizational reputation.
- ◆ Give primary loyalty to one's employing organization, insisting on the right to give advisory counsel in accordance with sound PR ideas and practices; cooperate with other groups while avoiding conflicts with primary responsibilities; object to untenable policies or activities.
- ◆ Be aware of personal influence, but avoid making promises or granting unprofessional advantage to others; refrain from accepting special considerations for influences on

organizational decisions; avoid unauthorized use of organizational facilities, resources, or professional services for personal gain or for promotion of the candidacy of aspirants to elected offices; forego derogatory acts or utterances against other professionals.

- ◆ Recognize that effectiveness is dependent on integrity and regard for ideals of the profession; do not misrepresent professional qualifications; give credit for ideas and words borrowed from others; cooperate with professional colleagues to uphold and enforce this ethics code (National School Public Relations Association, n.d.).

The document then notes that members are expected to sever relationships with organizations or individuals if these relationships require conduct that violates the organization's ethical codes.

Baker and Martinson (2002) posit that effective PR practice is both ethical and proactive. They identified five principles that guide ethical persuasion:

1. *Truthfulness*—avoiding lies and half truths;
2. *Authenticity*—questioning motives involved with persuasion;
3. *Respect*—respecting individuals in the targeted audiences;
4. *Equity*—being fair; and
5. *Social responsibility*—considering the broader social interest.

The issue of social responsibility has become central to PR professionals. In this regard, experts, such as Seitel, argue that all organizations, including private enterprises, have a responsibility to their communities. This includes such contributions as maintaining a healthful environment, providing jobs for people of color, and generally enhancing the quality of life (Stone, 2005).

Kruckeberg (2000) contends that PR ethics need to move from being treated as tactical statements to being treated as strategic statements. That is, practitioners must think strategically about their behavior and their organization; this perspective has a moral connotation. In this vein, Kruckeberg also focuses on social responsibility:

In sum, consideration of strategic ethics requires that public relations practitioners look more broadly, more strategically, at their role as interpreters and ethicists and social policymakers in guiding organizational behavior and take strategic responsibility in influencing and reconciling public perceptions of their organizations within a global context. (p. 39)

With respect to schools, this means that administrators engaging in PR need to be guided by a commitment to making schools moral institutions that serve society and improve the quality of community.

SUMMARY

Public relations practice is shaped by the law, both in policymaking and in application. School administrators interact with internal and external publics in different forms and through various activities, and the law applies to PR in ways that reflect those differences. In general, legal problems are broadly categorized as liability and constitutional torts.

Ethics also play an important role in school public relations. In a communicative context, school administrators shape information, determine the extent to which they share information, and decide how they will use information. All of these decisions have ethical and moral dimensions (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2007). More recently, PR and school administration scholars have emphasized the issue of social responsibility. When PR is viewed in a social context, ethics extend beyond individual compliance with accepted behavioral standards; practitioners are expected to contribute to making their organizations moral and to ensuring that their organizations improve society and the quality of life for all citizens (Kruckeberg, 2000).

QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

CASE STUDY

1. What is copyright law?
2. How does copyright law affect school Web pages?
3. What errors did Maynard make in constructing the Web page for his school?
4. What could have prevented these errors?
5. What defenses are available to Maynard if he becomes a defendant in a lawsuit?
6. To what extent is Dr. Weigand legally and professionally responsible for the problem?

CHAPTER

7. What interests do the courts balance in cases involving a teacher dismissal?
8. What is defamation?
9. What is the difference between conditional and qualified immunity?
10. What is the difference between libel and slander?
11. Assume that a high school principal writes an article in the school newspaper explaining that he recommended the dismissal of an English teacher because she consistently used unacceptable language in the classroom. To support his decision, he adds information about the teacher's background, including the fact she had been arrested for shoplifting when she was a sophomore in college. Discuss whether including this information violated the dismissed teacher's privacy right.
12. Since public schools are government agencies, is social responsibility a greater issue for them than it is for executives in private corporations? Discuss the issues that are pertinent to answering this question.

REFERENCES

- Adler v. Duval County School Board*, 250 F.3d 1330 (11th Cir. 2001).
- Alexander, K., & Alexander, D. (2001). *American public school law* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: West-Wadsworth Publishing.
- American Law Institute. (1986). *Restatement of torts* (2nd ed.). St. Paul, MN: American Law Institute Publishers.
- Baker, S., & Martinson, D. L. (2002). Out of the red-light district: Five principles for ethically proactive public relations. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 47(3), 15–19.

9 CHAPTER

Community Relations

CASE STUDY: A MENTOR'S QUESTIONABLE ADVICE

After becoming superintendent of the Rock Ridge School District, Nadine Scott identified four long-term goals. One of them was to improve leadership stability in a system where the average tenure for building principals has been less than 5 years. The first strategy she initiated to achieve this goal was a mentoring program, and the first principal to be assigned a mentor was Dr. Karen Lewis, principal of North Middle School. Dr. Lewis had been a teacher for 12 years and an assistant principal for 4 years, but had not been employed in the Rock Ridge district previously. Her assigned mentor was Edgar Palmer, the district's longest serving principal.

Rock Ridge administrators fondly refer to Edgar as the "sage." During his 28-year tenure as principal of Adams Elementary School, he had managed to outlast five superintendents. When Karen Lewis asked him why he has been able to survive long-term in a district plagued by administrator turnover, he answered, "Hard work, positive relationships with teachers, concern for students, and good old common sense."

A newly employed principal was required to meet with his or her mentor at least once a month during the initial year of employment. At that point, the mentor and protégé submitted separate written reports to the superintendent; the report had to include a recommendation to end or extend the mentor-protégé relationship.

Edgar was delighted with his new role as mentor. He needed little encouragement when it came to offering advice, especially to other principals. He offered plenty of it to Karen. Knowing that she had recently completed a doctoral degree in school administration, he periodically reminded her that he acquired most of his knowledge from dealing with real problems and not from books.

Karen liked Edgar personally, but she disagreed with some of his suggestions. At first, she wanted to be tactful; so, she would listen politely when he espoused his philosophy of school administration. After a few months, however, she felt compelled to challenge his suggestion that encouraging parents and other stakeholders to become directly involved in schools was a bad idea. Specifically, he told her, "I've lived in Rock Ridge a long time. Despite what you may read or have been told in administration classes, most residents rely on us to run the schools. Sure, there are a few malcontents, but they usually have an axe to grind."

"Do you think most parents are pleased with our schools?" she inquired.

"Absolutely. But you have to be careful when it comes to parents because some of them are troublemakers. Good parents respect teachers and administrators, and they don't challenge what they do. They trust us with their children. The complainers, on the other hand, think they know more than we do. Well, they're wrong—but, of course, it's best not to tell them that. So I just try to stay away from them. Unfortunately, that's not always possible. Sometimes you can't avoid meeting with them—but when that happens, I smile and basically ignore their advice."

Initially, Karen elected not to tell Edgar she disagreed with him on the issue of parent relationships. She discussed his philosophy, however, with two trusted colleagues, a for-

mer professor and the principal with whom she had worked when she had been an assistant principal. Both concluded that the advice given to her was imprudent. Although Karen felt reassured after hearing this, she remained unwilling to dispute Edgar's beliefs, primarily because he did not appear to be open-minded and because he appeared to have political power. For example, his two most vocal supporters were the president of the teachers' association (a third-grade teacher employed under his supervision) and a school board member (his nephew). Principal Lewis concluded that the best strategy was to smile and ignore his advice.

INTRODUCTION

In the past, many principals were socialized to believe that citizen involvement in schools was counterproductive, largely because it would generate conflict. Today, however, effective practitioners have a different perspective—one predicated on the realization that stakeholder participation in public education is appropriate. Philosophically, civic engagement is fundamental to democracy; politically, involvement is typically advantageous to garnering economic support.

As pointed out in Chapter 1, school administrators in the past have often referred to PR as “community relations,” primarily because they believed that the former term was politically incorrect. In truth, PR “strives to help organizations develop and preserve the variety of relationships that ensure long-term success” (Austin & Pinkleton, 2001, p. 5); therefore, it is a process broader than persuasion, press agency, and advertising. Holliday (1988) identified four core purposes or processes for establishing and maintaining positive relations with community stakeholders:

1. Promoting a school climate that is conducive to teaching and learning,
2. Encouraging a maximum level of parental involvement,
3. Building the public's knowledge of education as a means of garnering support, and
4. Involving citizens in collaborative projects, partnerships, and similar initiatives to maximize human and material resources.

His perspective is nested in two premises: that information leads to support and participation and that support and participation enhance productivity (i.e., student learning and overall school effectiveness). Unfortunately, trend lines for educational challenges and community participation in many low-performing schools have moved in the wrong direction; as the challenges have multiplied, participation has waned.

The content of this chapter addresses relationships between school personnel and community stakeholders. First, the nexus between relationships and communication is examined. Second, methods for improving community relations are discussed. Then, focused attention is given to constructing positive relationships with parents and other community stakeholders.

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- ◆ Explain why relationships are critical for principals.
- ◆ Explain the role communication plays in forging and maintaining relationships.
- ◆ Define school and community relations.
- ◆ Define a multicultural PR perspective.
- ◆ Explain the importance of principal-parent relationships.

RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION

The reluctance among some school administrators to develop relationships with others stems from misguided beliefs about organizational efficiency. Most notably, these administrators believe that interactions with employees and persons outside the organization produce conflict and the conflict then diminishes organizational efficiency (Hanson, 2003). For example, there is a school board in a small rural district that meets only once a month on a Saturday morning at 8:00 a.m. The board meetings are held in the superintendent's conference room, an area that provides no seating for visitors. The underlying purpose is to discourage local residents from attending.

In truth, conflict is inevitable in organizations, but its effect is not predetermined. Instead, the effects of conflict on a district or school are determined primarily by the manner in which it is managed (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). Recognizing this fact, forward-thinking administrators are disposed to capitalize on the positive by-products of conflict, especially in relation to pursuing organizational improvements. A positive perspective of relationships in schools was summarized by Uline, Tschannen-Moran, and Perez (2003):

Conflict is a natural part of collective human experience. In our efforts to cooperate with one another, we have differences of opinion about how best to accomplish our common goals. We seek to protect our individual interests within these efforts and forestall outside influences, fearing discord in the face of these conflicting forces. Conflict is often unsettling. It can leave participants shaken and ill at ease, so it is often avoided and suppressed. Yet conflict, when well managed, breathes life and energy into relationships and can cause individuals to be much more innovative and productive. (p. 782)

Typically, administrators committed to involving stakeholders are guided by a mix of philosophical, professional, and political convictions. Philosophically, they believe that citizens have a right to be informed about public schools (Gotts & Purnell, 1985), and therefore they accept democratic administration as a normative standard (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2007; Miretzky, 2004). Professionally, they rely on empirical evidence showing that stakeholder participation enhances authentic reform (Crowson & Boyd, 2001; Fullan, 2001). And politically, they realize that change is less probable in a community in which stakeholders are alienated and unwilling to financially support improvement efforts (Duke, 2004; Hoyle, Björk, Collier, & Glass, 2005).

Unfortunately, administrators do not always understand that relationships influence school improvement efforts and that PR is actually all about building and maintaining positive relationships. The quality of relationships we find in schools is determined by four variables described by Huang (1997):

- ◆ *Control mutuality*—mutual agreements about power sharing.
- ◆ *Trust*—the extent to which persons in a relationship trust each other.
- ◆ *Satisfaction*—feelings that the relationship is successful and mutually beneficial; and
- ◆ *Commitment*—feelings that the relationship is sufficiently important to warrant effort and resources.

Ill-advised administrators attempt to manipulate or otherwise control relationships unilaterally. For example, a principal may prey upon weak teachers by demanding their loyalty in return for “administrative protection.” Such behavior also has been observed in relationships between superintendents and school board members (Kowalski, 2006). This asymmetrical approach to personal associations usually proves counterproductive—that is, it is more likely to produce misunderstandings and dissatisfaction rather than goodwill and support (Grunig & Huang, 2000).

Positive relationships are capable of producing three types of capital deemed essential for school reform:

1. *Political capital* in the form of increased financial support (Valenzuela & Dornbush, 1994),
2. *Social capital* in the form of positive dispositions and interrelationships among citizens (Smylie & Hart, 1999), and
3. *Human capital* in the form of increased citizen knowledge and skills (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990).

The association between these products and school reform is illustrated in Figure 9–1.

Given the importance of relationships, administrators need to know circumstances that cultivate productive and unproductive associations. Most notably, they need to recognize the detrimental effects of intermittent and inconsistent communication. As an example, the only time some superintendents and principals communicate with or seek input from community stakeholders is when they are driven by ulterior motives—such as persuading citizens to vote for a tax increase. Astute stakeholders recognize such behavior for what it is—an attempt to manipulate (Kowalski, 2005).

Positive associations are more probable when persons engage in *relational communication*, an interpersonal and symmetrical paradigm focusing on participant perceptions of exchanges (Littlejohn, 1992). Interpersonal communication involves two-way exchanges in which persons influence one another’s behavior over and above their organizational role,

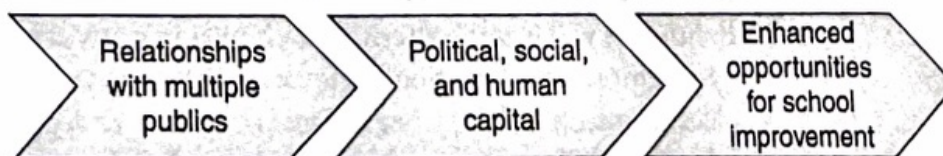


FIGURE 9–1
Relationships, Capital, and School Reform

rank, and status (Cappella, 1987). Symmetrical communication is intended to benefit all interactants (Grunig, 1989), and therefore the interactants behave similarly to minimize their formal authority and actual power differences (Burgoon & Hale, 1984). The purpose of relational communication is to maintain positive relationships between school employees and stakeholder publics (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000).

When executed properly, relational communication produces mutual understandings, mutual influence, negotiation, openness, credibility, and trust. These characteristics are integral to positive organizational development (i.e., pursuing change on the basis of known community needs), and organizational equilibrium (i.e., providing services that meet community needs) is more probable (Toth, 2000) for at least two reasons: First, administrators who communicate interpersonally and symmetrically are better able to identify and address unmet needs (Conrad, 1994; Kowalski et al., 2007). Second, communities satisfied with their public schools are more likely to treat these institutions as assets rather than liabilities (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000).

IMPROVING COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Even in its formative years, public education was expected to maintain a symbiotic relationship with local communities. This belief reflected a philosophical disposition centered primarily in the value of liberty (Fowler, 2000). During the last 2 decades of the 20th century, however, a mix of political and professional convictions was responsible for a renewed interest in school–community relations. The transformed attention emanated primarily from the following conclusions:

- ◆ The percentage of citizens who have no direct contact with schools has grown incrementally over the past 3 or 4 decades, producing a wide gap between public education and the public (Richardson, 1997).
- ◆ Public schools have deteriorated and their ineffectiveness jeopardizes the country's economic welfare (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).
- ◆ Educators are either incapable of or unwilling to independently reform schools (Sarason, 1996).
- ◆ School improvement will not occur unless a broad base of stakeholders participates in and supports proposed changes (Bauman, 1996).

Noting the public's appetite for reform during the last 2 decades of the previous century, Banach and Frye (1996) made three predictions:

1. The public will abandon reforms that do not appear effective and then demand alternatives to traditional public schools (e.g., school choice or charter schools).
2. Politicians will legalize alternative change initiatives intended to create competition for traditional public schools; they will do so not because they are convinced that the ideas are effective, but rather because they want to appease a disgruntled constituency.
3. Educators will not respond well to these alternative initiatives because the governance structure, the political environment, and the existing policies and procedures in local school systems are not conducive to change.

These and similar forecasts fueled democratic approaches to school reform—that is, strategies that required community involvement.

Building and maintaining community relations are arguably broad topics. Williams and Chavkin (1989) found that most successful programs shared the following characteristics:

- ◆ Guidance by written policy,
- ◆ Support from administrators,
- ◆ Training for both staff and parents,
- ◆ Use of partnership approaches,
- ◆ Two-way communication,
- ◆ Networking, and
- ◆ Ongoing evaluation and modifications.

In this portion of the chapter, the processes of identifying and analyzing publics and of communicating with them are explored. Focused attention is then given to communication and community diversity.

Identifying and Analyzing Publics

Public schools serve multiple publics, and defining them accurately is a prelude to improving relationships. Administrators should know the stakeholders with whom they need to cultivate relationships. A stakeholder public is defined here as any group that has a stake in the district or school in question (Richardson, 1997). Generally, publics are divided into four categories:

1. *Internal publics* (i.e., groups within the organization, such as teachers and students);
2. *External publics* (i.e., groups outside the organization, such as taxpayers);
3. *Media publics* (e.g., print and broadcast reporters and editors); and
4. *Regulatory publics* (e.g., governmental agencies that have authority to affect schools).

To qualify as a public in our context here, the population in question should be distinguishable, bound by one or more homogeneous characteristics, relevant to the welfare of public education, politically influential (or potentially influential), and accessible.

After publics are identified, they should be analyzed. The following are areas that are commonly assessed and evaluated:

- ◆ *Demographic analysis*—each public's characteristics, such as gender, age, income, or political disposition;
- ◆ *Cultural analysis*—each public's customs, rituals, values, and dispositions toward education;
- ◆ *Interest analysis*—each public's concerns, such as tax issues or quality of education issues;
- ◆ *Communication analysis*—each public's dominant language, communication channels, and normative communicative behavior;
- ◆ *Social-political analysis*—each public's social standing and political influence; and
- ◆ *Leadership analysis*—each public's leadership structure, including the key individuals who shape opinion and influence action.

Communicating with the Community

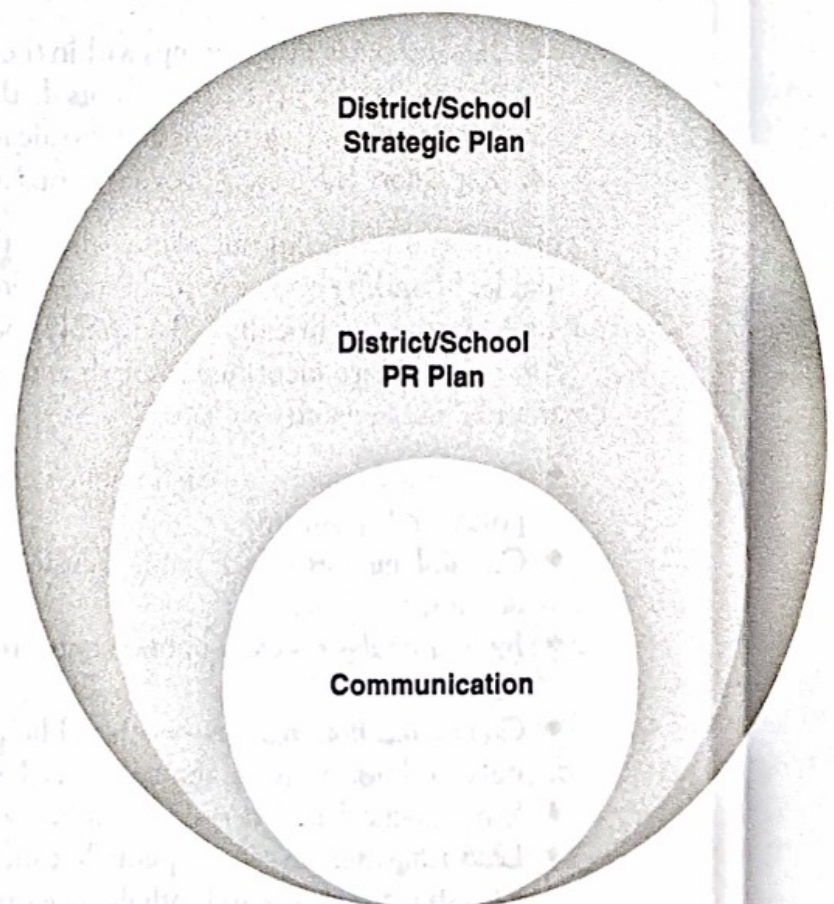
Rising communication expectations for school administrators are attributable to several conditions; foremost are (a) America's development as an information-based society, (b) the rapid development of technology, and (c) a disjunction between many taxpayers and the public schools (Kowalski, 2006). Despite the fact that these conditions have been widely publicized, it is doubtful that the rate of communication improvements in schools has kept pace with the rate of technology improvements in society (Keil, 2005). For example, administrators and teachers often do not take full advantage of the Internet as a communication tool (Moore, 2005).

Ideally, communication is addressed as part of a PR plan that is an extension of an institutional strategic plan (see Figure 9-2). The PR plan should address alternatives for communicating with identified publics, list resources available to support communication, and provide guidance to employees about their roles and responsibilities as communicators.

According to Kernan-Schloss and Plattner (1998), communication responsibilities should be framed by three questions:

1. What is needed from each public to enhance a symbiotic relationship and support school improvement efforts?
2. What do educators expect from members of each public?
3. What do members of each public expect from educators?

FIGURE 9-2
Relationships among Communication,
PR Planning, and Institutional Planning



School administrators are required to communicate with others in and out of the school. Primarily because of their formal authority and frequent interactions with school employees and students, principals typically are more comfortable communicating with internal publics. Recognizing this, Thomas (1996) offered the following suggestions to principals about communicating with other publics:

- ◆ Use clear and simple language.
- ◆ Frame the essential questions that will guide dialogue, especially if the topic is school reform.
- ◆ Establish an open process for conducting dialogue.
- ◆ Manage disagreements by promoting civility, rather than by refusing to deal with conflict.
- ◆ Promote ownership of ideas (process and product) by using collective pronouns such as *our* and *we* and by avoiding divisive pronouns such as *their* and *they*.
- ◆ Capitalize on existing communication resources.

In an information society, administrators should periodically reengineer established communication options and capitalize on new options (Moore, 2005). But as history demonstrates, this is not always the case. For instance, the extent to which principals took advantage of email after it became available to them varied considerably (Kowalski et al., 2007).

Unfortunately, many administrators have not studied communication academically, at least not in the context of their profession (Kowalski, 2005; Osterman, 1994). As a result, they may not make proper use of communication outlets available to them. Although the quantity and quality of these outlets vary across districts and schools, the following are the most frequently used:

- ◆ Print media (e.g., newspapers)
- ◆ Broadcast media (e.g., radio and television)
- ◆ Internet (e.g., school Web pages, electronic mail)
- ◆ School- or district-sponsored publications or broadcasts (e.g., school newsletters, handbooks, policy manuals, high school radio broadcasts)
- ◆ Public forums
- ◆ Open houses
- ◆ Extracurricular events (e.g., plays, interscholastic athletics)
- ◆ Academic programs (e.g., award ceremonies, graduation)
- ◆ Parent groups
- ◆ Partnership programs
- ◆ Conferences (e.g., parent–teacher conferences)

When pursuing community relations, administrators should always remember two facts: Disseminating information is not synonymous with communicating (Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2004), and communicating with all publics in the same way usually is not effective (Watts & Tutwiler, 2003). Errors related to the first fact can be reduced by ensuring that community members can exchange information through multiple outlets; advisory committees, focus groups, opinion polls, and school Web pages are examples. Errors related to the second fact can be reduced by pursuing principles of multicultural education and by recognizing differences among constituent publics.

Deploying a Multicultural Perspective

The population of most school districts has become more diverse over the last half century, and communities continue to become more heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, wealth, and age (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). The present demographic profile for the typical school district is considerably different from the one that existed 100 years ago—a time when many standards for effective practice in school administration were established (Kowalski, 2006). Communicative behavior is derived from a set of values, attitudes, and beliefs shared within the particular cultural context in a process called *socialization* (Mavrelis, 1997). Administrators who do not understand diversity are at a distinct disadvantage with respect to developing community relationships because they are unprepared to communicate in alternative ways. For example, principals may incorrectly conclude that only racial or cultural minorities are disadvantaged by poverty (Fuller, 2003).

The value of a multicultural approach to PR is well documented in the literature (e.g., Grunig & White, 1992; Kern-Foxworth & Miller, 1992). Social-interpretive communication theory, discussed by Banks (1995), indicates that effective multicultural PR is determined by the degree to which communication

- ◆ Reinforces participants' self-concepts,
- ◆ Affirms participants' cultural identities,
- ◆ Enhances the parties' relationship,
- ◆ Accomplishes the parties' strategic goals,
- ◆ Embraces the constitutive nature of communication,
- ◆ Recognizes the contextual nature of meanings,
- ◆ Accepts the diversity of interpretations, and
- ◆ Remains open to reinterpretation.

The more that is known about a school's external publics, the more likely an administrator will engage in multicultural communication. One tool for assessing social composition is a sociological inventory. Such an inventory could cover population characteristics, customs and traditions, political structure, social tensions, economic conditions, community groups, communication channels, and previous community efforts (Gallagher, Bagin, & Kindred, 1997). Unfortunately, administrators have often failed to communicate with all relevant publics at the same level of effectiveness. Multiple studies (e.g., Gibson, 1983, 1991; Rodriguez, 1992), for example, have found that school personnel in diverse communities frequently did not know or ignored the culture and communication patterns of certain racial and ethnic groups.

Language differences among diverse publics are the easiest aspect of multicultural communication to assess; however, they certainly are not the only dimension that needs to be analyzed. Watts and Tutwiler (2003) provide the following examples to demonstrate this fact:

- ◆ Attitudes and behaviors among members of the African American community are often influenced by concerns related to racism and past incidents of biased treatment. Therefore, "a sense of kinship often extends beyond blood relations to other members of the community" (p. 52).

- ◆ Attitudes and behaviors among members of the Asian American community are often influenced by distinct boundaries between family and school. Consequently, members of this community are not prone to challenge school authority to set curriculum and achievement standards.
- ◆ Attitudes and behaviors among members of the Latino community are often influenced by a conviction that the family is an essential resource for coping with problems. Therefore, members of this community are prone to respond negatively to any action that appears to challenge the family's role, especially in relation to values.

Minority group residents often feel they are at a disadvantage when their values on education (e.g., related grading, testing, and discipline) conflict with the majority's values (Garcia & Ortiz, 2004). Moreover, if administrators in their schools are identified with a culture other than their own, they believe their communicative behavior will be treated as inferior or unacceptable. Regardless of the validity of these perceptions, they exist and they affect relationships.

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

Ask aspiring principals to define the role of parents and you will probably receive at least three different answers, primarily because parents have been portrayed in different ways in the literature. Some authors (e.g., Chambers, 1998; Houston, 2000) cast them as customers; others (e.g., Decker & Decker, 2003) portray them as owners; and still others (e.g., Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2003) refer to them as clients. Although distinctions among these role characterizations may appear to be only semantic, they actually are dissimilar philosophically and operationally. The word *customer* connotes accommodation (Jones, 1997), as in the adage "The customer is always right." The word *owner* connotes organizational dominance, as in the adage "The boss is always right." But the word *client* connotes dependency, as in the adage "You are wise to follow your attorney's advice." Therefore, persons who view educators as professionals believe that calling parents (and students) customers is "as chilling as the sound of a fingernail scratching on a blackboard" (Bayer, 1996, p. 82).

In relation to most other professions, however, the practice of public school administration is atypical. Most notably, superintendents and principals must apply their professional knowledge and skills in highly political contexts (Wirt & Kirst, 2001). As a result, parents are at various times customers, owners, and clients; consequently, building positive relationships based on mutual understanding and benefits is often difficult (Martinson, 1999). To better understand school and community relations, both the need for parental relationships and the techniques for building and maintaining them are discussed here.

Need for Parental Relationships

Educators often recognize that far too many students are detached from schools, probably because they witness indifference in their classrooms on a daily basis. According to Constantino (2003), levels of student engagement are determined by an intricate mix of desires, attitudes, motivation, and behavior. Further, each of these variables is influenced by

conditions pertinent to a student's (a) individual characteristics (e.g., personality, health), (b) peers, (c) family, and (d) school. Unfortunately, educators are less likely to discern that many parents also are disengaged from schools (Steinberg, 1996).

Why is parental engagement important? This question should be answered from three perspectives:

1. *Philosophically*, parent relationships are justified by the values that guide a democratic society—values such as citizen participation and shared decision making (Kowalski et al., 2007; Petersen & Kowalski, 2005).
2. *Politically*, administrators are more likely to improve schools if they have parental support (Bauman, 1996), and they are more likely to gain support if they have positive relationships with parents (Kowalski, 2006; Petersen & Kowalski, 2005).
3. *Professionally*—that is, from an educational perspective—the answer is more complex. Parents who are involved with teachers and administrators are likely to focus on the intellectual growth of their children and to reaffirm the importance of education; conversely, they avoid negative judgments, such as simply comparing their children to other students (Constantino, 2003).

Protracted efforts to achieve school reform clearly elevated the professional dimension of parental involvement. For example, after conducting a macroanalysis of 85 studies, Henderson and Berla (1994) concluded that parent involvement has produced a myriad of educational benefits, as demonstrated by the following examples:

- ◆ Students whose parents were involved with schools usually had higher grades, higher test scores, greater self-esteem, higher levels of motivation, and better attendance records.
- ◆ Parents who were involved had higher levels of sensitivity to the social, emotional, and educational development of their children; they had a more accurate understanding of teacher roles and were more committed to supporting teachers and the school.
- ◆ Educators who are in schools having high levels of parent involvement had higher morale, more respect from parents, and a better understanding of parental problems and cultural differences.
- ◆ Schools that had high levels of parent involvement had greater community support, better reputations, and higher quality programs than did schools that had low levels of parent involvement.

Overall, there is considerable evidence supporting the conclusion that parent involvement is associated positively with student motivation (Gonzalez-DeHass, Holbein, & Willems, 2005; Lim, 2003) and academic performance (e.g., Crosnoe, 2009; Jeynes, 2007). Even so, parental contact with schools, especially at the secondary school level, has been traditionally low (Dodd, 1998). Teachers, arguably the educators expected to have the highest level of contact with parents, say that their performance in this area would be greater if principals made parent relationships a higher priority and if more time was provided to cultivate these relationships (Miretzky, 2004). Traditionally, many parents have felt that their collaboration was neither encouraged nor valued by educators (Chavkin & Williams, 1987).

Most parents do not initiate contact with educators; therefore, principals and teachers should be the initiators and they are more likely to do this if they understand the social

conditions that make educator–parent relationships increasingly essential to student learning. Consider, for example, the following conditions found in most schools:

- ◆ *Diversity.* Today, the population of the typical public school district is heterogeneous with respect to race, religion, political values, social standing, education levels, and income (as described previously in Chapter 2). By interacting with parents, educators gain a clearer understanding of how demographic variables affect students (Watts & Tutwiler, 2003).
- ◆ *Parent role.* In the first half of the previous century, parents often were deeply involved in their children's education, especially in smaller rural schools. During the period from 1950 to 1970, however, the treatment of parents gradually changed from participant to guest. Mothers were far more likely than fathers to visit schools, largely because planned activities such as plays, music programs, and parent–teacher conferences were usually scheduled during normal school hours when fathers were working. As the economy changed and many mothers began working (Sherman, 1994), neither parent in two-income families was available during school hours (Fuller & Marxen, 2003). Although many schools now schedule evening events, planned activities alone do not ensure engagement.
- ◆ *Family structure.* Increasingly, the structure of families has become less uniform. Many students are now being raised by one parent, by grandparents, or by a legal guardian (Watts & Tutwiler, 2003). If all or most families had two parents with one of them available during the school day, generic approaches to dealing with parents probably would be more successful. Since this is not the case, an individualized approach based on an understanding of family conditions is essential.
- ◆ *Family hygiene.* Assisting students living in dysfunctional families has become an increasingly difficult challenge (Dodd, 2000). Students reared in these conditions are often characterized by (a) distrust, (b) low self-esteem, (c) an inability to have fun, and (d) shame (Fuller & Marxen, 2003). In order for school personnel to intervene, they must establish relationships that allow them to make a difference.
- ◆ *Parent availability.* Educators often see themselves as being blameless when it comes to parental disengagement. For example, they conclude that parents do not get involved with schools because they have other priorities (e.g., work, social activities). However, several studies (e.g., Dauber & Epstein, 1991) have concluded that lack of time does not fully explain disengagement. The ways schools are organized and the attitudes of principals and teachers are other cogent factors (Dauber & Epstein, 1993).

Principals who only interact with parents when they are forced to respond to or provide negative news are least likely to have productive relationships. Conversely, administrators who cultivate positive relationships with parents find it much easier to deal with unpleasant situations because they are better able to be proactive (focus on what will or can be done to correct the situation), positive (make a commitment to solve the problem), and candid (share all pertinent information) with parents who trust them (North, 2005).

Lastly, economic and social diversity has elevated the importance of parental relationships (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Lareau, 2000; Lareau & Shumar, 1996). Parents of privileged children often participate more in schooling and provide their children more educational resources than do parents of children living in poverty. In analyzing this finding, McGrath and

Kuriloff (1999) also warned that socioeconomic disparities affect the qualitative nature of parental involvement. Specifically, they found that relatively few upper middle-class white mothers set norms for parental involvement; in so doing, they “often acted, perhaps unintentionally, in ways that tended to exclude other mothers, especially African American mothers.” The researchers urged principals to exert the leadership necessary to prevent parental involvement from becoming another factor contributing to educational inequities.

Building and Maintaining Parental Relationships

To improve parental engagement, administrators and teachers must first define this process accurately (Coleman & Churchill, 1997). Typically, educators agree on two points: The need for parental involvement is real, and parental involvement in schools should be based on a multidimensional perspective (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997). But without an effective, meaningful framework to guide them, educators see parental engagement as nothing more than “a series of disconnected activities with little relevance to family or classroom environments” (Coleman & Churchill, 1997, p. 144).

Engagement became a popular word during the reform-minded political environment of the 1980s and 1990s. Often, however, the concept was misinterpreted (Wadsworth, 1997). Engagement, especially in the context of PR, is not manipulation; rather, it is the building of a reciprocal relationship that is uncharacteristic of political transactions and entrepreneurial exploitations (Thompson, 1998). And though collaboration is a form of colearning (Herman, 1998), parental engagement is more than parents spending a few hours a week helping their children do homework.

The most widely referenced definition of school–family collaboration was developed by Epstein and associates (1997). It includes six functions:

1. Home-to-school communication
2. School-to-home communication
3. Parents as volunteers
4. Parent involvement in school governance and decisions
5. A positive home learning environment
6. Greater collaboration and connection with the community

Discussing participation in the context of a learning community, Kowalski et al. (2007) identified six characteristics pertinent to parental engagement:

1. Support for change
2. Continuous learning
3. Collaboration
4. Open, two-way communication
5. Inquiry
6. Mutual respect

After defining engagement, an administrator should conduct an engagement audit. The purpose is to determine gaps between what is and what should be. Ideally, data regarding relationships are collected and analyzed continuously using feedback loops—that is, asking questions, receiving answers, making decisions or changes, and providing feedback as educators and parents have interactions (Soholt, 1998).

Regardless of how parental involvement is diagnosed, the following components are usually effective:

- ◆ Inventory the number of interactions that occur, and group them by activities (e.g., music programs, parent–teacher conferences, athletic events, discipline problems).
- ◆ Collect and analyze teacher and parent opinions regarding (a) the productivity of these interactions, (b) the effectiveness of communication during these interactions, and (c) mutual treatment during these interactions.
- ◆ Collect and analyze data to determine why some families have not had any interactions with school personnel.
- ◆ Determine what types of information parents (a) find most useful, (b) find least useful, and (c) want, but do not receive.
- ◆ Determine which teacher-initiated or administrator-initiated activities require or encourage parental involvement.
- ◆ Seek suggestions about ways to improve interactions.

Perhaps most notably, an engagement audit is an effective way to determine if common barriers to parent relationships exist. Many of the common barriers are issues that are best addressed by teachers and parents directly; examples include ambivalence toward parental involvement (Eccles & Harold, 1993) and differing perceptions of meaningful relationships (Krasnow, 1990). Principals, however, can be quite influential with respect to other variables, such as a lack of administrative support for teacher and parent interaction and a lack of time for parent conferences (Miretzky, 2004).

Procedurally, the pursuit of parental engagement also may include the following steps identified by White (1998):

- ◆ *Creating an action team.* The action team coordinates the process and ensures that it is ongoing.
- ◆ *Developing an involvement plan.* The plan is typically developed by the action team and provides goals and strategies for improving parental involvement.
- ◆ *Developing an appropriate parent involvement policy and regulations.* Once the involvement plan is approved, the principal needs to ensure that the policy and regulations facilitate its implementation.
- ◆ *Securing support for parent involvement.* Even the best plan will fail if those attempting to implement it do not have sufficient human and material resources.
- ◆ *Providing staff development for educators.* Because parental involvement is defined as a multifaceted process, the principal needs to ensure that all professional staff understand it and are prepared to implement it.
- ◆ *Evaluating and revising the involvement plan periodically.* Evaluation should be a formative process in which periodic adjustments are deemed beneficial.

Figure 9–3 illustrates all elements of an engagement plan.

An engagement plan is most likely to be developed and implemented in schools that have environments conducive to relationships. The following are common characteristics of these schools:

- ◆ *Positive institutional climates.* The social relationships both among staff and between staff and parents are friendly, open, compassionate, and respectful (Lim, 2003).

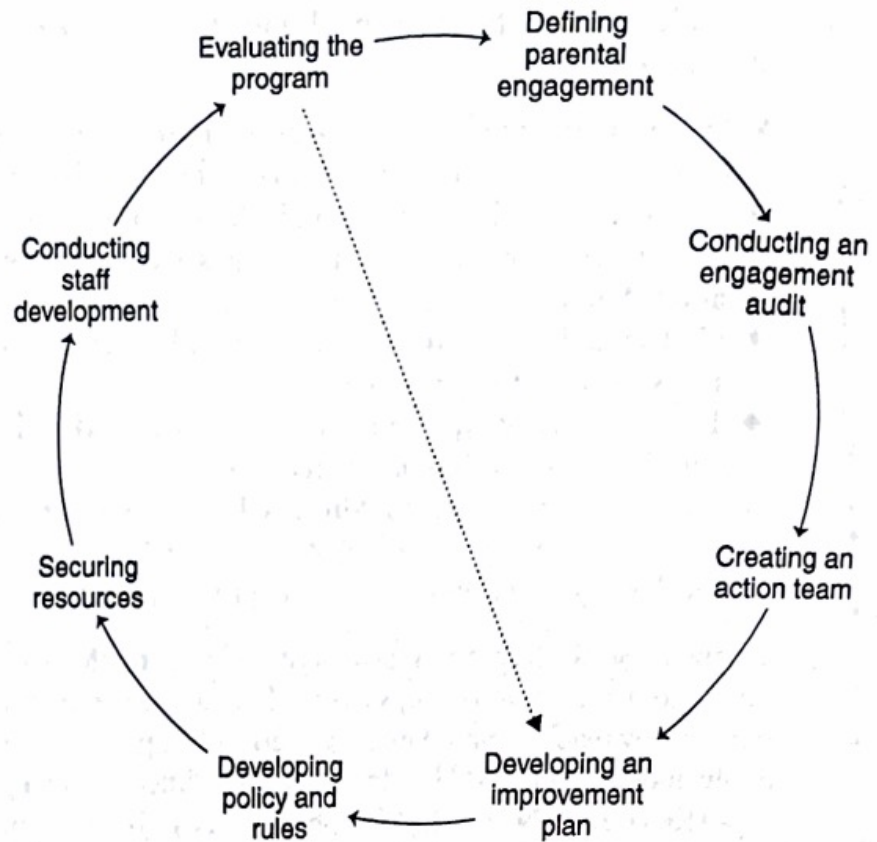


FIGURE 9-3
Elements of a School-Parent Engagement Plan

- ◆ *Cultures that promote democratic leadership and participation.* Parent involvement is viewed as essential to democratic decision making (Petersen & Kowalski, 2005).
- ◆ *Open, two-way communication.* Multiple channels are used to ensure that communication among school personnel and between school personnel and parents occurs continuously (Kowalski, 2003).
- ◆ *Enabling programs.* School-sponsored programs are adopted to encourage and support parental involvement (Lim, 2003).
- ◆ *Respect for diversity.* School personnel recognize and understand diversity and individualize parent relationships to maximize collaboration (Lim, 2003).

Some districts and schools have developed “parent partnerships.” True partnerships are agreements in which two parties concur with respect to goals and process, usually within a legal or moral framework—for example, a partnership between a school and a local business. Collaborative relationships involving schools and parents are more accurately defined as “an on-going, developmental process of mutual or reciprocating empowerment” (Shepard, Trimberger, McClintock, & Lecklider, 1999, p. 34). That is, teachers and parents empower each other, enabling both parties to have a more positive influence on student learning. The goal of an effective PR program is to provide administrators and teachers with the resources necessary to cultivate these collaborative relationships.

SUMMARY

The content in this chapter examined community relations as an integral component of school PR. Rather than having one homogeneous public, schools actually have multiple publics distinguishable by demographic variables. Identifying and analyzing them are essential to erecting an effective two-way communication process, and such a process is essential to school–community relations.

Focused attention was given to parents because they are arguably the most influential public with respect to student learning. The need for school–family relationships has increased incrementally, both because society has become more diverse and because changes in family structure have made parental involvement more difficult. To build and maintain school–family relations, administrators must play a proactive role in which they define ideal parental involvement, assess current levels of involvement, and erect an involvement plan. Equally important, administrators must encourage and facilitate the implementation of that plan.

QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

CASE STUDY

1. Why does Principal Palmer believe that community and parental involvement in schools is a bad idea?
2. After having read this chapter, do you agree or disagree with Principal Palmer's opinions of community and parental engagement?
3. Evaluate the decision Dr. Lewis made not to openly disagree with Principal Palmer. If you were in her situation, would you have done the same? Why or why not?
4. Educators, including administrators, are exposed to a process of socialization when they enter a new organization. This process is intended to get new employees to accept the underlying beliefs of the prevailing district or school culture. Given Superintendent Scott's effort to increase leadership stability, should she have assigned Principal Palmer to be a principal mentor? Why or why not?
5. If you were Dr. Lewis, would you reveal your concerns about Principal Palmer's views to Superintendent Scott? Why or why not?

CHAPTER

6. Are the terms *community relations* and *public relations* synonymous? Why or why not?
7. How can principals identify and analyze relevant publics?
8. In what ways has demographic diversity created challenges for community relations?
9. In what ways has demographic diversity created challenges for parental involvement in schools?
10. Can parental involvement have negative consequences for schools? If so, in what ways?
11. What is relational communication?
12. Discuss ways principals can influence community relations.

10

CHAPTER

Media Relationships

CASE STUDY: MISMANAGING A SENSITIVE SITUATION

A high school football coach was placed on paid leave after one of his players told several teammates that the coach had asked him to have sex with his wife. After a teacher learned that the claim was being discussed among students, she informed the principal. Once he conferred with the superintendent and school board members, the principal suspended the coach with pay, pending a legal investigation of undisclosed charges.

Knowing that reporters would seek to learn the nature of the charges, the principal held an emergency faculty meeting. Without disclosing the charge against the suspended coach, he told those present that the matter was being investigated by law enforcement officials. He then advised those present to refrain from discussing the suspension with reporters, because doing so could be a violation of confidentiality laws. Lastly, he requested that they relay pertinent information they may acquire regarding the coach's suspension.

Despite efforts to not reveal the reason for the coach's suspension, the story was leaked to a local newspaper prior to the conclusion of a police investigation. On the very day law enforcement officials arrested the coach and his wife, a story confirming the investigation and the alleged sexual misconduct appeared in the local paper as front-page copy.

Faced with a media crisis, the school board designated one of its members to be the official spokesperson to reporters. This board member was to handle all media inquiries, including those made directly to school district employees. But the appointment of a media spokesperson did not deter television crews and newspaper reporters from descending on the high school. Interviews were sought not only with teachers but also with students. Because they had previously been advised not to discuss the issue, no teacher agreed to be interviewed; however, several students were cooperative. As a result, the local television news featured interviews with several students who freely speculated about the coach and his wife even though they did not have firsthand knowledge of the case.

The next morning the local newspaper carried several articles, each including anonymous quotes from students and school employees. Although the superintendent and principal recognized that some of the information in one of the articles was clearly wrong, they decided not to correct the record. The newspaper that printed the story was a small local publication, and they figured that making a correction was not worth the effort. But shortly after the story appeared, the Associated Press picked it up and ran it across the country. The error was now compounded, and school officials faced a dual problem: dealing with the coach's inappropriate behavior and dealing with misinformation about the incident.

As the story gained national attention, community members demanded that the school board and administration gain control of the situation. Responding to increasing levels of political pressure, the superintendent convinced the school board to employ a private investigator for \$10,000; his charge was to determine whether any employees had prior knowledge of the sexual misconduct involving the coach and his wife. The employment of the investigator, however, only intensified criticism. The school district was in poor financial condition, and taxpayers were angered that money was being spent for

this purpose. Several taxpayers wrote letters that appeared in the newspaper stating that school board members and administrators should have conducted the investigation. Even worse in the eyes of critics, the private investigator concluded his work in less than 3 weeks and reported that he did not find any evidence that employees had prior knowledge of the misconduct.

Eventually, the coach and his wife pleaded guilty to criminal charges brought against them. Subsequently, parents of two teenagers who were found to be victims of their crimes sued the school district, alleging that school officials had failed to adequately protect their children from the coach. When asked about the lawsuits, school administrators and the board member spokesperson refused to comment.

The media and the public accused school officials of having breached their duty in three areas. First, they were blamed for not having provided proper and sufficient supervision of an employee. Second, they were blamed for managing the problem carelessly, especially in relation to employing the private investigator. Third, they were blamed for jeopardizing the district's financial welfare by creating the potential for further financial losses via the lawsuits.

INTRODUCTION

Reasonable people recognize that school administrators cannot anticipate every school-related problem. Nevertheless, they expect superintendents and principals to manage these situations effectively after they occur. The preceding case demonstrates how mismanaging a problem can be compounded by mismanaging the media. Apparently, the district had no media relations plan; as a result, important decisions—such as naming a media spokesperson and refusing to answer reporter questions—were made on an ad hoc basis. Moreover, no consideration was given to the likelihood that reporters would attempt to interview students. Once the ability of the superintendent and principal to manage the situation involving the coach was challenged, virtually every subsequent decision they made was criticized.

Negative news coverage of schools or school employees has often been blamed on unscrupulous reporters. As an example, a report by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan public-opinion research firm, confirmed that school administrators have been very displeased with the quality of press coverage given to public education (Batory, 1999). In truth, both administrators and journalists usually share the blame for poor relationships. On the one hand, many administrators do not understand journalism; they act aloof when dealing with reporters, and they attempt to avoid or manipulate reporters (Borja, 2004). On the other hand, many reporters attempt to cover public education without understanding the governance structure of this institution, and they often accuse administrators of overstating positive information while concealing negative information (Spicer, 1997).

Discussing effective media relations, a veteran college president (Raisman, 2000) noted that the first rule for administrators is to realize that the media are typically neutral when it comes to covering education. Even in the context of an information-based

society, however, this perspective has not dissuaded some administrators from continuing to believe that avoiding journalists is the best policy. In truth, poor or nonexistent relationships between administrators and journalists intensify tensions that surround unpleasant situations when administrators must respond to criticism or a crisis situation (Polansky & Montague, 2001).

This chapter addresses the need for and development of a positive media relations program. Decisions related to this topic are discussed at the organizational and personal levels. The chapter content is framed by two objectives: to identify ways that administrators can enhance the image and effectiveness of districts and schools and to identify ways that administrators can better prepare themselves to manage potentially threatening situations when the media are demanding data and comments.

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- ◆ Explain the importance of having a district or school media relations plan.
- ◆ Identify the primary components of a media relations plan.
- ◆ Identify actions that contribute to building and maintaining positive relationships with journalists.
- ◆ Explain how the media can be a means to communicate positively with stakeholders.
- ◆ Describe effective practices related to holding press conferences and issuing news releases.
- ◆ Identify focused concerns for working with electronic media.

ORGANIZATIONAL DECISIONS

Media are broadly divided into print and electronic outlets. The former include newspapers, newsletters, journals, and magazines; the latter include television, radio, and Web-based outlets. Although the term *media relations* is commonly used, superintendents, principals, and other administrators actually build relationships with media employees (e.g., reporters, editors, photographers). The term *media relations* actually refers to the patterns of communication that occur between organization members (school employees) and media personnel (Ridgway, 1996). Working without a media relations plan is like tightrope walking; one misstep can have serious repercussions. Thus, administrators who rely on spontaneity to make communicative decisions usually end up having inconsistent, unpredictable, and largely negative relationships with reporters (Gonring, 1997).

Media Relations Plan

The purposes of a media relations plan are to set goals for interacting with journalists and to provide strategies for achieving those goals. Too often in the past, superintendents and principals have assumed that such a document was a low priority. The consequences of not planning, however, typically became apparent to them in the midst of a crisis—a situation during which they had little time to think about decisions that had to be made (Cook, 2001).

According to Gonring (1997), an organization's media relations plan should be shaped by four variables and the fundamental questions they raise:

1. *Organizational purpose (Why does the organization exist?)* Purpose raises questions about the organization's mission and value to society. In the case of schools, the overarching purpose is to provide an essential service.
2. *Ownership (Who owns the organization?)* In the case of schools, ownership is either public or private. This consideration is especially pertinent to determining the extent to which the organization is expected to interact with the stakeholder publics being served.
3. *Media interest in the organization (To what extent do media seek to report on the organization?)* In the case of schools, media interest is typically high. Consequently, administrators should analyze and understand the bases for this level of interest.
4. *Organizational expectations (What does the organization hope to accomplish by interacting with the media?)* In the case of schools, building a positive image, producing political support, securing economic resources, and identifying new and changing needs are cogent objectives.

The formation of a media relations plan is enhanced when the following attributes are present:

- ◆ *Direction.* The district or school has a policy that provides parameters for the plan's goals and strategies. As an example, the policy should detail expectations regarding the exchange of information between the organization and its multiple publics.
- ◆ *Clarity.* The plan is written in language readily understood by those affected.
- ◆ *Unity.* The plan is an extension of a more comprehensive PR plan to ensure that interactions with media personnel are connected to more global communication and information management objectives.
- ◆ *Sponsorship.* The plan is supported and approved by the superintendent and school board.

Relationships of the four key variables and these attributes are illustrated in Figure 10-1.

FIGURE 10-1
Interface of Organizational
Considerations and Media
Plan Attributes

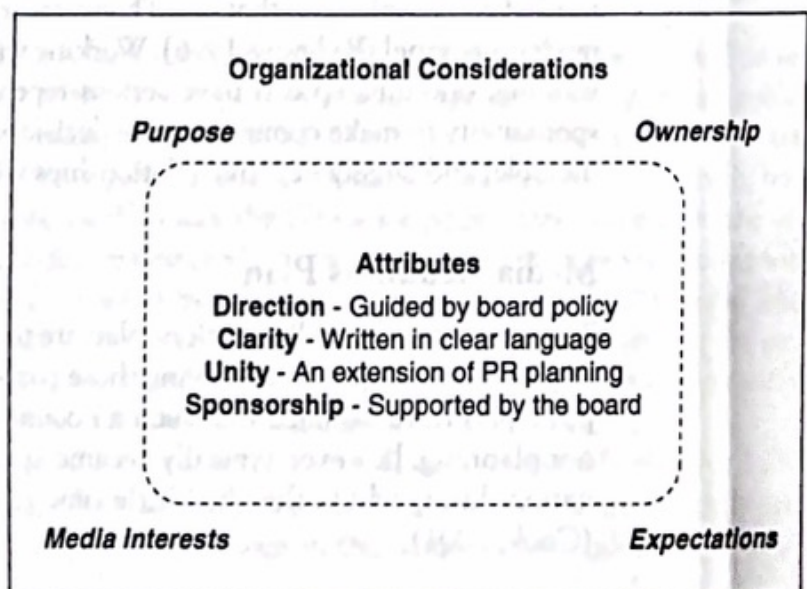
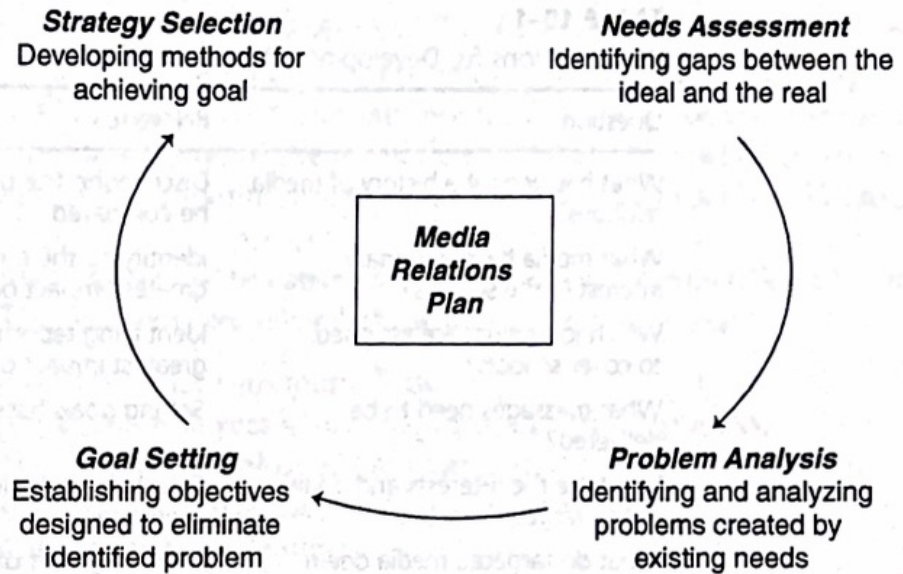


FIGURE 10-2
Basic Elements of a Media
Relations Plan



Since contextual variables differ across districts and schools, implementing, without modification, a media relations plan developed by administrators in another organization, even when that plan has been successful, is ill-advised. Why? The success of almost any type of plan depends not only on substantive content, but also on the circumstances under which it is implemented (Fullan, 1999). Therefore, administrators have no assurance that the plan they are emulating will be effective in their school. Internal variables—such as educational philosophy and goals—and external variables—such as local media and community conditions—almost always influence outcomes (Kowalski, 2004). Therefore, media plans should be tailored to meet a specific institution's needs and goals and should take into account available human and material resources that affect implementation.

In general, effective media relations plans are characterized by the following procedures, which are also shown in Figure 10-2:

- ◆ **Needs assessment.** This process entails analysis of prevailing conditions intended to assess gaps between what exists and what should exist with respect to media relations. For example, school officials may determine that current relationships with several reporters are negative.
- ◆ **Problem identification and analysis.** This process is used to make judgments about identified needs. As an example, school officials may learn that most media coverage over the past year has been negative and that the most negative news was reported by journalists with whom school officials have poor relationships.
- ◆ **Goal setting.** This process entails replacing, reaffirming, or modifying existing media relations goals to increase the probability that identified needs could be met in the next year. In the district where the preponderance of media stories over the past year were negative, for instance, administrators may decide to add the goal of producing at least one positive story monthly over the course of the next year.
- ◆ **Strategy development.** This process focuses on prescribing actions and behaviors for goal attainment. For instance, what actions are recommended to ensure that one positive story will be produced each month? Key tasks surrounding the plan's development are listed in Figure 10-2.

TABLE 10-1
Key Questions for Developing a Media Relations Plan

Question	Relevance
What has been the history of media relations?	Discovering the past so that ideal and real performance can be compared
What media have a primary interest in the schools?	Identifying the media that have the most contact with and the greatest impact on schools
Which journalists are assigned to cover schools?	Identifying reporters who have the most contact with and the greatest impact on schools
What messages need to be delivered?	Setting goals based on identified needs
What are the interests and goals of the targeted media?	Selecting strategies that maximize opportunities for desired coverage
What do targeted media deem newsworthy?	Informing staff of the areas that are likely to receive coverage
Who will assume management of the plan?	Identifying one individual who assumes overall responsibility for implementation and who serves as a resource person to other administrators
Who will receive or use the media relations plan?	Ensuring that the plan is written appropriately for those who use and are affected by it
How often will the plan be revised?	Ensuring that the plan is evaluated and that goals and strategies are revised periodically

According to Kosmicki and Bona (1996), a media relations plan for education institutions should be designed to address the needs of three publics:

1. District (or school) employees
2. Media personnel
3. Other primary stakeholders

In districts and schools that have media plans, and many do not, the least amount of attention has been given to media personnel needs. Both the failure to develop a plan and the failure to address media needs are serious oversights; reporters and editors have the power to shape and control information, and ultimately, to influence public opinion (Gonring, 1997). Generally, a media relations plan should be viewed as a tool connecting the needs of the three publics.

Table 10-1 identifies key questions that should be asked and answered prior to and during the forging of a media relations plan.

Implementing a Media Relations Plan

The size of educational institutions (in terms of enrollment and employees) has been a major factor determining who is responsible for media relations. In very large school systems (those over 20,000 students), we are likely to find a PR director and even possibly a coordinator of media relations. In midsize districts (between 5,000 and 20,000 students), we are likely to find a full-time PR director who assumes responsibility for

media relations. In the remaining districts, responsibility for this function varies—from having a full-time PR specialist to not assigning any employee media relations responsibilities. Since most public school districts remain relatively small in terms of student enrollment, it is likely that a majority of them still do not have a PR specialist; in districts where this is the case, the superintendent typically serves as an ad hoc PR specialist (Kowalski, 2006).

Several important assignments must be carried out to ensure that a media relations plan is applied as intended. The following are several of the most important tasks:

- ◆ Preparing employees to interact with journalists,
- ◆ Providing consultation to employees when they interact with journalists,
- ◆ Adjudicating conflict between employees and journalists,
- ◆ Developing and managing press releases and press conferences,
- ◆ Preparing and disseminating positive news,
- ◆ Advising the superintendent (or designee) on relevant policy and regulations affecting the media, and
- ◆ Serving as a contact person for media inquiries.

In districts without a PR specialist, the last duty almost always falls on superintendents and principals. Reporters usually contact them first when they need information.

Employing a PR Specialist

Carr (2009) contends that all school districts should employ a competent PR specialist, even if only on a part-time basis. In stating her case, she points out that in an information-based society, the demand for improved communication has increased and the manner in which public opinion is shaped has changed. Many stakeholders now demand continuous and rapid information exchanges with school personnel; their perceptions of school effectiveness are shaped by both traditional and nontraditional media outlets.

One of the most essential roles for a PR specialist is working with media personnel successfully. To do this, he or she must meet the following qualifications:

- ◆ *Knowledge of the district's policies and plans concerning communication.* The person responsible for media relations should be familiar with all school policies and plans that affect communication.
- ◆ *Information management skills.* This person must be well informed with respect to information sources and the methods required for retrieving information.
- ◆ *Communication skills.* This person should be competent in communication skills, ensuring that he or she can exchange information effectively with school employees, journalists, and other primary stakeholders.
- ◆ *Trust of district officials.* This person should have the confidence of the superintendent, administrative staff, and school board.
- ◆ *Experience and credibility with the media.* This person should have had previous experiences working with journalists and be seen as a credible school official by them.
- ◆ *Ability to perform under pressure.* This person should be able to maintain a proper demeanor at all times, even during a crisis situation.

As demonstrated in this chapter's opening case study, making decisions about how to deal with media only after a crisis occurs is precarious. Two problems become likely when this occurs. First, time and information limitations during a crisis increase the likelihood of appointing a person who lacks requisite knowledge and skills (Kowalski, 2002). Second, superintendents and school boards may instinctively appoint two or more media spokespersons, believing that the task will be completed more adequately. In fact, having more than one media spokesperson is often detrimental, because both the manner in which information is provided to the media and the accuracy of information provided may be inconsistent (Armistead, 1996).

Assigning a school board member to be the media spokesperson also is ill-advised. Beyond the possibility that a board member does not possess requisite knowledge and skills, such an appointment violates the critical distinction between policymaking and administration. Just as school board members are not allowed to be district employees, they should not be allowed to function as district administrators (Kowalski, 2006).

WORKING WITH PRINT MEDIA REPORTERS

Like all professionals, school administrators rely to some extent on tacit knowledge—that is, wisdom accumulated through experience and shared among superintendents and principals. One pearl commonly passed from generation to generation is the caveat—a paraphrase of Mark Twain—that administrators ought not to fight with persons who buy their ink by the barrel (Akers, 1983). While serving as executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, Paul Salmon developed a list of old-fashioned, commonsense guidelines for successful practice. Among them were the following two pieces of advice: Recognize the importance of empowerment and effective communication, and develop a positive relationship with the media (Shannon, 1994). Many seasoned administrators nevertheless believe that these guiding principles are easier to set than they are to follow. Good media relationships, even in the context of a well-developed media relations plan, require forethought and nurturing.

Establishing a Foundation for Effective Relationships

Novice principals and superintendents quickly discover that they cannot prevent media contacts. Nevertheless, they may not recognize that they usually can control how they first meet reporters. After assuming a new position in an unfamiliar community, an administrator can either wait to be contacted by the media or initiate contact with reporters. The latter is preferable. A new principal, for example, can identify reporters who cover schools and invite them to a get-acquainted meeting at the school. The intent is to get acquainted in a congenial and relaxed setting. Administrators who allow reporters to initiate the first contact often find that the initial meeting will be related to a problem, stressful, and formal (DeLapp, 1991).

A positive relationship between administrators and reporters also depends on the parties understanding and respecting each other's roles (Raisman, 2000). As an example,

principals who want to be treated as professionals should learn to treat journalists as professionals. Unfortunately in the past, many administrators typecast reporters as trouble-makers interested in covering only negative stories (McQuaid, 1989). Conversely, reporters often viewed administrators as trying to manipulate media coverage (Bridges & Nelson, 2000). Thus, an administrator and a reporter should exchange thoughts about role expectations early in their relationship. Afterwards, they can move forward to build credibility and trust, paving the way to a mutual open-door policy (Sielke, 2000).

Working with New Reporters

Richard Colvin, a former education reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* and now director of the Hechinger Institute at Columbia University's Teachers College, commented, "Administrators need to know that the relationship between schools and the media already exists. It is an administrator's responsibility to make it a positive relationship" (as quoted in White, 1998, p. 8). In most school districts, administrators have to overcome two problems in trying to follow this advice. First, reporters covering education, especially for low-circulation outlets, almost always have other assignments. Consequently, they may not spend much time interacting with school administrators, either because they are more interested in their other assignments or because their other assignments are considered more important (Posner, 1994). Second, education assignments are low-level appointments at many newspapers and broadcast outlets, often given to the least experienced reporters. Those who do well covering schools generally get promoted out of the assignment (McQuaid, 1989).

Most media personnel know little about the inner workings of schools and even less about the history, culture, or current problems of a specific district or school when they are initially assigned to this beat. Consequently, helping them learn about education in general and about local schools specifically is one way to build trust. In terms of building relationships with administrators, media personnel are much like new teachers: Both are more apt to trust administrators who are sincere and help them become more proficient.

Assisting media personnel in covering school board meetings—a difficult assignment for those who know little about the structure and politics of public education—is one way that superintendents can build trust. Typically, a reporter's article must be prepared right after the meeting ends. Faced with a tight deadline, there is little or no opportunity to conduct postmeeting interviews, to check name spellings and titles, or to confirm statements. Anticipating these conditions, administrators could aid the media personnel in the following ways:

- ◆ Send reporters an agenda several days in advance of the meeting.
- ◆ Highlight and explain action items.
- ◆ List the names and titles of individuals scheduled to participate in agenda items.
- ◆ Offer to meet with reporters prior to the board meeting to answer questions they may have about the agenda.
- ◆ Offer to meet with reporters after the board meeting to answer questions and provide information (e.g., identifying persons who are in pictures taken by reporters).

In addition to providing assistance in covering board meetings, administrators can build trust by helping media personnel in the following ways:

- ◆ *Identify and explain pressing education issues of the day.* Often reporters are unaware of emerging issues, and even when they are aware, their understanding of them is often shallow.
- ◆ *Provide research and related information.* Reporters appreciate receiving background material that potentially strengthens their articles or reports.
- ◆ *Direct reporters to outside sources.* Reporters usually appreciate receiving tips about individuals outside the school district who could provide additional or different perspectives.
- ◆ *Share documents when permissible and appropriate.* Often administrators have access to documents that can clarify or validate an issue; reporters appreciate having material that adds accuracy to their coverage (Rhoades & Rhoades, 1991).

Accommodating Deadlines

Reporters routinely have deadlines—times established for them to complete research, writing, and editing. Completed stories typically must be submitted hours before publication or airing because the copy may require the approval of several editors as well as technical development (e.g., determining where and how the article will be placed in the newspaper). Time parameters necessitate expeditious information exchanges; thus, reporters are often aggravated when school officials fail to return telephone calls or return them only after deadlines have passed.

Some administrators wrongly assume that ignoring a reporter's inquiries ensures a story's demise. When inquiries are not answered within the requested time frame, reporters are likely to write the story sans the school district's perspective. Therefore, responding within requested time parameters provides some protection against one-sided reporting—and is a courtesy that strengthens personal relationships between administrators and reporters (Frohlichstein, 1993).

At times, responding within the requested time frame is not possible. For example, suppose a reporter requesting a summary of student test scores from the superintendent of a small district within 24 hours. Having no support staff, the superintendent is unable to meet her request. Accordingly, the superintendent should give the reporter an honest explanation and an estimate of the time needed to fulfill the request. If the reporter behaves ethically, she should explain why test data for this district are not included in her article, and she should make arrangements to do a follow-up article after she receives them.

Dealing with Negative News

Negative news is any report or article that focuses on a problem, conflict, or scandal that places a district or school in a less-than-favorable light. Negative news frustrates administrators because just one incident can damage ongoing efforts to forge a positive image. Unfavorable media stories can relate to either the institution or the people in it (either employees or students). When faced with these stories, administrators have often become defensive. As an example, they have claimed an unscrupulous reporter was trying to advance his own

career by victimizing them or the schools. Even if such a perception is true, expressing it publicly does not make the negative story disappear or neutralize the story's effects.

Reporters are trained not to look the other way when problems surface; and this responsibility typically is not diminished simply because a reporter and administrator like each other. Journalists see themselves as public watchdogs with the responsibility to reveal and write about problems in public institutions. In light of these facts, choosing to remain silent about negative news is a big mistake (Shaw, 1987). Reporters and other stakeholders are likely to view your silence as being indicative of guilt or incompetence. The following guidelines facilitate managed responses to negative news:

- ◆ *Never try to suppress a story by lying or refusing to comment.* Just one lie can destroy your credibility, and saying “no comment” suggests that you have something to hide.
- ◆ *If a problem really exists, share your perspective on the issue as quickly as possible.* Make yourself accessible to the media and provide your side of the story.
- ◆ *Have the top-ranking administrator speak to the media.* Hearing from the superintendent or principal conveys the message that the district or school is not taking the matter lightly.
- ◆ *Have an action plan to deal with the problem.* Negative reactions are often lowered after school officials demonstrate that they are prepared to deal with the situation—for example, by indicating the steps they will take to deal with the problem.
- ◆ *Communicate the action plan in language that can be understood by the reporter and readers.* Unless the public understands your description of the district's response, they are not apt to focus on your affirmative actions.

Conflict, even negative news, can lead to productive outcomes if managed properly. For example, a newspaper story and then subsequent letters to the editor criticized school officials for tolerating crowded classrooms in an elementary school. Instead of being defensive, the superintendent and principal admitted that the problem existed and then pointed out that they intended to resolve the issue within 3 years. Specifically, they provided evidence that the district's long-range facility plan had recently been modified so that an addition to the elementary school was now the first priority. Lastly, they pointed out that resolving the problem would require the passage of a tax referendum that was being placed on the ballot within a year. Skillfully, these administrators capitalized on the conflict to provide a compelling argument for approving construction funds.

Speaking Off the Record

Speaking off the record means different things to different people and reporters have not treated such communication uniformly. As a general rule, “never say anything to a reporter you are not willing to see in print or hear on the evening news” (Howard & Mathews, 2006, p. 113). Yet experienced reporters often have been able to get administrators to speak to them “off the record,” usually by promising them anonymity or confidentiality—that is, the administrators are assured either that they will not be identified as the source of the information or that the story will be pursued through other sources. Even when promises are honored, and often they are not, the story can get traced back to the administrator who provided the information.

Therefore, do not delude yourself into believing that speaking to reporters off the record consistently enhances your relationship with a reporter. Having secret conversations with reporters actually can have the opposite effect. For example, your relationship may be diminished because the reporter views you as a dishonest informant who selectively discloses information intending to harm others (Howard & Mathews, 2006).

Refusing to Comment

When confronted with difficult questions or accusations, administrators have often responded by saying “no comment” or “I can neither confirm nor deny your accusation.” Although these responses appear rational and safe, they actually convey negative messages. Million (2000) contends that administrators who answer “no comment” are perceived as trying either to avoid additional scrutiny or to conceal something. Consequently, experienced reporters rarely retreat after receiving a “no comment” response; instead, they dig deeper.

Clearly, there are times when you cannot respond in a timely manner to a reporter's questions. Depending on the circumstances, the following responses are more judicious than refusing to comment:

- ◆ *“I don't have the details to answer your question at this time. Can I get back to you later?”* This response is effective when the administrator needs to collect and analyze data. An example would be answering questions about an accident in a science lab before school district officials have concluded an investigation of the matter.
- ◆ *“Can I have _____ contact you regarding this issue?”* This response is effective when the question pertains to a matter that could be better addressed by another school official (e.g., the school's attorney or the district's business manager).
- ◆ *“I am not at liberty to provide this information because _____.”* This response is effective when the administrator knows that the requested information is protected by law (e.g., the contents are from an employee's personnel file).
- ◆ *“I am not sure the information you want can be revealed. I'll check and get back to you promptly.”* This response is effective when the administrator is uncertain whether the requested information can be made available (e.g., the details of an out-of-court legal settlement).
- ◆ *“I need to confirm the information before I respond. I'll contact you as soon as I am able to do that.”* This response is effective when the administrator is unaware of the situation raised by the reporter (e.g., the arrest of an employee).

Questions that may pertain to legally protected information are especially challenging for administrators. Consider a case where parents accused administrators of engaging in unfair discipline practices by giving preferential treatment to a student athlete. The administrators knew that federal laws prohibited them from releasing discipline information contained in the student's record. They also knew that simply refusing to comment on the matter potentially would be counterproductive. Accordingly, they explained the law to the reporter and pointed out the information could be divulged only with proper parental approval. After receiving this explanation, the reporter informed the public that school officials could provide the information only if the parents signed a form granting legal permission to do so (Surratt, Majestic, & Shelton, 1998).

Telling the Truth

One of the cardinal PR principles for administrators is “Never lie to the media.” Beyond being unethical, the person who lies or obscures facts rarely prevents a good reporter from finding the real story (Posner, 1994). Yet, administrators may be tempted to lie, especially when the circumstances are personal or when the reporter covering the issue is thought to be an adversary.

Answering certain questions can be painful, but giving untruthful answers can be deadly. Experience has proven that lies come back to haunt those who tell them. If caught lying, administrators can lose credibility, public trust, and positive relationships with the media that took years to build—a tremendous price to pay for having gained the convenience of keeping reporters temporarily at bay (Howard & Mathews, 2006).

Staying on Track

When reporters contact administrators, they usually have a specific topic in mind, and they want input in a timely manner so that they can meet their deadline. Therefore, you should answer questions directly and avoid being evasive (Parker, 1991). Understandably, reporters get frustrated when you do not cooperate—for example, by refusing to answer their questions, by answering their questions with questions, or by trying to change the subject.

Journalists have three objectives when they conduct interviews: gathering facts, putting facts into context, and obtaining quotes, preferably from dissimilar perspectives (DeLapp, 1996). Thus, during an interview, you should refrain from offering opinions, making lengthy comments, and introducing new issues. If during the course of an interview, you want to address another topic, wait until the original interview is concluded before doing so (Ordozensky & Marx, 1993).

Getting the School’s Story to the Media

As noted earlier, administrators often complain that the media rarely portray schools in a positive light. What educators wish to see or hear in the media, however, may be of little interest to reporters—not because the story is positive, but because it is not news. If administrators want to get their stories printed, they have to know what is newsworthy. Answering the following questions can help you determine if a story merits media attention:

- ◆ Would I want to hear this story?
- ◆ Who is the audience for this story?
- ◆ Why should taxpayers care about the story?
- ◆ Can the story be connected to larger issues currently in the news?
- ◆ Are there interesting photo opportunities that accompany the story? (This is an especially cogent question for television outlets.)

Frequently, stories that administrators want to see in print do not lend themselves to being newspaper articles. A folk dancing group at a high school and a Thanksgiving skit at an elementary school exemplify activities that reporters may not see as newsworthy, but they could make their way into print because they are suitable for stand-alone photos—

that is, photos that are used without accompanying stories. Media coverage for schools is enhanced when administrators understand the *importance of timing*. Features that are not normally suitable for news stories can attract media attention if brought forward at the right time. When stories are connected to current events, they have a better chance of being published. For example, a story about an outdoor science laboratory might be used in conjunction with the state legislature's deliberation of an environmental protection bill. A good tactic is to develop a news opportunity calendar—a list of holidays or events that may present opportunities for getting school-generated stories published.

Besides understanding the nature of news and the importance of timing, administrators need to understand the missions of local media markets. Consider, for example, the tremendous differences faced by superintendents in urban and rural districts. A small-town newspaper is usually more willing to cover “puff” pieces—stories that have no news value and little human interest, but are published to maintain good relations between the newspaper and the school district. Hence, reporters for these papers might write a short article (with a photo) about a principal having lunch with the straight-A students, whereas reporters at large-circulation newspapers covering urban districts are likely to reject the idea. In addition, reporters are often the friends and neighbors of school officials in smaller communities. These contacts can serve to draw a reporter's attention to a desired story (Parker, 1991).

Preparing News Releases

Writing a news release is a relatively simple process and a good way to eliminate misunderstandings. Since an administrator is initiating contact with journalists, timing is an important consideration. Getting reporters to pay attention to the release depends on whether the content is newsworthy or related to current issues in the news.

Reporters should be informed if you are presenting them with an “immediate” or an “embargoed” release; this declaration should appear at the top of the first page. The former are intended to be released to the public as soon as possible; the latter are intended to be released at a later date specified by the issuer. A news release should be printed and should include the full name and telephone number of the person who should be contacted if reporters want additional information. According to Ordovensky and Marx (1993), the release should be written in journalistic style and address the following five W's:

- ◆ Who is issuing the release?
- ◆ What is the release about?
- ◆ When will the event in question take place?
- ◆ Where will the event in question take place?
- ◆ Why will the event in question take place?

The effectiveness of a press release is enhanced when the most important information is placed at the beginning, starting with a headline that grabs the reader's attention (Albrecht, 1997). Larger newspapers and broadcast media outlets often receive multiple news releases from public agencies, so reporters commonly sort through them on the basis of the headline and the first few paragraphs.

News releases may contain facts and opinions. Facts should be stated concisely, and if opinions are included, quotes from individuals expressing the opinions should be provided.

TABLE 10-2
Guidelines for Preparing a News Release

Guideline	Benefit
Identify the issuing organization immediately.	Reporters or editors know the source before reading the document; identification can provide credibility.
Identify the contact person.	Questions, comments, and decisions are directed to the appropriate person.
Provide a headline.	The reader is able to discern the nature of the release immediately; in large media markets, this can be critical.
Develop a strong first paragraph.	The first paragraph captures the reader's attention. It should provide a concise, engaging summary of the news release.
Brevity is a virtue.	Reporters and editors are more likely to read the entire document if it is not unduly lengthy.
Avoid using educational jargon.	The material in the release is more likely to be used by journalists if they do not need to make clarifying inquiries.
Double-space the document.	The reader has room to do editing and to insert comments or notes.
Provide vital time-related information.	State the date of the release and the intended date for publication or broadcast; doing so increases the likelihood that the release will be used as intended.
Insert either "more" or "###" at the end of each page.	The former notation informs the reader that additional information follows the end of a page; the latter informs the reader that the release is finished.
Predetermine distribution.	This action makes it more likely that the release will reach all intended audiences.
Include a brief overview of the district or school.	This action ensures that all readers will have an accurate description of the district or school issuing the release.
Provide supplementary material for complicated information.	Providing explanations in the news release will lengthen this document; some reporters may refuse to deal with it simply because it is too lengthy. If explanations of complicated content (e.g., test scores, budgets) need to be provided, use appendices or attachments.

Since news releases should not be very long (typically two or three pages), only the most important or effective quotes should be used. The release should be written just as you would like to see it appear in the newspaper the next day. Table 10-2 contains a summary of basic guidelines that can be used to structure press releases.

Planning and Conducting News Conferences

News conferences present a greater challenge than do news releases, largely because they are more time-consuming. According to Ordovensky and Marx (1993), school officials conduct them for three possible reasons:

1. They need to communicate with multiple media outlets simultaneously.
2. Reporters indicate that they need to ask them questions about breaking news.
3. The district's or school's most knowledgeable source needs to be available to the media, but this person has only a limited amount of time to devote to reporters.

Since the goal is to communicate with multiple media outlets simultaneously, giving reporters as much notice as possible is helpful to ensure that they can attend. An advisory, containing basic information about the purpose of a scheduled news conference and pertinent logistics (date, time, location, and parking), should be sent to reporters at least several days in advance when possible.

A news conference is more likely to be successful when it is planned properly. Here are suggestions you should follow:

- ◆ Select a time of day and a location that are convenient for reporters.
- ◆ Select a site that (a) can accommodate media equipment, (b) is convenient for reporters, and (c) is appropriate for the topic.
- ◆ Several hours before the conference is scheduled to begin, contact reporters and politely ask them if they will be attending. The call reminds them of the conference and symbolically conveys the fact that you consider their attendance to be important.
- ◆ Be prepared to distribute pertinent materials at the start of the conference. These include one or more relevant news releases and information packets containing supportive data.
- ◆ Anticipate reporter questions and be prepared to answer them.
- ◆ Inform attendees how they can get additional information.
- ◆ Avoid confrontational encounters with reporters and have a contingency plan if communication exchanges become emotional.
- ◆ Determine a procedure for conducting the conference in an orderly manner.
- ◆ Have a planned ending for the conference. The preferred method is to announce that only one more question can be asked.
- ◆ Advise school personnel not to leave the conference abruptly when it ends. Reporters may wish to interview them. Accordingly, only personnel who may be interviewed should attend the conference.
- ◆ News conferences should be scheduled sparingly because reporters are likely to ignore them if they believe such conferences are held for frivolous reasons. Always determine if the topic is newsworthy before scheduling a conference.

Correcting the Record

As in all human endeavors, mistakes are made in media stories about schools, and these errors are made on both sides of the fence—by reporters and by school officials. Even slight errors, such as misstating a person's official title, could have negative repercussions. Regardless of who is at fault, an administrator should always point out the mistake directly to the reporter. Lodging a complaint with an editor may create the perception that your primary intent is to discredit the reporter. If errors recur because the reporter is careless or unfair, then discussing the matter with the appropriate editor may be warranted.

School officials may have several motives for failing to correct the record. Several years ago, for example, a newspaper reporter mistakenly wrote that a school district agreed to pay \$250,000 to a junior high school girl who had sued her teacher for sexual harassment. After the story broke, school officials took disciplinary action against the teacher. Countless stories about the lawsuit and the disciplinary action followed. Although reporters covering

the story changed, they consistently relied on previous media reports for their historical background. Therefore, the report that the school district had paid the settlement was restated countless times over the next 5 years. The superintendent could have corrected the record by explaining that the damages were actually paid using the district's insurance pool and not the district's operating budget—but he did not. Initially, he remained silent in an effort to protect the reporter—a person he considered a friend. Later he concluded that correcting the record would not matter.

In other instances, administrators may be reluctant to correct errors favorable to schools or to themselves. As an example, a newspaper article on district test scores incorrectly stated that 86% of the students in a certain district met or exceeded state benchmarks on achievement tests. Actually, the correct figure was 68%; but after seeing the article, the superintendent advised his staff not to comment on it. Three weeks after the original article was published, the error was brought to the reporter's attention via an anonymous letter. She called the superintendent and asked him why he had not brought the error to her attention and he responded that it was not his responsibility to do so. Their relationship was never the same.

WORKING WITH ELECTRONIC MEDIA REPORTERS

Today, many stakeholders get most of their information about schools from electronic media such as radio, television, and the Web. When being interviewed by broadcast media reporters, you must be concerned with not only what you say but also with how you speak and, in the case of television streaming video, how you look when you speak. Administrators often find that electronic media reporters are more direct and confrontational than their print media peers (Walker, 1990).

Television

The tenor of a live or taped interview is crucial because both the interviewer and interviewee communicate verbally and nonverbally with each other and with audiences. Factors such as personal appearance, gestures, and facial expressions convey messages that either validate or contradict words. Thus, video interviews should never be taken lightly. The following recommendations can help you to be prepared for the experience:

- ◆ *Before you agree to do an interview, find out if it will be live or taped.* Taped interviews allow you to pause before answering or to stop and start over if you decide to rephrase your answer—hence, they are typically less stressful.
- ◆ *Anticipate the interview questions you will be asked.* Preparing answers to anticipated questions and determining how you will present these answers can reduce stress. To do this, have colleagues conduct a simulated interview with you so you can determine if your answers actually achieve their intended purposes.
- ◆ *Focus on nonverbal behavior.* Concentrate on the reporter's nonverbal behavior as well as your own. As examples, an interviewer who reads his notes while you answer a question he just asked may be telling you that he is uninterested in your responses;

by smiling before you answer a question, you may be telling the interviewer that you want to be cooperative and establish rapport with him and the audience.

- ◆ *Avoid one-word and excessively long answers.* One-word answers provide too little information and long answers suggest that you want to dominate the interview—either by focusing on predetermined “talking points” or by consuming time in an effort to limit the number of questions you will be asked.
- ◆ *Focus on messages you want to present.* Assuming that you know the topic of the interview in advance, predetermine two or three key points you want to emphasize, then inject them in your answers periodically.
- ◆ *Dress appropriately.* Your appearance can cause viewers to pay more attention to how you look than to what you say. As examples, both overdressing and underdressing can prompt the interviewer and audience to question your credibility. As a general rule, you should dress as you do normally when you are performing your duties.
- ◆ *Suggest questions to the interviewer.* Some reporters welcome suggested questions, especially if they are not very knowledgeable of the topic to be discussed. If you are able to propose questions, doing so makes it more likely that you will convey your focused messages (Ordovensky & Marx, 1993).
- ◆ *Maintain eye contact with the interviewer and try to ignore the cameras.* When you and the interviewer are together in the same studio, remember that the audience is observing your conversation. By not maintaining eye contact with the interviewer, you are conveying nonverbal messages that usually are interpreted negatively (e.g., you dislike the interviewer or you disrespect her). In satellite interviews (i.e., when you and the interviewer are not in the same studio), looking into the camera when answering is proper.
- ◆ *Be careful what you say during a commercial break.* Things you say during breaks are not de facto “off the record.” For example, the interviewer may tell the audience that during a commercial break you expressed discomfort with the questions being asked.
- ◆ *Avoid being manipulated or intimidated.* An interviewer may try to influence your emotions, such as inducing you to be aggressive, passive, or anxious. By recognizing potential manipulation or intimidation, you are more likely to remain in control of your emotions (Howard & Mathews, 2006).
- ◆ *Avoid being derailed.* To remain focused on your message, you need to inject transitions at the end of your answers. For example, you might say, “Rather than spending all of our time talking about financial problems, can we now focus on academic programs?”
- ◆ *Avoid nervous habits.* Tapping your finger on the table or shuffling your papers presents an image of uneasiness.
- ◆ *Do not tolerate constant interruptions.* If the reporter keeps interrupting you while you are answering questions, politely request that you be given adequate time to make your points.
- ◆ *Use visuals to enhance critical points.* Video is a medium that favors the use of pictures, graphs, and charts (Parker, 1991).

In larger media markets, television reporters are assigned to cover school districts; occasionally, they attend board meetings looking for short pieces that can be integrated into the nightly news broadcast. These spots provide opportunities for administrators to deliver a message, but the time is limited—often less than one minute. Thus, words for these short pieces must be chosen carefully (Parker, 1991).

Radio

Radio station reporters often contact administrators via telephone without advance notice. Typically, they are seeking a few sound bites that can be used to enhance a story. If the reporter intends to make an audiotape of your conversation, she or he should inform you and gain your permission. If the reporter is taking written notes instead of taping, you need to provide time for him or her to write or type them.

Radio offers an excellent opportunity for direct audience involvement via call-in shows (Austin & Pinkleton, 2001). Consequently, station personnel may invite administrators to participate in scheduled programs where the purpose is to conduct an in-depth interview coupled with audience participation. If you are contacted to do such a program, you should accept only if you have extensive knowledge of the topic(s) to be discussed and if your employer agrees that you should do it. If you are not highly knowledgeable of the topic, recommend another school official to the reporter.

Although many of the suggestions for appearing on television are relevant to radio, there are several notable considerations that pertain only to radio:

- ◆ If the topic and time of an interview are known in advance, prepare notes and use them to respond to questions. When you are called without advanced notice, see if the reporter will agree to conduct the interview a little later in the day—thus giving you time to prepare notes.
- ◆ Unless a radio interview is being conducted before a live audience, nonverbal behavior and personal appearance are not factors. Thus, words are the only conduit for the messages you want to convey.
- ◆ You usually have greater opportunity to discuss essential points in detail on radio because the time frames generally are longer than they are on television.
- ◆ Presenting statistical data on the radio is more difficult because you cannot use charts or other visual aids to influence the audience.

Web-Based Outlets

Increasingly, information about districts and schools is being made available via the Internet. The increasing availability of streaming media content via broadband is driving traditional sources of audio content, such as radio stations, to use the Internet to develop original online content (Cox, 2000). Newspapers also are making their content available online, typically within 24 hours after publication. In the case of established media outlets, the Internet provides a medium for reaching more people, and it provides opportunities for users to retrieve past articles or broadcasts quickly and easily. However, the content is still produced by journalists who are employed by these businesses.

Other forms of online journalism present a unique challenge to school administrators. Examples of these outlets include online journals, community Web pages, education association Web pages (e.g., those of the state department of education, school board association, teacher organizations), political action group Web pages, and Web logs (or “blogs”). Online journalism outlets, discussed earlier in Chapter 8, often are interactive (i.e., they provide opportunities for the public to respond) and hypertextual (i.e., they offer hyperlinks to related stories, archives, and selected resources; Deuze, 2005).

Relationships with persons who generate stories about schools through Internet-only outlets are difficult to develop for at least three reasons. First, administrators often will never meet these individuals; in some instances, their identities are purposely concealed. Second, many of these individuals are not professional journalists; therefore, they develop their own reporting standards. Third, many of them are driven by political motives; therefore, their reporting decisions may be based on emotions and self-interests, rather than rationality. Even so, administrators should identify and then monitor Internet sources that provide news, opinions, and other types of information relevant to the employing district or school.

SUMMARY

In an information age, school officials are expected to provide information frequently, accurately, and honestly. Their ability to do so usually depends on their relationships with journalists. Effective relationships require both parties to understand each other's roles and to develop a mutual appreciation for these roles and responsibilities. Table 10-3 includes a summary of media relations suggestions discussed in this chapter.

TABLE 10-3
Summary of Media Relations Suggestions

Issue	Suggestions
Organizing the program	Develop a media relations plan that is connected to the district's PR plan; determine who will be responsible for administering public information functions; determine who will serve as spokespersons.
Gaining an understanding of journalists	Learn about the role and responsibilities of journalists and use that knowledge to form opinions about the media.
Building and maintaining positive relationships	Media relations are about personal relationships—between you and reporters. Take the initiative to meet them and always try to be cooperative.
Answering media inquiries	Make yourself accessible, honor deadlines, and never lie. When you cannot answer, provide an explanation instead of saying "no comment."
Speaking to a reporter off the record	Do not do it under any circumstances.
Dealing with negative news	If the news is true, admit it, and then focus attention on your plan to resolve the problem.
Issuing news releases	Make sure the content is newsworthy, follow the format presented in this chapter, and accommodate reporter questions.
Holding news conferences	Make sure the topic merits a conference; schedule the conference to accommodate reporters; plan carefully so that you maintain control.
Conveying your message	Pursue positive stories by capitalizing on media interests.
Correcting errors	Always bring errors to the attention of the reporter, and then determine if issuing a formal correction is in the best interest of all parties.
Working with electronic media	Understand how messages are shaped via radio, television, and Web-based outlets.

Being criticized by the media, directly or indirectly, is painful for administrators. When this occurs, you may be tempted to hide, express indifference, or make excuses. None of these reactions, however, is advantageous. Even worse, you may opt to publicly counterattack; this myopic rejoinder virtually ensures that future interactions with journalists will be acrimonious. Effective administrators recognize that conflict, including disputes with journalists, is inevitable, and rather than ignoring the problem or surrendering to it, they capitalize on the situation. They do this by viewing the conflict both as a learning opportunity (at the personal and organizational levels) and as an opportunity for organizational growth (Kowalski, 2006). As an example, a forward-thinking superintendent responded to negative media stories about crowded classrooms by first educating her administrative staff about possible solutions and then convincing the school board to support a school construction referendum.

Although it may appear that some reporters are interested in covering only negative school stories, the media actually report both positive and negative stories. In most school systems, the quantity of positive and negative stories is basically equal over time (Shaw, 1987). Unfortunately, positive stories often capture less attention than negative stories, and this partially explains why many administrators believe the media are predisposed to be critical. As an administrator, you should seek to develop relationships with reporters because in an information-based society, journalists have the power to shape public opinion.

QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

CASE STUDY

1. Was it a good idea for the school board to name one of its members as the official media spokesperson to deal with this scandal? Why or why not?
2. Evaluate the principal's decision to urge the faculty to remain silent. Would you have done this? Why or why not?
3. Can a principal control media access to students? If so, under what conditions?
4. Should the superintendent have been more visible in making media statements with regard to this case? Why or why not?
5. By refusing to comment about the scandal, did school officials encourage or discourage journalists from pursuing related stories?
6. What actions could the superintendent or principal have taken to communicate with stakeholders about the scandal immediately after it became public?
7. Why were many residents in the school district angry about the employment of a private detective?

CHAPTER

8. What is a media relations plan?
9. What information should be contained in a media relations plan?
10. Content in the chapter stresses the point that media relations are really about personal relationships. What does this mean?
11. When and how should administrators react to errors in media articles or stories?
12. Why should school administrators have a basic understanding of journalism?

13

CHAPTER

Responding to Crisis

CASE STUDY: SUICIDE AT MCKINLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL

As usual, Principal Beth Rodriguez arrived at McKinley Middle School at about 7:15 a.m. after having breakfast at her favorite restaurant. She was startled to find several police cruisers and an ambulance, lights flashing, parked in front of the building. Her first thoughts were that a security alarm had been activated accidentally or that someone had entered the school illegally during the night. As she approached the school, she was stopped by the police and told no one could enter the building. After identifying herself, she was allowed to enter. Upon doing so, she saw the two custodians talking to police officers in the main entry area. As she approached them, the officer in charge, knowing who she was, said that he wanted to speak with her alone in her office.

Once there, the officer told her that at approximately 5:30 a.m., a custodian called the police emergency number, 911, and reported finding the body of Bill Block, a popular science teacher, hanging from a rafter in the gymnasium. The officer added that his death appeared to be a suicide but that two detectives were still collecting evidence. Moreover, an autopsy would have to be performed to confirm that initial assessment. He added that the detectives were estimating that the time of death was 7 or 8 hours earlier.

Shaken by the tragic news, Principal Rodriguez found it difficult to concentrate. What should she tell the teachers and support staff? What should she do with the students once they arrived? What would she do when reporters descended on the school? Never having to deal with such a situation previously, none of the answers was apparent to her. She approached the detectives. After some consultation, they told her that no other person would be allowed to enter until the body was removed, and the gymnasium could not be used until the investigation was concluded later that day.

It was now 7:45 a.m., and as the principal looked out the entry doors, she could see that many of the employees were standing behind a police barricade. The first student buses would be arriving in less than 20 minutes.

At that point, one of the detectives approached and told the principal that they would be removing the body in about 5 minutes. He then said, "Two officers will remain to seal the gym area. The custodians told us that Mr. Block was not married, and to their knowledge, he has no family in the local community."

The principal acknowledged that the information was correct. Then the detective added, "You need to decide what you are going to do with people outside. After students arrive, you could have a real mess out there. And, I'm sure reporters are going to be here shortly."

The principal's head was spinning. She reached for her cell phone and called the superintendent's office. The secretary indicated that he and the district's only assistant superintendent were attending a conference and were not scheduled to return until 2 days later. She informed the secretary of the suicide and asked her to have the superintendent call her as soon as possible. Immediately after the conversation, she hurried back to her office and began looking for the school's crisis plan. She knew it was in her file, but without the aid of her secretary, she was not sure where.

INTRODUCTION

As the case study demonstrates, administrators find it difficult to think clearly when confronted with crisis because the situations are uncommon and highly stressful. Any decision the principal makes is apt to affect students, the staff, and even the community. Thus, being prepared is not a luxury, it is a necessity. In the aftermath of highly publicized murders occurring in schools over the past several decades, states have required schools to develop crisis plans. Mandates, however, ensure neither the quality of a plan nor its appropriate implementation. The middle school principal in the case study knew she had a plan, but did not know what it contained in relation to a death at school; when she needed it, she did not know where it was.

Administrators, who have had to manage a crisis, uniformly admit that preparation and practice are essential. This is especially true with respect to dealing with media and the public. Today, tragedies, even those occurring in remote locations, are almost certain to get national media coverage. Once this occurs, administrative behavior is judged by the public. Noted safety expert, Kenneth Trump, warns that many superintendents and principals have not been prepared to deal with these situations; by communicating ineffectively, they created a “crisis after the crisis” (Kowalski, 2005b). That is, the public judged them to be incompetent and the school system to be ineffective or negligent.

This chapter explores connections between crisis management and PR. First, the process of crisis planning is explained; both process and plan content are addressed. Then focused attention is given to communication; recommended procedures are detailed for action before, during, and after a crisis.

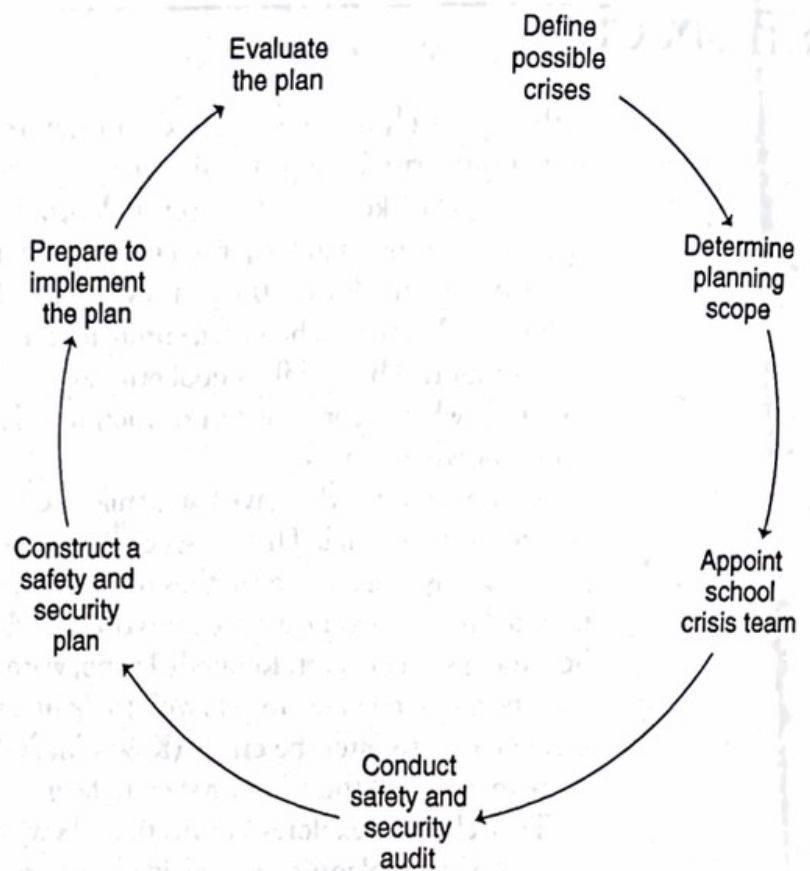
After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- ◆ Describe the range of crises that can occur in schools or in the environments in which schools operate.
- ◆ Identify the purpose and process of a school safety and security audit.
- ◆ Delineate the purposes of a school safety and security plan.
- ◆ Explain the relationship between safety and security audit and safety and security plan.
- ◆ Identify the purpose and role of a school crisis team.
- ◆ Describe criteria for appointing members of the school crisis team.
- ◆ Explain the importance of communication prior to, during, and after a crisis situation.

SAFETY AND SECURITY PLANNING

As school security expert Kenneth Trump (2002) advises administrators, it is better to be prepared than to be scared. And arguably, the best way to prepare is to plan. School safety and security planning should have two primary purposes: preventing possible crises and providing guidelines for crises that are not prevented. For plans to be successful, however, they need to be tailored to a specific school because schools and communities are never identical. For example, support services, such as crime and fire protection, are not the same in all

FIGURE 13-1
Developing, Implementing, and
Evaluating a School Safety and
Security Plan



cities; even two elementary schools in the same district may have substantially different physical facilities. The intent here is to identify issues that should be addressed in developing a school safety and security plan. These components are illustrated in Figure 13-1.

Integrating District and School Responsibilities

Before any actual planning occurs, superintendents and principals need to have a clear understanding of their individual responsibilities for safety and security planning. This includes knowing which decisions and support need to be provided at each level. Ideally, a school system will have a district plan and individual school plans. The former is established first and provides policy and guidelines that facilitate the development of the latter. More precisely, district plans often set requirements and identify resources whereas an individual school plan includes specifications tailored to that specific environment.

Explaining the ideal relationship between a district and school plan, Hammond (2008) provided the following examples of how the two documents should be interfaced:

- ◆ *Preventive measures.* The district plan identifies highly effective measures; an individual school plan includes selected measures deemed most appropriate for that specific environment.
- ◆ *Crisis committees.* The district plan specifies (a) a requirement for establishing such a committee in each school, (b) guidelines for appointing members, and (c) scope of responsibilities; an individual school plan determines actual committee structure and individual member roles and responsibilities.

- ◆ *Safety and security plans.* The district plan establishes guidelines for required school plans; an individual school plan determines how those guidelines are to be met.
- ◆ *Safety drills.* The district plan identifies requirements for conducting drills; an individual school plan specifies how the district requirements will be met.

The need for individual school plans is framed by the dissimilarities found among campuses in a school system. As examples, potential security issues in elementary and secondary schools are rarely identical; site concerns for two elementary schools in the same district may be quite different because of their size and location. Therefore, developing a generic district plan and having all schools in the system adopt it may be expedient but not prudent. The primary focus in this chapter is on developing, implementing, and evaluating an individual school safety and security plan.

Defining a Crisis

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1993) defines crisis as a "turning point for better or worse," a "decisive moment," or a "crucial time" and goes on to reveal that crisis is a "situation that has reached a critical phase." Poland and McCormick (1999) describe a crisis as a "temporary breakdown of coping" (p. 6) surrounded by anger, anxiety, and grief. In the context of the typical school, however, there are different levels of crises and administrators should identify and define them (Trump, 1998).

Crises range in scope and intensity; for example, they can affect only one person or affect an entire community. They can occur before, during, or after school, and in some instances, even away from the school campus, such as a fatal bus accident (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). They are typically unpredictable, and their cumulative effect on a district or school depends largely on the quantity and quality of management provided by administrators and other staff members (Fink, 1986).

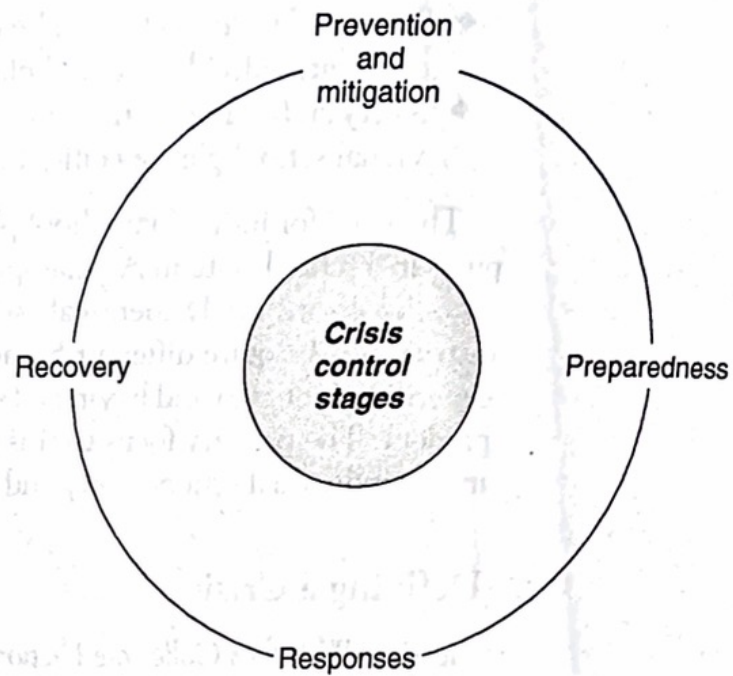
The range of situations that qualify as a crisis is actually broad. Violent acts or threats are most readily recognized; but natural disasters, such as fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, snowstorms, and earthquakes, also qualify. Other types of crises include accidental deaths, suicides, chemical spills, accidents, structural failures in the facility (collapsed wall or roof), and acts of terrorism. Moreover, the changing nature of schools needs to be considered in relation to possible crises. Although hurricanes and tornadoes have always posed a threat to schools, for example, recent experiences have revealed how these situations wiped out databases, hardware, and software in schools unprepared to protect these vital resources (O'Hanlon, 2007).

Planning Scope

A school crisis plan provides specific content and prescribed procedures. *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities* (U. S. Department of Education, 2007) explains that effective planning is a continuous four-stage cycle (also see Figure 13-2).

1. *Prevention and mitigation.* This stage has three parts: a safety audit of the school, identification of local resources/agencies (and their plans), and an analysis of traffic patterns that may be pertinent to emergencies. In addition, administrators should attempt to coordinate information with local businesses and government agencies.

FIGURE 13-2
Crisis Control: Linear Stages



2. *Preparedness.* In this phase, administrators develop site plans intended to be used by first responders (i.e., agencies such as police and fire departments that typically are the first to arrive on the scene of a crisis). Included are floor plans, building elevations, and information about entryways, windows, utilities, communication/alarm systems, and control panels. Plans for conducting drills are also addressed at this phase.
3. *Response.* This phase should address issues such as locating and equipping a command center; identifying evacuation routes; disseminating crisis-planning information to relevant stakeholders; determining how reporters, parents, and spectators will be managed; and maintaining the security of the school site during a crisis.
4. *Recovery.* This phase should detail strategies for returning the school to normal operations. Provisions for aftercare services by psychologists, counselors, and other health providers need to be included.

By conceptualizing school safety and security plans as living documents, administrators update and improve them continuously (Clarksean & Pelton, 2002).

As part of the planning process, principals need to consider individual roles and responsibilities. Foremost in this regard is assembling a school crisis team—a group that is “responsible for developing a plan and coordinating activities during an actual crisis” (Quinn, 2002, p. 6). In addition, the team coordinates the distribution of the plan and oversees simulations to ensure that employees and students follow the plan correctly (Rettig, 1999).

Appointing the School Crisis Team

The principal is responsible for appointing team members, and in fulfilling this responsibility, he or she should select personnel who meet the following criteria:

- ◆ They are competent communicators.
- ◆ They have a reasonably high tolerance for stress and know how to manage personal stress.

- ◆ They are interested in serving on the committee and are available to do so.
- ◆ They possess knowledge and skills pertinent to the committee's responsibilities.
- ◆ They are respected in the school and community.

Typically, principals chair these teams; however, they should not assume that they will be present during an emergency (Brunner & Lewis, 2005). Therefore, appointing an assistant principal or another responsible employee as the assistant chair is essential. Other employees commonly appointed include security personnel, custodians, the school nurse, counselors, a coach or athletic trainer, and several other teachers (Quinn, 2002). Once appointed, committee members are assigned to the following specific team roles:

- ◆ *Vice chair*—assumes responsibility for crisis management if the principal is not present.
- ◆ *First-responder coordinator*—meets all first-responders, directs them to the crisis area, and provides them with pertinent data (e.g., provides maps, floor plans).
- ◆ *First-aid responders*—trained in first-aid techniques, they render emergency medical assistance until emergency personnel arrive. (If no certified first-aid providers are employed, the principal should select an employee to receive requisite training for this role.)
- ◆ *Sweep-team coordinators*—the last ones out of the building during an evacuation, checking the hallways, restrooms, and other areas to determine if other persons and suspicious items remain.
- ◆ *Communication coordinator*—responsible for all communication during a crisis.
- ◆ *Staff liaison*—communicates with school employees about the committee's activities and seeks concerns that need to be directed to the committee.
- ◆ *Student liaison*—communicates with students about the committee's activities and seeks concerns that need to be directed to the committee.
- ◆ *Parent liaison*—communicates with parents about the committee's activities and seeks concerns that need to be directed to the committee.

Ideally, a school crisis team conducts at least one open forum annually regarding the evaluation of and revisions to the existing crisis plan. This function makes it more likely that the plan will be evaluated periodically and that persons involved with the school are given opportunities to voice concerns and make suggestions.

Safety and Security Audit

According to Trump (1998), a safety and security audit (also referred to as *vulnerability audits*) provides information about existing conditions that constitute vulnerabilities and risks. Gillens (2005) divides this process into the following tasks:

- ◆ *Policy analysis*—assessing policies and regulations that pertain to school safety and security to determine if they are sufficient, pertinent, and beneficial.
- ◆ *Critical infrastructure and asset identification*—assessing a school's information protection framework and analyzing its effectiveness in relation to protecting the school.
- ◆ *Critical infrastructure continuity and contingency planning*—assessing current provisions for procuring services that protect against major disruptions to normal operations.

- ◆ *Physical infrastructure analysis*—assessing physical security and controls as a first line of defense for both the facility and the site.
- ◆ *Analysis of student discipline data*—identifying crimes or other problems that potentially jeopardize a school.

Several states have developed safety audit programs for use by districts (Brickman, Jones, & Groom, 2004). Trump (1998) cautions, however, that checklists or prepackaged audits may be less than ideal. Most notably, they may not include all topics relevant to a school's safety (e.g., the audit of a school located near a hazardous material center may need special considerations) or they may be used by persons unqualified to make safety decisions.

In recent years, school officials also have been urged to engage in environmental scanning activities intended to identify possible vulnerabilities and risks outside the school. Such information is typically obtained through relationships with other governmental agencies (Coombs, 2007).

The safety and security audit provides a foundation for developing a school safety and security plan; therefore, it should be completed prior to developing the plan. The written audit also has symbolic significance; it informs employees, students, and the public that school officials are paying attention to school safety and security issues (Kowalski, 2002).

Constructing a Crisis Plan

Before putting together the actual plan, the crisis team should verify that the following three tasks have been completed successfully:

1. Identifying potential crisis situations via the audit
2. Defining each potential crisis by describing qualifying characteristics
3. Assigning roles to the members of the crisis team

Administrators are expected to provide leadership for constructing a crisis management plan (Duke, 2002). Specifically, they create a collaborative environment in which team members work with representatives of various government agencies and services (e.g., police departments, local hospitals). And once this environment is established, they facilitate collaboration.

Simply borrowing a crisis plan developed for another school may appear to be a prudent shortcut to crisis planning, but experience suggests otherwise. To be effective, a plan should be written to meet the specific needs determined by both the school's physical environment, its population (employees, students, visitors), and the community being served (Trump, 1998). The most complete plans include both security strategies and crisis guidelines. The former are preventive measures carried out in the hope of preventing crises or at least reducing the severity of a crisis. Examples include restricting access to the school, improving internal communication capabilities, upgrading alarm systems, and inspecting and repairing potential hazards. The latter provide directions for handling situations when they occur. For guidelines to be useful, they need to be clear, attainable, and periodically practiced (Trump, 2002).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2007), a number of steps should be taken to create a positive planning context:

- ◆ *Identify and involve relevant stakeholders*—individuals concerned about safety and security and individuals likely to be involved if there is a crisis.
- ◆ *Consider existing plans and information*—not only those developed by the school but also by other local agencies.
- ◆ *Identify potential crises*—the various types of situations that may potentially occur within the school or within the community and affecting schools.
- ◆ *Define and publicize roles and responsibilities*—so that they are known to all relevant publics.
- ◆ *Develop communication processes*—designed to reach all relevant publics.
- ◆ *Obtain necessary equipment and supplies*—needed during a crisis.
- ◆ *Identify immediate responses*—such as evacuations, lockdowns, and relocation decisions.
- ◆ *Develop and collect pertinent data*—such as maps, floor plans, and site access information.
- ◆ *Develop accountability procedures*—that detail how students will be managed or released from school.

In addition to writing a crisis plan, school officials must take steps that help ensure the plan's success (Thompson, 2004). The first step is locating an area to be the command center. This area should be secure, accessible, sufficiently large, and conducive to storing essential equipment. In addition, Trump (1998) recommends the following:

- ◆ Appointing alternates to assume responsibilities for key roles in the event that one or more committee members are absent during an actual crisis;
- ◆ Determining responsibilities for school employees who are not team members;
- ◆ Establishing emergency codes for communicating during a crisis; and
- ◆ Identifying resource people, additional information needed, and backup communication equipment.

Preparing Employees to Implement the Plan

Implementation requires communicating the plan's content to stakeholders and then conducting simulations so that implementation can be practiced (Smiar, 1992). The structure and appearance of the plan can discourage employees from reading it; therefore, avoid constructing unattractive, complicated, and lengthy documents (Jones & Paterson, 1992).

Principals who have had firsthand experience with a crisis (e.g., Baker, 2005) emphasize the necessity of preparing faculty and staff to implement the approved plan. The following are the most common ways to do this:

- ◆ *Orientation.* One or more orientation sessions should be conducted after a plan is adopted to ensure that employees know and understand the content.
- ◆ *Training.* Training sessions are intended to develop knowledge and skills related to the plan, including the ability to identify potential security problems. Studies examining

school preparedness (e.g., Gainey, 2009) indicate that in schools with a safety and security plan, employee training often remains a concern.

- ◆ *Drills.* These are simulations conducted to practice the plan. They should be held periodically but never less than once a year—even if the plan has not been revised since the previous year. Simulations should include implementation of procedures planned for the aftermath of a crisis (e.g., personal counseling).

Evaluating the Plan

To be effective, crisis plans need to be living documents—that is, they are revised periodically to meet changing school and community conditions. Plan evaluations should be both summative and formative. The summative component determines whether the plan achieved its objectives; the formative component determines whether changes and improvements are necessary for the next school year.

The following are several other suggestions for evaluating plans:

- ◆ Conduct an annual safety and security audit prior to each school year and interface the findings with the current safety and security plan. If changes have occurred, the audit should detect them.
- ◆ Have legal counsel review the plan for liability and privacy issues (Jones & Paterson, 1992).
- ◆ Have the crisis team determine if revisions are necessary so that the plan can be revised at least several weeks before a new school term begins.

CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Administrators who have experienced a school crisis usually comment that reporters and parents arrived at the school more quickly than they had anticipated. In this information age, there is little lag time between an incident and public disclosure. Citing his work with schools, Kenneth Trump notes that problems such as overloading telephone systems, having a nonfunctioning public address system, or having too few or poor-quality two-way radios create communication failures that intensify the negative aspects of a crisis (Kowalski, 2005b).

Pre-crisis Tasks

Given the frenzy surrounding the first hour of a crisis, principals perform more effectively when they are prepared to initiate communication that can reach several audiences. Many of them admit, however, that they have not studied communication, at least not formally and not in relation to their administrative responsibilities (Kowalski, 2005a). Therefore, communication during a crisis should receive focused attention. First, administrators should recognize the common notification devices that may be available to them. A variety of notification devices can be used in relation to a crisis. According to Kennedy (2009) examples include cell phones, alarms, school/district

Web pages, intercom systems, email, and portable loudspeakers. Second, they should adopt the following recommendations:

- ◆ *Develop a crisis communication plan*—preferably embedded in the school safety and security plan.
- ◆ *Designate a media spokesperson*—preferably a person who has good relations with the media and various stakeholder groups.
- ◆ *Identify key stakeholders*—representing all segments of the community, including contacts at other governmental agencies.
- ◆ *Anticipate difficult questions*—and shape possible responses to them.
- ◆ *Determine policy directing employees and students*—especially with regard to communicating with the media.
- ◆ *Acquire necessary equipment and supplies*—allowing various forms of communication to occur.
- ◆ *Verify the compatibility of school communication devices*—such as cell phones and two-way radios used to reach first-responders.
- ◆ *Establish a database containing pertinent information*—that can be used for communication during a crisis.
- ◆ *Establish communication pathways (protocols)*—such as telephone or email trees (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).
- ◆ *Provide training*—that ensures all school employees, including the communications director, understand what they are expected to do.

Questions about making the school safety and security plan a public document are frequently raised by principals and superintendents. Kenneth Trump suggests that school officials should not put their crisis plans on the school Web site or otherwise distribute them to the general public. Rather, he advises that school officials inform parents and the media that a plan is in place and that school personnel are prepared to follow it if a crisis occurs (Kowalski, 2005b).

Brunner and Lewis (2007) identify seven points of information that principals should share with primary stakeholders about safety and security:

1. That the school has an emergency response plan;
2. That the school has a check-in procedure for visitors during the school day;
3. That parents should contact the school officials immediately if they are aware of a potentially dangerous situation;
4. That the district has safety and security policies that are enforced consistently;
5. That there is a communication plan for disseminating information during an emergency;
6. That the expertise of a school crisis team is available; and
7. That multiple strategies are used to maintain a safe school climate.

Communicating During the Crisis

The first level of communication includes providing information to school employees and students. Faculty and staff, in particular, should be briefed as to the nature of the crisis and kept aware of developments (Heath & Sheen, 2005).

Typically, voice commands are the best and most efficient way to notify building occupants initially that a crisis has or may occur. Codes, such as the following ones, inform employees of the nature of the crisis and direct them to take prescribed actions:

- ◆ *Code yellow*: Lock down classrooms; an unauthorized person is in the building.
- ◆ *Code blue*: A catastrophic medical event is occurring in the building.
- ◆ *Code red*: A weather-related event is imminent; move to your assigned safe area.
- ◆ *Code purple*: Evacuate the building and proceed to a designated student holding area.
- ◆ *Code green*: A general all clear; return to your classroom.

The school safety and security plan should detail actions to be taken once persons inside the school have been notified of the event. For example, when “code yellow” is sounded, teachers usually are instructed to have their students get on the floor and crawl toward the outside wall of the building, to lock the classroom door, to cover the window in the door, and to position students so that they are not visible to persons outside the building.

After school employees are notified, measures should be taken to inform parents and the media. Experts agree that administrators often err by not trying to work effectively with these two publics during a crisis (Kowalski, 2005b). Communication at this level should adhere to the following guidelines:

- ◆ Try to have as many facts as possible before communicating, anticipating that parents and reporters will have questions.
- ◆ Use common terminology and consistent messages (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).
- ◆ Provide accurate messages and answer questions (Warner, 1994).
- ◆ Avoid answering hypothetical questions; rather than speculating on what might occur, rely on the facts to detail what has happened and what is being done to address the situation.
- ◆ Clear press releases with the school crisis team leader and communication coordinator.
- ◆ Do not disclose the names of students and employees unless legal approval to do so has been granted (Fiore, 2002).
- ◆ Inform parents of the actions being taken in relation to students (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).
- ◆ Be proactive; contact parents and media as soon as possible even if they have not yet contacted you.
- ◆ Activate a crisis hotline so that persons can seek information.
- ◆ Develop messages you want to communicate to parents and media.
- ◆ Do not be evasive or defensive; focus on what is being done to manage the crisis.
- ◆ Respond to rumors immediately.
- ◆ Issue press releases when appropriate (Kowalski, 2002).
- ◆ Maintain a log of media inquiries, responses, and press releases (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Communicating After the Crisis

Public interest and media coverage do not end when a crisis is brought under control. You should anticipate that reporters will analyze causes and administrative responses and will ask questions about why the crisis was not averted. Therefore, school officials should be prepared to explain how the situation evolved, to explain how it was managed after it evolved, and to respond to other stakeholder concerns.

Anticipating that concerns will linger after the crisis has subsided, the communication director and principals should contact parents and let them know that their comments, questions, and suggestions are welcomed (Sharp, 2005). In addition, the following actions are usually advantageous in providing information to the media, parents, and other stakeholders:

- ◆ Analyze the underlying cause of the crisis and the manner in which school personnel and first-responders reacted to it.
- ◆ Summarize what was done to bring the school site and facility back to normal operation.
- ◆ Determine how employees and students have adjusted after the crisis was controlled.
- ◆ Develop a list of follow-up procedures that were implemented and aftercare services that were available and provided.
- ◆ Debrief employees and students about the crisis.
- ◆ Describe lessons learned from the crisis.
- ◆ Describe adjustments that were made to the school safety and security plan as a result of the crisis (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

SUMMARY

Credibility, trust, and competence help determine if a school administrator is successful in managing a disaster. Credibility stems from being prepared, letting stakeholders know you are prepared, and helping others to become prepared. Trust emanates from open and continuous communication with relevant publics, both inside and outside the school. And competence comes from acquiring knowledge and applying it so that the requisite skills are mastered.

This chapter provided an overview of crisis planning as it relates primarily to individual schools. Special attention was given to planning, managing, and communicating. As you reflect on the chapter's content, consider what has been done or not done in your school, district, and community to ensure that schools remain safe and secure and to ensure that crises are managed effectively if they occur. In most communities, one will find substantially more security provisions than were in place prior to 1990, primarily as a result of federal and state requirements for safety planning and crisis management. Less attention, however, has been given to the importance of communication before, during, and after a disaster occurs.