Why School Public Relations?

School public relations is important because more and more of the school administrator's time is spent dealing with people. In most communities, taxpayers are letting it be known that they care about the quality of education and about its cost and want to be informed about it. An interest in better communications skills has also been sparked by strong teacher associations and unions that provide public relations help for members. As teacher representatives demand more explanations and as the nuances of negotiation become more subtle, top administrators must learn to be comfortable communicating in diverse situations with myriad publics.

An administrator may provide excellent leadership for the school's curriculum and may be a financial wizard, but if an administrator cannot effectively communicate with the school board, parents, taxpayers, staff, and the news media—on a regular basis—his or her days in the district will be few.

News coverage frequently declares one of the following reasons for a superintendent's dismissal: "He couldn't communicate with the board," "Her comments alienated parents," or "He just didn't have a good feel for this community." Knowing the public and being able to keep abreast of the community's thinking are major requirements for today's successful administrator. Suggestions on how to accomplish these tasks are offered in **Chapter 3** .

Rich Bagin, executive director of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), cites the following as the commonly found reasons that school and community relations fail:

1. Too often educators equate communication with the dissemination of information. They fail to understand that communication is a two-way process that engages parents, taxpayers and communities in meaningful relationships.
2. School communication and engagement often are reactive to events and situations rather than planned efforts targeted at meeting specific objectives.
3. Leaders and front-line employees do not understand their specific communication roles, have little or no accountability for how they communicate, and receive little support to help them fulfill their communication roles.
4. Educators often have little communication training or experience and are not comfortable when issues have the potential to place their actions and decisions in the public or media spotlights.[1]

If school officials aren't convinced that they have a responsibility to communicate because communication helps people learn or because it builds confidence in the schools, they might want to consider another reason: to keep their jobs. More and more school systems now offer parents some opportunity to choose the school or programs their children will attend. This means that images and perceptions count more than ever for schools. Fair or not, accurate or not, schools that are perceived as being "good" will attract more students than schools that people do not seem to like. The point is that people working in schools that don't attract students will not have jobs. That sounds dramatic, but it probably will be the result because choice options continue to expand.

Why do people choose one school over another? What makes School A seem better than School B? Many people have different theories. Some feel that it is the overall image of the school projected by the school district newsletter and media coverage. Others feel that it is based on the test scores of graduates. Still others think that an aura, evolved over the years, continues, even though in reality the quality of that school has changed.

The reasons why people make school choices become important when considering the growing interest and action on school-choice options. Data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics show that between 1993 and 2007, the percentage of students in grades 1–12 attending a "chosen" public school (that is, a school other than the one to which they were assigned) increased from 11 to 16 percent. In the same period, the percentage attending their "assigned" public schools decreased from 80 to 73 percent.[2]

With the competition for public funds on the local, state, and national levels, it's imperative that educational leaders be effective spokespersons for

education. With only so many dollars available, the question facing legislators is whether those dollars should go for roads, bridges, health care, welfare, or education. Impressions are made daily by administrators—impressions that influence legislators' decisions about public education. While state and national associations can provide lobbying leadership, much also must be accomplished on a local level by school officials as they communicate in the community. Whether it's speaking in a classroom to explain how public education works (a neglected curriculum item in most schools) or having breakfast with a local legislator, the school administrator constantly affects the public perception of education. Because administrators lead a fishbowl existence in the community, it's important that they understand and support ways of building confidence in public education. Many of these ideas and techniques are, of course, applicable to those responsible for leadership in nonpublic schools.

For too many years school officials were reluctant to commit staff and funds to public relations. They felt that "public relations" carried a stigma—that it was perceived as "spin" for covering up or obscuring problems. Whether a school chooses to call it public relations, public information, community relations, or communications is relatively unimportant. The commitment to better planned, regular, two-way communications with all the audiences served by the schools is, however, important. One of the reasons more of a commitment has not been made may lie in the fact that so few school officials have been prepared to handle public relations responsibilities. In addition, education has in many cases continued its administrative organization with few changes in title or responsibilities over the years. Yet, a role-playing technique that asked thousands of taxpayers nationally what they would have done if given the chance to start the first school found that the need to communicate between the school and home was always one of the top two priorities.[3] Many of the commitments now considered almost sacrosanct were not listed as being among the top five necessities to ensure a successful school.

The importance of communication in the overall school operation is being recognized by an increasing number of states, as more are requiring that candidates for administrative certification complete a course in the field of community relations. National organizations, such as the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), have recognized the growing importance of school–community relations by devoting resources and conference sessions to the topic. Other regional and state education associations are committing more and more sessions to the topic on a regular basis.

Suggestions for Improving Public Confidence

The following suggestions to improve public confidence in educational leaders and in the schools have been adapted from observations made by John Wherry, then executive director of NSPRA, and Don Bagin, who was president of that organization.[4]

Do an Effective Job, and Let People Know about the Successes and Challenges

To increase the chances of doing an effective job in the public relations area, the initial step is to be sure that the schools themselves are doing an effective job. No public relations program can make a bad school look good for very long. On the other hand, an early step in building confidence in our schools is to let everyone know what the schools are doing well, what the problems are, and what's being done to solve the problems.

The public schools have made major contributions to the United States; although the schools are far from perfect, more should be done to promote their accomplishments. Pollster George Gallup long suggested that one of the biggest challenges facing educators was the need to let people know about the fine things being done in the schools.[5]

In addition to announcing successes, school officials must be ready to admit problems. The more educated, better informed, and more engaged populace that pays for the schools will not be fooled for very long by school officials who attempt to cover up problems. Constituents don't expect leaders to be perfect; they do expect them to recognize challenges and explain what's being done to meet them. A leader who admits that mistakes can occasionally be made encourages staff members to assume risks to

try programs that will improve the schools. The key is to establish a spirit of honesty and sincerity so the staff and community believe the information being shared.

The quest for excellence must be communicated to all staff members and the public. Only when people realize that school leaders are serious about this commitment will they have more confidence in the people running the schools. As more people consider the possibility of tax credits and vouchers, the private and parochial school choices loom as greater competition for public schools. School leaders must find ways to identify and overcome problems such as ineffective teachers and administrators.

If a commitment to excellence is not made, public schools will most likely find their image suffering even more with the emergence of school choice options. Parents who value education will avoid sending their children to a school where, for example, "fifth grade is the bad year because all three teachers should have been dismissed," especially if those parents have a child entering fifth grade.

Related to the question of quality is that of quantity. Just how much can the schools be expected to do? Should the public schools be expected to offer vocational training? Should they teach students how to brush their teeth and drive cars? One of the most serious challenges facing educational leaders is to gain a community consensus on what the expectations are for the schools. Only then can school leaders be evaluated on how well the schools are doing.

The Public's Concern about Discipline must be Taken Seriously

Year after year, the public's concern about public school discipline is rated at or near the top of the list by the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup survey of public attitudes toward public schools.[6] Whether the problem is real or perceived, it exists in the minds of the people who will help determine how much support public education receives.

Discipline means different things to different people, but some agreement on a definition exists. A series of regional meetings with parents, students, and educators sponsored by the Missouri Department of Education identified the following as the biggest discipline problems: disruptive classroom behavior, student disrespect for authority, student apathy toward learning, and absenteeism and class cutting.

The importance of the discipline factor in school selection was underlined in a study done in Gloucester County, New Jersey, a county used by the Gallup organization as representative of the country. The telephone study asked 100 parents who had always sent their children to public schools a series of questions about schools. Parents were asked whether they would continue to send their children to public schools if tax relief were provided, such as a voucher or tax credit. Only 41 percent said they would continue to send their children to public schools. When asked why, the number one reason given was "discipline."

To address the perception of discipline and its related safety and security issues, a program that involves parents, students, and staff should be developed to build a clear code. Many examples of strong discipline policies are being supported and even cheered by parents and communities. Programs that encourage more people to visit schools during the learning day can be a giant step in reducing misperceptions about discipline.

School Leaders Must Personalize the Schools more to Enhance the Comfort of those being Served

People make decisions on key purchases based on their personal experiences with the product, whether it be the choice of an automobile, a hotel, or a bank. How people feel about their schools is usually dictated in the same way. It's not so much the newspaper article or the newsletter story as it is the way a secretary responds to a question, or a teacher returns a phone call, or a guidance counselor or principal helps a student who is confused about an important decision.

Teachers who phone students' parents with positive news, principals who invite small groups of parents for lunch, and secretaries and custodians who greet all visitors as if they were board members do much to make people feel good about their schools. Because so few school employees have taken a course on how to deal with the public, an

in-service program to share ideas would help. Such a program is ideal in that it meets the challenge of appealing to all employees, inasmuch as everyone must communicate in some way with members of the community.

All employees must recognize their role in public relations. Studies show that people who acquire their information about the schools from board members and employees tend to support the schools more than people who get their information from other sources. One of the problems is that each entity (board members, administrators, and teachers) feels that the job of building public confidence in the schools belongs to another group. Teachers claim it's the board's job, the board says administrators should be doing it, and the administrators point to teachers as the people having the closest contact with parents. If all groups don't recognize the need to contribute in the public relations arena, the kind of confidence desired will never occur.

Staff Morale Must Be Improved

Today, a major concern of board members and administrators often is staff morale. In previous years, a major public relations concern was media relations, newsletter preparation, and community advisory committees. Now board members and administrators realize that staff morale affects external relations and has to be addressed.

One way to determine the level of morale is to ask this question: If you had an idea for improving the school where you work and it would cost nothing to implement, would you suggest it? Only between 20 and 40 percent of the 10,000 teachers and administrators surveyed in schools throughout the country said they would.[7]

Teachers and principals report that they don't suggest ideas anymore. When asked why, they note that the ideas are listened to but nothing new happens. With the current emphasis on computers and information dissemination, it must not be forgotten that the most precious part of a school is its staff. People need to be asked their opinions, and they need to be told when they do a good job. (**Chapter 7** offers specific strategies that will help accomplish these goals.) Community residents who hear various versions of an incident that occurred at a school tend to believe employees' versions more than other sources. It's vital, therefore, that employees be kept informed about school news, including impending decisions.

All School Officials Must Use and Insist That Others Use Comfortable Words

Public confidence in school leaders cannot be built with words that people don't understand. The educator who addresses the PTA or sends a memo to thousands of parents does little to enhance the school's image with jargon and multisyllabic words that the audience won't understand. Other chapters present specific ways to avoid the problem. Suffice it to say here that the utilization of maximal learning stations won't necessarily optimize the SAT scores of the multiethnic, multitrack, pubescent adolescents permeating the district.

Educators Must Stop Fighting Among Themselves and Start Building Coalitions

The former, almost guaranteed, support of parents is no longer sufficient to gain what educators think they and education deserve. Because the percentage of parents who have children in grades K–12 in the public schools is not a majority, the traditional support base has been eroded. Therefore, educators must work together to gain public and legislative confidence and support.

This working together has many implications; some will require that association leaders rethink their positions. A National School Boards Association president once asked that board members extend an olive branch to teachers. Many board members applauded; others disagreed. One teachers' association public relations director privately asked a friend of the board group, "What kind of trick is the olive branch?" It was no trick, but the question conveyed the lack of trust in the board–teacher relationship. As the public image of education is subject to closer scrutiny, more and more teachers, administrators, and board members are becoming aware of the need to work together. Teachers must work with other teachers, administrators, board members, parent support groups, and the business community to build the kind of coalition that will be listened to by legislators.

Need for a Communication Plan

A plan must be developed for community relations or little will happen. Board members and administrators can commiserate for a long time about the need for a public relations program, but it won't happen unless someone develops a plan and makes a commitment. The superintendent, or someone delegated by the superintendent, must be given the time and resources to develop a sound communications program. Some school districts, in an effort to emphasize the importance of the topic, have committed a year to in-service programs for all staff members to improve communication within the district. If building confidence is important, then that importance must be demonstrated with commitment. If the commitment is not made, chances are that little will happen, and different education factions will be able to look back and say, "We should have made the commitment."

For quite a while most experts and textbooks in school–community relations have suggested that the prime reason for communicating more effectively with the staff and community is to build confidence

in the school. There's nothing wrong with that. This confidence is very productive.

Yet some people tend to forget a vital catalyst for the communications undertaking: to help people learn better. This must be remembered. When schools embark on an effective communications program, support comes more easily when the people paying the bill recognize that communications is a key component of better learning.

This means that the public relations effort should entail dealing with people more than dealing with things. This will indeed build confidence and gain support of parents and others. More important, through involving people in the schools and in their children's learning, it will create a better learning atmosphere and encourage students to learn.

NSPRA recommends that school communication activities be planned and guided by a written communication plan. The organization recommends the following:

- The public relations/communication efforts are planned on a systematic (often annual) basis to support the achievement of the organization's goals and objectives.
- The plan has the approval of the superintendent/ chief executive officer.
- The plan focuses on meeting the goals of the organization and ultimately improving education, and to the extent possible, enhancing student achievement.
- The plan identifies the needs of target publics and uses research data to identify key messages and strategies for delivering those messages.
- Communication plans for specific program changes or initiatives are developed in conjunction with the staff responsible for them.
- Communication plans identify the various publics who will be affected and the strategies for reaching them.
- To the extent possible, communication plans include measurable goals for behavior change or accomplishment, deadlines, responsibilities, resources, and strategies.
- Plans are reviewed regularly to ensure that communication efforts remain relevant and are on schedule, and are adjusted whenever necessary to reach planned goals or to deal with emerging needs and opportunities.[9]

The two main purposes of such a program are to foster student achievement (through establishment of a positive school climate and parent and citizen involvement) and to build citizen knowledge and understanding leading to financial support.

To gain support for schools, more educators also are adopting marketing communication techniques for their schools and programs. A number of techniques and ideas, all aimed at building public confidence, have been developed in recent years. One of the most attention

getting has been using the marketing concept to sell the school's story to the public. William Banach and the Macomb Intermediate School District in Michigan used marketing techniques traditionally employed by companies to sell soap, cars, and other products. In essence, such programs often identify the audiences to be reached and define how the public schools can best meet the needs of those audiences with the schools' services. The Macomb program, for example, offered bumper stickers, refrigerator magnets, pencils, and other attention grabbers to keep the school story in front of large numbers of people. Some educators believe that this approach will reap results in the increasingly competitive environment in which schools now operate; others have been slower to accept such promotional techniques.

Whatever the feeling about marketing communication and promotion, most educators are becoming increasingly cognizant of the need to employ more community relations techniques than they are now using. This book, therefore, is organized to help the reader understand school–community relations and to employ successful communication techniques. The first part outlines the essentials of a school– community relations program. The second part explains the communication process and ways to communicate with the public as well as how to build sound and constructive relationships during special events. The third part features the various tools used to communicate to various audiences. The fourth and final part presents an assessment and evaluation of the results of a community relations program.

Questions

1. Explain how current national issues in education can work to erode public confidence in a local school district—and how school communication efforts might be used to preserve or boost confidence in local schools.
2. Why is it important to have a formal communication plan for a school district overall?
3. What key reasons are often found when school communication fails, and how can schools and educators best prepare to avoid such failures?
4. When might marketing communication techniques be appropriate for use in school communication efforts? When might marketing communications be inappropriate for use in school communication efforts?

Questions

1. Explain how current national issues in education can work to erode public confidence in a local school district—and how school communication efforts might be used to preserve or boost confidence in local schools.
2. Why is it important to have a formal communication plan for a school district overall?
3. What key reasons are often found when school communication fails, and how can schools and educators best prepare to avoid such failures?
4. When might marketing communication techniques be appropriate for use in school communication efforts? When might marketing communications be inappropriate for use in school communication efforts?