

## Public Character of the School

Despite the involvement of the federal government in local and state educational affairs, it is evident in the legal structure of state school systems and in the laws regulating their operation that the power to manage schools actually resides in the people. At the state level, the people have the right to support or oppose legislation affecting the education of children, to work for the modification and repeal of existing

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laws, and to decide at the polls who shall represent them in the legislature.

This right is similar at the local level, where fellow citizens are elected or appointed to membership on the board of education and are expected to carry out the popular will. To ensure the public character of the board of education, state law typically prescribes that parents and citizens shall have the right to be heard at a regular meeting of the board or to file in writing their ideas regarding educational objectives, policies, and programs. Regular meetings must be open to the public, and no vote on school business can be taken in private by the board. The minutes of the board's meetings and records of transactions are public property and may be inspected at any time on request by a citizen. The failure of a school board and its individual members to abide by these and other regulations set forth in the law may result in dismissal of the board and prosecution of the members for misconduct in office.

This concept emphasizes the public character of the school and that the educational enterprise is one of shared ownership. Citizens in the community hold the status of part owners in the schools. They own stock, so to speak, in the schools by virtue of the fact that it is their taxes that support the schools. The dividends received are formal education for themselves and their children and the indirect benefits that flow to society from a literate and well-prepared population in such fields as art, science, industry, and agriculture.

Shared ownership carries with it responsibility on the part of citizens as well as those who administer the schools. People must be supplied with accurate and adequate information about the school system if they are to form intelligent opinions and transmit their thinking to school officials. To participate as partners in helping the school meet individual and societal needs, they must have access to pertinent facts and ideas and be able to discuss them rationally among themselves and with those who manage the schools.

What citizens feel and how they act influence the selection of school board members, the fixing of tax rates, the passage of bond issues, the nature of curricular offerings, the provision for special services, and the like. In addition, prevailing attitudes and opinions not only establish the limits of institutional functioning but also shape and guide the operation of policies and practices within the school system.

It is essential to the management of the school that those who are charged with responsibility for directing its affairs understand the role of public attitudes in a democracy and their effect on the education of children.

When the public becomes apathetic toward the schools, the administration must detect it and involve the public more. In so doing, school management must alert the public to its role in

the schools in a democracy. In turn, the administration can energize the public's attitude and interest in the schools.

If this public apathy continues, it can spill over to school management. The quality of education deteriorates. Frustration sets in. Citizens lose faith in the schools. Cries go up for competition in the form of independently operated, publicly funded schools, such as charter schools. Even more dramatic, the state takes over the schools entirely. Local control disappears.

The school administrative team need not be expert on the subject, but certainly one or more of its members should possess practical insight and understanding of what public attitudes and opinions mean and why people think and feel as they do. Without this knowledge it is difficult to plan strategies affecting school–community relations.

## The Meaning of Public Opinion

Public attitudes may be viewed as predispositions, thoughts, or feelings of persons toward something, such as an issue or a policy question that has not yet come into sharp focus. For example, prior to the real onset of the space race in the late 1950s, attitudes were expressed about federal aid to education, instructional changes in the curriculum, foreign language teaching, and science offerings in elementary and secondary schools. These attitudes were suddenly fused into public opinion on the specific question of strengthening the educational program when the Soviets put the first satellite into space, and swift action was taken to explore ways and means for turning out a better educational product and enacting

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appropriate legislation for underwriting essential changes.

Other characteristics are also ascribed to attitudes, the most common being their emotional tone. Attitudes are always accompanied by some positive or negative feeling, and the nature and intensity of this feeling influence an individual's perception of any new situation he or she encounters. For example, a beginning teacher who has had a series of unpleasant experiences with the principal will probably develop a dislike for principals in general despite the fact that another one under whom he or she is now working is sincere and thoughtful. To the teacher this new principal has an ulterior motive of personal gain in acting decently. Such an attitude may persist for a long time, depending on the intensity of the negative feeling and the frequency of constructive acts on the part of the second principal. It is known that attitudes are the result of forces in each individual's environment—such as his or her physical needs, social needs, emotions, perceptions, motivations, and experiences—and that these in turn influence the individual's behavior. Interestingly enough, opinions are defined in a similar way.

Social scientists have not arrived at a standard definition of *attitudes* or *opinions*. Therefore, the terms are often used interchangeably. Yet it may be worthwhile to review some of the meanings connected with the term *public opinion*. Occasionally, *public opinion* is defined as any widespread belief or consensus arrived at by members of one or more groups, or as prevailing customs and traditions handed down by previous generations. The term is also frequently associated with the process of developing opinion instead of opinion itself, with fine distinctions drawn between judgments reached by logical methods of reasoning and judgments growing out of emotional states of mind. Attention may likewise be given to the quality of the opinions expressed or to the intensity of the opinions. No doubt these and other variations in the meaning of the term have a place in a detailed study and analysis of public opinion, but they are hardly suitable to guide the work of laypersons and professional school officials. As a working rule, we should think of public opinion as a collection of individual viewpoints held more or less in common by members of a group regarding some person, condition, or proposal. Generally, these points of view concern matters that are controversial or capable of causing controversy.

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## School–Community Relations

In view of its background and status in U.S. society, the school has a definite responsibility to furnish taxpayers and parents with complete and accurate information regarding its needs and activities and to develop educational policies and programs that reflect popular interests and desires. How to implement this responsibility effectively is the problem of school–community relations.

### The History

Although the necessity for keeping the public informed is as old as the school itself, nevertheless it was not until the beginning of the 1920s that a formal approach was made. This began with studies of publicity, especially newspaper publicity, and of the value such publicity had in keeping the school before the people and in acquainting them with what it was doing. During this period at least three books were published on the subject of school publicity,<sup>1</sup> as well as a scattering of articles in professional journals.

Within a few years the term *publicity* was replaced with the phrase *school public relations*, for at least two reasons. First, it was felt that the word *publicity* carried both positive and negative connotations. Second, the realization developed that a more inclusive concept than publicity was necessary for telling the story more fully and for reaching a wider audience. In the mid-1920s, Moehlman came out with the first book in educational administration dealing with school public relations. He defined public school relations as an “organized factual informational service for the purpose of keeping the public informed of its educational program.”<sup>2</sup> The book included chapters on public relations policy, the responsibilities of personnel, and the use of such media as newspapers, house organs, annual reports, school newspapers, and oral and written communications with parents.

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Attention was also given to the importance of social contacts, parent–teacher associations, school buildings, and appraisal of results.

These pioneering efforts were followed 11 years later with another book by Moehlman setting forth the doctrine of “social interpretation.” According to this doctrine, “Social interpretation may be considered as the activity whereby the institution is made aware of community conditions and needs and the factual information service whereby the people are kept continuously informed of the purpose, value, conditions, and needs of their educational program.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is a two-way system of communication through which the community is translated to the school and the school to the community.

The objectives of a program in social interpretation, as set forth by Moehlman, are as follows: “The ultimate objective is to develop continuing public consciousness of the importance of educational process in a democratic social organization, to establish confidence in the functioning institution, to furnish adequate means to maintain its efficient operation, and to improve the partnership concept through active parental participation.”<sup>4</sup>

School public relations at present represents an extension of the interpretative point of view. This extension takes into account a change in basic terminology, increased emphasis on communication, and greater citizen involvement and participation in the educational decision-making process. There is a movement now to eliminate the term *public relations* and to use instead the phrase *school–community relations* because the latter is more in keeping with current concepts concerning the involvement and participation of citizens in the educational decision-making process and is less subject to association with undesirable practices in promotion and persuasion for selfish ends.

It has been increasingly evident that the school in a dynamic, changing social order cannot adapt itself to change or make the necessary improvements in its program without involving citizens in its affairs. As pointed out by Sumption and Engstrom, “There must be a structured, systematic, and active participation on the part of the people of the community in the educational planning, policy making, problem solving, and evaluation of the school.”<sup>5</sup>

Through such involvement, citizens come to know the school firsthand. They are able to raise questions, obtain information, express ideas, consider proposals, and take positions on critical issues. They become part of the decision-making process that keeps up with social change and brings about educational change.

Citizen involvement ensures a better understanding of what the community wants for its children now and in the future. It likewise provides better opportunities for closer cooperation with local governmental agencies and community organizations that have an interest in

education and public welfare. Generally, it helps to bring about increased use of community resources in the educational program, thereby integrating further the school and community.

### Recent Definitions

Before stating what is meant by *school–community relations*, it might be well to examine some definitions of *public relations*.

Rex Harlow, the founder of the organization that eventually became the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), discovered over 500 definitions of *public relations* from many sources. From all these he composed an 86-word definition that Grunig and Hunt reduced to “the management of communication between an organization and its publics.”<sup>6</sup>

Cutlip, Center, and Broom later defined *public relations* this way:

Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.<sup>7</sup>

Wilcox and Cameron cited this definition of *public relations* from the 1978 World Assembly of Public Relations, which was endorsed by 34 national public relations organizations:

Public relations practice is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders, and implementing planned programs of

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New on the public relations scene, because of numerous corporate scandals in the beginning of the twenty-first century, is the term *reputation management*. Seitel notes that after the scandals, public relations firms were quick to develop reputation management practices that would enhance corporate credibility. He goes on to define *reputation management* as “the ability to link credibility to business goals to increase advocacy, support, and increase profits.”<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that previous definitions of public relations did not include “honest communications” or “organizational credibility” because the authors assumed these characteristics already existed in the organization.

## Questions

1. Some critics of school public relations might argue that such efforts amount to no more than “spin” or “covering up” problems in schools. To defend investments in school public relations efforts, what points would you make to show how school public relations is an investment that serves students as well as their schools and communities?
2. Compare the various statements on public relations with those made by the National School Public Relations Association. How does public relations practice in general compare with its practice in schools?
3. Which of Grunig and Hunt’s models of public relations should schools employ to be effective at supporting student and school success? Why might some of their models be more effective than others for school public relations planners and educational leaders?
4. What would you say to a person who wants to know the relationship between public opinion and public relations—and how can understanding public opinion contribute to school leadership success?