Public Relations in Schools

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Public Relations in Schools
Fifth Edition

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CHAPTER 1

School Public Relations
A New Agenda
CASE STUDY: THE NEW SUPERINTENDENT’S PUBLIC RELATIONS PLAN

When Janet Holt became superintendent of the Boswell School District, it marked the first time this farming community had employed a female administrator. The district’s five school board members selected her because she was energetic, enthusiastic, and self-confident. Above all, they were impressed by her leadership philosophy and her commitment to work closely with the local community. During her employment interview, for example, Dr. Holt said that the relationship between the school district and the community should be based on mutual trust and shared responsibility. She added that district employees and other stakeholders should have input into policy decisions generally and school-improvement decisions specifically.

At the time Dr. Holt interviewed for the Boswell superintendency, she assumed residents in this predominately farming community already were highly involved with the public schools. The school board members, however, said nothing during her interview that either confirmed or dispelled this assumption. After she became superintendent, however, she quickly learned that district residents had rarely been involved directly in making important decisions, preferring instead to have school board members and the superintendent make decisions for them. There were no advisory committees or school councils. Moreover, she discovered that the school board members were comfortable making decisions for stakeholders.

Media coverage of the school district had been very limited. Two reporters, one from a newspaper and one from a radio station, regularly attended school board meetings. However, the media outlets that employed them were located in a small city approximately 25 miles from Boswell. Neither the district nor individual schools published newsletters; and though the district had a Web page, it contained only basic information about the school board and the individual schools.

After accumulating facts about communication between the district and stakeholders, Dr. Holt prepared a brief report and sent it to the school board. She thought the members would be surprised to learn how little communication had been taking place; however, they were not. Summarizing the overall sentiment of the school board, the board president told her, “Everyone is pretty satisfied with the schools. Our taxes are reasonable, students do well, and residents don’t have many complaints. If residents wanted more information, I’m sure our previous superintendent would have given it to them.”

Dr. Holt explained to the board members that new outcome-based assessments mandated by the state required district resident involvement in school-improvement initiatives. Thus, even if everyone were satisfied, the lack of stakeholder participation in visioning and planning would likely become a concern. She added that even in the best of times, public schools should maintain active and ongoing relationships with the community so that citizens have an opportunity to pursue their individual interests. Based on these two points, she recommended that the district consider adopting a public relations (PR) plan that would set goals and tactics for improving communication. All five board members indicated they supported the idea.
Over the next 6 months, Dr. Holt, working with the district’s three principals, developed a plan that included the following initiatives:

- A PR advisory committee, consisting of three teachers, two administrators, and three district residents, would be formed. The committee’s primary responsibilities would be to oversee implementation of the PR plan and to evaluate outcomes.
- Both the superintendent, on behalf of the district, and the principals, on behalf of the three schools, would ensure that newsletters would be published at least three times a year.
- The district’s Web page would be expanded, and each of the three schools would develop its own Web page. All district-sponsored Web pages would include options allowing district residents to ask questions and exchange information with school personnel and with each other.
- Formal communication channels would be identified so that district employees would know how they were expected to communicate with each other and with district residents.
- Efforts would be made to increase media coverage, especially positive stories that highlighted effective programs.
- District officials would conduct an opinion survey among district residents at least once every 2 years to ascertain emerging needs and the extent to which existing needs are being met.
- At least one public forum would be held each semester to allow district residents to state their views and ask questions about planned improvements in the district.
- The PR committee’s chairperson would make bimonthly reports to the school board.

The superintendent projected a budget of $30,000 to support implementation of the efforts.

The PR plan was sent to the school board members in late April with a cover letter from Dr. Holt indicating that she would recommend approval of the plan at the May school board meeting. Within a week after receiving the material, the board president told her that several board members had doubts about supporting the recommendation. He admitted that he also was leaning toward not supporting the plan and urged her to remove the matter from the May agenda.

Dr. Holt was surprised and disappointed after hearing the board president’s comments. She explained that delaying approval of her recommendation would de facto block implementation for at least another year, because funds would not be appropriated in the upcoming fiscal budget. After explaining this problem to the board president, she told him that she did not want to remove the item from the agenda. The board president responded, “Okay then. Let’s move forward and see what happens.”

Protocol required that a motion and a second were necessary to place a recommendation on the floor for discussion. After the superintendent formally recommended the PR plan at the May meeting, no member made a motion to accept the recommendation. After a period of silence, one member finally made a motion saying, “I recommend approval—but I do so only to allow discussion to take place.” Another member then seconded the motion, repeating the qualification. At that point, the board president
spoke. "This plan includes good ideas and I appreciate the work Dr. Holt and the principals did developing it. Nevertheless, I did not anticipate that a PR plan would require separate funding. I'm not sure the taxpayers want to see us spending $30,000 on PR." Immediately, another board member concurred with the president and raised another objection. "In addition to opposing money for PR, I oppose using public dollars for such a program. Why should we spend tax dollars to convince ourselves that we have good schools? We're running a public service, not a business."

Dr. Holt sat silently, hoping that at least one board member would support the plan publicly. The only female school board member came to her rescue. "Janice," the board member said, "I think the ideas expressed in the plan are great, but the money is a problem. Residents have not asked to become more involved in the schools, and spending money to get them to do something they are not asking to do doesn't make much sense. And at this point, I don't believe most residents will become more involved, regardless of how much money we might spend."

The two remaining board members remained silent. Recognizing that her recommendation would be defeated, Dr. Holt made one more attempt to persuade the board members to support the plan. "This plan has two important goals—improving communication and increasing community involvement. After I became superintendent last July, I studied what had been occurring in these two areas. I found that little had been done in either area. The proposed budget may seem high, but we cannot develop a Web page, put out newsletters, and support committees without resources. Moreover, I think you are defining PR very narrowly. I view school PR as a process of effective communication and relationship building."

At that point, a motion was made to table the recommendation indefinitely and it passed unanimously. Then, the board president said, "Since the funds requested will not be appropriated in the next fiscal-year budget, we should take our time and study Dr. Holt's plan more carefully. I would like to see school Web pages and newsletters, and maybe we can find ways to support these initiatives by raising private funds."

After the meeting, Dr. Holt mentally asked herself questions about the board's decision. Had she misread the situation? Were the school board members echoing stakeholder sentiments or did they oppose greater community involvement because they like things as they are? Should she have been more aggressive in presenting the plan? Did she err by insisting that the plan remain on the agenda knowing that approval was unlikely? Was it possible to create the Web pages and newsletters without school district funds?

INTRODUCTION

As the case study demonstrates, PR is arguably one of the most recognized but least understood dimensions of organizational administration. It has been an American institution (Cutlip, 1995), and its status as a coherent discipline dates back to the beginning of the 20th century (Sitrick, 1998). Many burgeoning corporations adopted aspects of PR in an effort to develop relationships with customers who were spread across various publics (i.e., demographic groups such as farmers or housewives).
During the first few decades of the 20th century, school administrators, especially those working in larger city school systems, learned that they too needed to build relationships with multiple publics. In their case, however, they instinctively emulated business executives without analyzing important distinctions between public and private organizations (Callahan, 1962). Eventually, scholars recognized that relationship building had to be tailored to the nature and mission of a public agency if the process was to be effective. Shortly thereafter, the first school PR course was taught at the University of Michigan in 1925, and the first school PR textbook was published 2 years later (Maher, 1997). Today, the modern practice of school PR extends well beyond persuasion techniques. Accessing information in a timely manner, exchanging information, empowering decision makers, identifying and solving organizational problems, and serving the community's interests exemplify objectives that have evolved over time.

This book is divided into three sections, each addressing a major purpose of the text. The first section is devoted to providing an accurate conceptualization of PR generally and of school PR specifically; focused attention is given to societal demands and constraints. The second section is devoted to internal communication and programming; focused attention is given to planning, institutionalizing, and evaluating PR programs. The final section is devoted to challenging responsibilities; specifically, they include community relations, media relations, external communication, referenda, and crisis management.

This initial chapter (a) examines differing perspectives of PR, (b) identifies generic barriers to implementation, (c) explains the increased importance of the process, and (d) presents four essential themes that frame contemporary PR applications. The first two themes, the information age and school reform, describe the context in which PR is applied; the last two themes, communication and reflective practice, pertain to administrator knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

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

- Define PR accurately.
- Define school PR accurately.
- Explain why the application of PR in districts and schools has become increasingly essential.
- Explain the central role of communication in PR.

PERSPECTIVES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

As demonstrated in the case study, many principals and superintendents continue to be asked the following question: Why should districts and schools spend money on and devote time to PR? This appears to be a reasoned query, especially to persons who believe that the primary intent of PR is to manipulate public opinion. Lingering doubts about the program's necessity continue to be a major barrier to PR implementation, often preventing district and school leaders from developing relationships that have been found to be essential to
school improvement. Specifically, information management and communication, two central components of modern PR, are indispensable to organizational development (Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2007) and organizational development is indispensable to organizational renewal (Hoy & Miskel, 2005).

Generally speaking, PR is a social science—although some consider it an art as well (Cutlip, 1995). Unlike most other professions (e.g., law, medicine), PR practice has not been controlled. Consequently, PR practitioners may or may not have completed a prescribed course of study and they are not required to be licensed (Seitel, 1992). PR is, nevertheless, a coherent discipline; scholars conduct both theoretical and action research, and practitioners have access to the professional knowledge base produced by these inquiries (Sitrick, 1998). Virtually all comprehensive universities, in fact, offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in this specialization.

The term public relations has had many connotations, especially for those who have not studied the discipline. Even in the literature, PR has been described at varying times as a concept, a profession, a process, and even a goal. Further, PR’s intended meaning is often linked to organizational context. For example, PR programs in large manufacturing companies may have missions, processes, and goals substantially different from those associated with school PR programs. Persons studying the history of PR (e.g., Cutlip, 1995; Dillschneider, 1996) have concluded that both connotations and contexts make it virtually impossible for one definition to describe practice across organizations. This deduction, however, has not dampened the curiosity of scholars and practitioners who continue to ask, “What is public relations?” (Gordon, 1997). The persistent exploration of this query has produced multiple definitions; collectively, they reveal a process that has gotten progressively broader and more complex. An accurate understanding of PR and subsequently of school PR begins with a review of definitions.

Erroneous Perspectives

A first step to comprehending PR is to examine popular misrepresentations. The following four are the most common distortions:

1. PR is nothing more than press agentry. Press agents are specialists whose work is typically confined to publicity functions; they concentrate on disseminating carefully crafted messages intended to benefit their clients (either individuals or corporations).

2. PR as a synonym for advertising or marketing. Advertising, like press agentry, entails the preparation of carefully controlled messages and their transmission to the public. In the case of advertising, the messages almost always are sent through purchased mechanisms (e.g., paid television or newspaper ads). Marketing, by comparison, involves the study of publics to determine the extent to which they need or desire a product or service. Although press agentry, advertising, and marketing are often integral PR components, especially in profit-seeking organizations, none of them alone is the equivalent of PR for at least two reasons. First, PR conceptually is broader than any of them. Second, many PR products are subject to media interpretation, meaning that they cannot be totally controlled by the
issuer (Cohen, 1987). For example, one can control the content of a paid newspaper ad, but other aspects of PR, such as press releases, are subject to reporter interpretation.

3. Viewing PR as simply propaganda. Propaganda involves creating and spreading ideas, facts, or allegations in an effort to deliberately influence public opinion. Frequently, propagandists employ misinformation to manipulate opinions and actions, both internally (inside the organization) and externally (in society). Commonly, the propagandist’s goal is either to enhance his or her organization’s image or to destroy the image of competitor organizations. In part, the proclivity to equate PR with propaganda stems from historical depictions of PR used in business and industry. During the early decades of the last century, PR personnel often “played fast and loose with the truth” (Dilenschneider, 1996, p. xxi). In the current context of practice, propaganda is not considered to be an ethical practice for school administrators.

4. Viewing PR as a synonym for communication. Commenting on this error, Haywood (1991) wrote, “Effective public relations is much more than communications: it should be more fundamental to the organization. Public relations should begin before the decision-making stage—when attitudes towards the issues are being developed by management and policies are being formulated” (p. 4). As Haywood suggests, PR is a comprehensive activity intended to influence leadership values and behaviors as well as to shape communication channels.

Multiple Definitions and Models

As noted, connotation and context largely explain dissimilar PR definitions. In the face of multiple and often conflicting descriptions, we may ask this: Why should we care about PR definitions? Gordon (1997) answered this question as follows: “Many communication scholars agree that definitions are inherently rhetorical and that the formations of definitions are social processes that shape reality” (p. 58). Therefore, definitions have shaped and continue to shape our perceptions of PR.

All definitions fall into one of two categories. They are either descriptive or normative. Descriptive definitions seek to explain what actually occurs under the label of PR. These statements typically are general and refer to PR practices across organizations. Dilenschneider (1996), for instance, defined PR simply as “the art of influence.” Crable and Vibbert (1986) described the process as a “multiphased function of communication management that is involved in researching, analyzing, affecting, and reevaluating the relationships between an organization and any aspect of its environment” (p. 5). The accuracy of descriptive definitions depends on objectivity, data collection, data analysis, and data interpretations. Often descriptive studies employ techniques such as interviews and focus groups, and the validity of these techniques can be attenuated by researcher bias (Austin & Pinkleton, 2001).

Normative definitions, on the other hand, identify goals describing how publics should be affected or how practitioners should behave (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). They are intended to influence practitioner values and beliefs, delineate acceptable behavior (e.g., candi- ness, accessibility), and identify desired outcomes (e.g., perceptions, attitudes). Over the
last half of the previous century, PR scholars often tried to improve the image of the PR function by prescribing ideal behaviors to serve as a moral, ethical, and professional compass for practitioners.

Organizational goals in normative definitions are usually characterized by several recurring themes. Intent and relationships between the organization and its many publics are two of them. Some writers (e.g., Lovell, 1982) stress that PR's general purpose is to promote goodwill toward the organization; others (e.g., Lesly, 1983; McElreath, 1993) view PR as a management function intended to facilitate relationships and understanding between the organization and its ecosystems.

Although descriptions of PR have evolved to reflect the growing complexity of both the concept and its application, some of the earliest definitions still endure in extant literature. Bernay's definition, constructed nearly 60 years ago, is one of them. This normative definition, analyzed by Cohen (1987), sets out three purposes:

- To inform;
- To persuade—that is, to modify attitudes and opinions; and
- To integrate the actions and attitudes of an organization with those of its publics and the actions and attitudes of its publics with those of the organization.

In 1978, when the First World Assembly of Public Relations Associations convened in Mexico City, the participants defined PR as "the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organizational leaders, and implementing planned programs of action which will serve both the organization and the public interest" (Newsom, Scott, & VanSlyke Turk, 1989, p. 6). This conceptualization treats PR as a core process in leadership and decision making.

Modern definitions and descriptions usually avoid mentioning the word persuasion. In large measure, the term is avoided because of a sensitivity to a Marxist worldview suggesting that anything other than a "two-way symmetrical model (in forms that attempt persuasion of others while disallowing reciprocal persuasion of self) is an agent of domination and, therefore, unethical" (Gordon, 1997, p. 62). Although there are other more acceptable perspectives of persuasion, writers (e.g., Dilsenstein, 1996) have preferred to substitute the word influence.

Some scholars have used key descriptors to clarify the meaning of PR. Wilcox, Ault, and Agee (1992), for instance, suggested that students and practitioners focus on six recurring key words or phrases:

- Deliberate
- Planned
- Performance
- Public interest
- Two-way communication
- Management function

Most scholars writing about organizational administration (e.g., Yukl, 2006; Zaleznik, 1989) treat management and leadership as separate roles. The former typically connotes a process of implementing strategies and controlling resources (human and material) in order to achieve organizational objectives. The latter typically connotes functions that focus
on determining organizational visions, objectives, and strategies. School administration, here and in many other books, is a generic term encompassing both management and leadership (Kowalski, 2003, 2006). Table 1–1 contains an analysis of the key words that give meaning to PR.

Effective PR also can be conceptualized in terms of connections between administrator behavior and outcomes. Figure 1–1 shows five linkages considered highly relevant.

FIGURE 1–1
Behavior–Outcomes Links in Effective PR Programs (Source: Adapted from Seitel, 1992, p. 10)
Environmental scanning, the last of the five behaviors in this illustration, is an integral element of strategic planning. Scanning refers to monitoring the organization's environment periodically to determine emerging needs and wants (Kowalski, 2006). Figure 1–1 identifies the more common objectives.

Our understanding of PR also is enhanced by looking at models. One of the most widely referenced is Grunig's (1984) typology based on communication direction (pertaining to the flow of information) and symmetry (pertaining to the intended benefits). In combination, the two factors produce four PR approaches:

- **One-way asymmetrical.** This approach is used to disseminate positive publicity and restrict unfavorable information; it is a form of propaganda associated with press agentry intended to benefit the organization. For example, a principal publishes a school newsletter solely for the purpose of enhancing the school's image. No effort is made to serve the needs of stakeholders nor are stakeholders provided opportunities to respond to what they read (e.g., ask questions or state differing opinions).

- **One-way symmetrical.** This approach is used to disseminate accurate public information without volunteering negative information; it is more neutral than press agentry and is intended to benefit both the organization and society. For example, a principal publishes a newsletter that contains information beneficial to him and the readers (e.g., clarification of the discipline policies), but readers are not given an opportunity to respond or ask questions.

- **Two-way asymmetrical.** This approach is used to persuade publics, but information about these publics is used to structure the communication to increase the probability of influencing the behaviors of the publics. For example, a superintendent conducts a community interest survey before determining a strategy for passing a tax referendum to fund a new school building. There is an exchange of information, but the intended benefit is restricted to the school (i.e., determining how to be politically successful by capitalizing on support and countering opposition).

- **Two-way symmetrical.** This approach is used for establishing mutual understanding and resolving conflict between the organization and its publics; it requires extensive knowledge and understanding of these publics and is intended to benefit both the organization and society (Dozier, 1995; Grunig, 1989). For example, a superintendent conducts a community interest survey before determining whether to pursue a tax referendum to fund a new school building. There is an exchange of information, and the superintendent wants to determine and then weigh whether community needs and values warrant moving forward with the project.

In modern PR practice, one-way asymmetrical programs are the least effective and two-way symmetrical programs the most effective.

In summary, there are multiple PR perspectives that vary primarily in two ways: describing process versus outcomes and describing real behavior versus ideal behavior. All are addressed within a framework of three recurring themes: administration, organization, and publics (Gordon, 1997). That is, the PR concept is an administrative function occurring within an organization and involving contact with external publics (see Figure 1–2).
CHAPTER 1  ■ School Public Relations  13

Constants  (elements found in virtually all definitions)

- **Administrative function**—PR is managed and executed by administrators.
- **Organizational context**—PR is delivered in an organizational context.
- **Publics**—PR involves interactions within the organization and between the organization and its multiple publics.

Variables  (differences among definitions)

- **Descriptive definitions**—The focus is on real processes and outcomes.
- **Normative definitions**—The focus is on ideal processes and outcomes.

**FIGURE 1–2**
Constants and Variables in Public Relations Definitions

**SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS**

School public relations refers to the application of PR in the context of organizations having the primary mission of delivering educational services. This includes public and private institutions at both the precollegiate and the collegiate levels. The largest subcategory within this organizational family includes public elementary and secondary schools. School PR is examined here with respect to meaning, goals, persistent barriers, and current importance.

**Meaning**

Awareness of the need to apply PR to public education evolved gradually during the first half of the last century (Harral, 1952). Historically, education writers and practitioners have preferred to call school PR “community relations.” Their intent was to avoid the negative connotations often associated with PR; as an example, they did not want the public viewing school administrators as Madison Avenue persuasion specialists (West, 1985). Their trepidation was well founded, because many stakeholders, in the past and presently, consider PR to be “synonymous with words like cover-up, obfuscate, misinterpret, and lie” (Martinson, 1995, p. 85).

In this book, school PR is presented as a positive construct spanning internal (in the district or school) and external (in the community) communication. The process is intended to produce and maintain (a) positive relationships, (b) a constructive organizational image, (c) collaboration (especially between school employees and other stakeholders), and (d) organizational effectiveness (Kowalski et al., 2007). Thus, school–community relations is not the equivalent of school PR; rather, it is concurrently a PR component and objective.

Most definitions of school PR allude to using information to influence perceptions and decisions (e.g., Knezevich, 1969; Saxe, 1984) and enhance school–community relations through two-way communication (e.g., Jones, 1966; Lutz & Merz, 1992). School PR also has been described dispositionally and procedurally. Walling (1982), for instance, wrote that the concept incorporates values and beliefs about communication and embodies management techniques used by schools to communicate with their constituents.
Some authors have preferred to use the term *educational PR*. The National School Public Relations Association (1986), for example, used this term and defined it as “a planned and systematic two-way process of communications between an educational organization and its internal and external publics designed to build morale, goodwill, understanding, and support for that organization” (p. 28). West (1985) also used this term in his definition: “Educational public relations is a systematically and continuously planned, executed, and evaluated program of interactive communication and human relations that employs paper, electronic, and people mediums to attain internal as well as external support for an educational institution” (p. 23). Both definitions emphasize that PR applied in schools is concerned with how people feel about issues, services, and individual or organizational personalities. The centrality of relationship building was also emphasized by Norris (1984), who suggested that PR would be better understood if it was called “public relationship.”

In this text, school PR is defined as an evolving social science and leadership process utilizing multimedia approaches designed to build goodwill, enhance the public’s attitude toward the value of education, augment interaction and two-way symmetrical communication between schools and their ecosystems, provide vital and useful information to the public and employees, and play an integral role in planning and decision-making functions. Its application in public schools is justified by three major propositions cogent to all governmental agencies:

- A democratic government is best served by a free two-way flow of ideas and accurate information so citizens and their government can make informed choices.
- A democratic government must report and be accountable to the citizens it serves.
- Citizens, as taxpayers, have a right to government information unless it is restricted by law (Baker, 1997, p. 456).

The nature of school PR also is influenced by the philosophical dispositions of those who exercise power and control over important education decisions (Kennedy, 2003)—persons such as governors, state legislators, and school board members.

**Goals**

The application of PR in districts and schools should be guided by clearly stated goals contained in a PR plan. Often, however, there are distinct differences between espoused and real objectives. As an example, a district’s espoused goal is open communication to improve internal and external relationships; but in reality, the goal is to persuade stakeholders to support schools politically and economically. Such disjunction often fuels skepticism about the motives that administrators have for applying PR.

Although PR goals should be adjusted to specific conditions and needs in districts and schools, several of them are universally valid:

- **Improving the quality of education.** Every administrative, instructional, and support service provided by a school, including PR, has as its ultimate goal the improvement of student learning. Thus, all PR activities should either produce or influence activities and outcomes that contribute to improved educational services (Armistead, 2000).
- **Encouraging open political communication.** Although public employees and taxpayers expect school officials to advocate their own ideas and recommendations, they want
to be a part of open and fair debates about these ideas (Baker, 1997). Denied this opportunity, they may resort to covert political action that serves to divide the community into competing interest groups (Kowalski et al., 2007). Through effective PR programming, advocates of rival ideas should be able to express themselves by engaging in open and candid discourse (Martinson, 1999).

- **Enhancing the image of the school or district.** Imaging entails presenting a picture of an organization to its various publics. In the case of elementary and secondary education, the public’s confidence has been diminished by a multitude of negative media stories (Peck & Carr, 1997). These reports, often based on conditions in the nation’s most troubled schools, have had a cumulative effect of creating negative images because taxpayers often see public education as one giant bureaucracy (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004). In truth, public schools are unique entities because their clientele, guiding philosophies, needs, problems, resources, instructional strategies, and institutional climates are not uniform. Imaging, therefore, should focus on establishing separate identities for districts and schools (Pfeiffer & Dunlap, 1988).

- **Building support for change.** Organizational development, including school improvement, requires change. Frequently, efforts to do things differently meet with resistance, both in the organization (e.g., opposition from teachers or students) and in the broader community environment (e.g., opposition from parents or pressure groups). Opposition can be based on misinformation, misunderstandings, and rumors, but even when publics understand the need for change, they may reject specific initiatives because they philosophically disagree with them (Bauman, 1996; Fullan, 2001, 2007). Consequently, when pursuing school improvement, administrators need to educate employees and the public and subsequently engage them in discourse to reconcile conflict emanating from opposing values and beliefs (Kowalski et al., 2007).

- **Managing information.** Traditionally, information has been viewed as a source of organizational power, especially for administrators who have access to vital information and substantial control over its distribution (Yukl, 2006). In modern organizations, however, information management is correctly perceived in an open and multidirectional communication framework. The intentions are to access, store, analyze, exchange, and otherwise use data to make effective decisions (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008).

- **Marketing programs.** The growing popularity of reform initiatives such as school choice, charter schools, and vouchers has prompted administrators to pay more attention to marketing. The primary characteristics of this function include (a) voluntary exchanges of values, (b) the identification of targeted audiences, and (c) sensitivity to consumers (Kotler, 1975). Hanson (2003) noted that educational marketing involves “developing or refining specific school programs in response to the needs and desires of specific target-markets (e.g., ‘at risk’ families, parents of preschool children, voters)” (p. 235). Said another way, marketing is a mechanism for determining what the public needs and expects from its schools.

- **Establishing goodwill and a sense of ownership.** In the current political climate, national opinion polls continue to reveal considerable dissatisfaction with public education
Taxpayers often see their relationship with local schools as one-sided; they believe they are forced to support schools financially but receive little or nothing in return. This negative attitude is especially prevalent among taxpayers without students attending public schools. Recapturing goodwill and rekindling a sense of collective responsibility requires school officials to engage all publics in meaningful discourse (Levin, 1999).

- **Providing evaluation data.** Administrators have a responsibility to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of education programs. A PR program can facilitate these tasks by providing feedback from various publics. As Tacheny (1997) noted, data gathered from employees and other stakeholders can be a powerful asset for determining performance and for improving future performance.

To ensure that espoused PR goals are actually pursued, administrators should develop performance objectives—specific statements containing behavioral criteria. They tell employees how to behave communicatively, set benchmarks for performance, and provide a framework for summative and formative evaluations. In the case of expected behaviors, judgments are made about progress toward goal attainment and about the need to add, delete, or alter existing goals. Examples of possible performance objectives and their relationship to goals are shown in Table 1-2.

### TABLE 1-2

Examples of Performance Objectives for Administrators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Goal</th>
<th>Possible Performance Objectives</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing learning</td>
<td>Establish partnerships; involve parents and other citizens on curriculum committees, textbook selection committees; enlist community members as volunteers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating politically</td>
<td>Manage conflict; hold open discussions to debate competing views; respect minority opinions; prepare communications for multiple publics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing image</td>
<td>Celebrate accomplishments; highlight strengths; provide accurate and relevant information to the media and general public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting change</td>
<td>Engage the public in visioning and planning activities; hold open meetings to explain planned change; provide speakers for civic groups; educate the public about the need for change and the nature of recommended changes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing information</td>
<td>Establish procedures for obtaining, analyzing, and storing data; create channels for accessing and distributing data; provide a mechanism for storing databases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing programs</td>
<td>Provide information about programs to the community on a regular basis; conduct periodic needs assessments to ascertain changing conditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing responsibility</td>
<td>Create school councils that include citizen representatives; create advisory councils; invite employees and the public to suggest improvements; praise successful collaboration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtaining evaluation data</td>
<td>Conduct employee, parent, and community surveys; encourage unsolicited comments; monitor the quantity and quality of complaints, concerns, and problems.</td>
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Persistent Barriers

As noted earlier, implementing PR programs has often been difficult and controversial. Resistance can occur at three levels (Connor & Lake, 1988):

- The level of understanding. Persons may not understand school PR or its potential value.
- The level of accepting. Persons may understand school PR and its potential value, but reject the concept philosophically.
- The level of acting. Persons understand and accept school PR, but lack the material and human resources necessary for effective implementation.

This typology provides a useful diagnostic tool for administrators because it should help them to select appropriate actions to overcome resistance.

Current Importance

Experts believe that schools benefit from a well-conceived PR program even in the best of times because information management and communication are incessant core activities in any organization. In troubled times, the stakes are higher because the stability or status of schools is threatened. Whether this peril comes from within the schools or from the wider environment, administrators are expected to protect the well-being of the institution and the interests of its stakeholders.

In an information-based, reform-minded society, public schools have encountered greater levels of competition; charter schools, vouchers, and home schooling are prime examples of initiatives that have broadened education alternatives for many parents and students. In a competitive environment, organizational image, communication, marketing, and information management assume new levels of importance (Hanson, 2003). Clearly, then, PR has become more essential. The public’s declining confidence in traditional education systems, in particular, has heightened the need for school officials to engage various publics in discourse so that acceptable purposes, programs, and outcomes can be established (Lashway, 2002).

Authors who have analyzed pressures for school reform (e.g., Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 1997) argue that education’s main critics often have misinterpreted or misrepresented vital statistics for public schools. After 1983, for example, a seemingly endless series of critical reports echoed unsubstantiated claims that public education was expensive and wasteful, that students were lazy and unproductive, and that the decline in America’s economic productivity resulted primarily from inadequate education (Berliner, 1993). Frequently, educators, especially at the local level, failed to provide accurate data to counter these charges. Examples of contemporary issues contributing to the need for school PR are presented in Table 1–3.

Experience has taught administrators that remaining silent in the face of criticism is precarious. Education’s most visible detractors repeatedly have blamed schools for failing students, yet they rarely discussed social issues that affect a student’s ability and motivation to learn. Having substantial power, they convinced most stakeholders and journalists that
TABLE 1-3
Examples of Conditions Contributing to the Need for School Public Relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Ramifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public dissatisfaction</td>
<td>Many citizens remain convinced that schools are inefficient and ineffective; these stakeholders are often reluctant to provide economic and political support essential to school improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life in an information-based society</td>
<td>Accessing and using information rapidly is crucial to identifying and solving problems. An organization's competitiveness is partially determined by its information and communication systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life in a pluralistic culture</td>
<td>As the population of most school districts has become increasingly diverse, philosophical and political disputes have become more common. Thus, the typical school no longer serves a homogeneous public but rather multiple publics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decentralization of governance</td>
<td>Current efforts to reform schools locally requires civic engagement in a political environment of representative democracy. School officials need to engage stakeholders in meaningful discussions and to manage conflict that will emerge from democratic discourse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic changes</td>
<td>The percentage of families having children in the public schools continues to decline. Building goodwill and support requires special efforts to reach stakeholders who have no direct association with education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market-driven reform ideas</td>
<td>Initiatives such as vouchers, choice, and charter schools are forcing many public schools to compete for students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic expectations</td>
<td>Schools are an investment in human capital; as such, they are expected to contribute to the nation's economic growth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student personal problems</td>
<td>More students are entering school with personal problems that deter learning; as a result, schools are being asked to do more in areas such as nutrition, psychological services, and social services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition for scarce resources</td>
<td>Public schools compete with other government agencies for public funds. Since these funds are inadequate to address all needs and wants, school officials must provide a compelling case for their institutions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Their views were totally objective and that they were altruistic reformers unaffected by political and economic self-interests.

Amundson (1996) advises school administrators that they have three choices with respect to responding to criticism:

1. **Ignore it.** This option is efficient (requires no effort) and less risk laden than confrontation; however, it often strengthens public perceptions that administrators are either indifferent toward school effectiveness or incapable of contradicting critics.

2. **Take a defensive posture.** This option entails either denying the need for reform or blaming others (e.g., students, parents) for ineffective schools. Although it may deflect blame, it does nothing to ameliorate negative conditions in low-performing schools.

3. **Communicate openly and honestly.** This option requires administrators to educate the public and to enlist their support and assistance in positive ways. Equally notable, it allows administrators rather than critics to manage the issues.
UNDERLYING THEMES

Four themes frame present-day school PR practices (see Figure 1–3). They are the information age, school reform, communication, and reflective practice. Accordingly, these themes are relevant throughout this book.

Information Age

America's transition from a manufacturing-based society to an information-based society was predicted by noted futurist Alvin Toffler (1970) as early as the late 1960s. A little more than a decade later, typewriters were replaced by microcomputers, the Internet provided a network for connecting computers, and the World Wide Web became a global network. In just one year, from 2001 to 2002, the number of U.S. citizens with access to the Internet increased from 158.9 million to 168.6 million—an astonishing 6.1% increase (Nielsen/Net Ratings, 2005).

The evolutionary effects of technology on education generally and on school administration specifically are evident. As early as the late 1970s, scholars had become confident...
that administration across organizations would be vastly improved by the increased accessibility to data (Lipinski, 1978). Shortly thereafter, West (1981) posited that technology could change normative standards of practice for principals and superintendents, especially if they used computers and other tools to narrow gaps between communication theory and practice. He cautioned, however, that focusing solely on efficiency could dehumanize rather than strengthen relationships. By the mid-1990s, technology had become so prevalent in schools that many administrators were evaluated formally with respect to deploying computers and other forms of technology (Lare & Cimino, 1998). Today, many stakeholders have an immense appetite for information, and they expect administrators and teachers to help satisfy their hunger (Kowalski, 2005). At the same time, forward-thinking educators realize that technology allows them to access important data; for example, classroom and teacher Web pages provide the means to elevate teacher-parent interaction (Davenport & Eib, 2004).

In an information-based society, administrators not exchanging information openly and often are likely to be bypassed. Disgruntled stakeholders usually are able to obtain information they seek from databases available in the public domain. Moreover, in an information-rich society, practitioners in all professions (May, 2001), including education (Kowalski, 2009), are expected to access and use data to make error-free or nearly error-free decisions. In the case of elementary and secondary schools, this expectation was formalized by requirements for data-based decision making embedded in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001 (PL 107-110 and commonly known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). As Slavin (2002) pointed out, however, this law dragged most educators “kicking and screaming” (p. 16) into a data and information revolution that had affected other professions decades earlier.

**School Reform**

Over the past 2 centuries, there have been multiple educational reform movements, each trying to answer the same fundamental questions (Parker & Parker, 1995): What are the purposes of public education? Who should pay for this service? To what extent should public education solve societal problems?

Current efforts to change schools that began circa 1980 have evolved substantially. Initially, low productivity was blamed on lazy and unchallenged students. Policymakers embracing this view tried to make students do more of what they were already doing; by lengthening the school year, lengthening the school day, and increasing high school graduation requirements are examples (Kowalski, 2003). A few years later, critics decided that incompetent educators also were responsible for low-performing schools (Hanson, 1991); as a result, colleges of education were mandated to raise admission and retention requirements and states required educators to pass competency examinations. By 1990, would-be reformers realized that their previous efforts had produced only modest gains. Prompted by education scholars, they turned their attention to two gnawing questions: Could public schools simultaneously pursue excellence and equity? Could centralized “one size fits all” policies produce desired levels of improvement? Consequently, reformers began searching outside mainstream education for solutions (e.g., proposing charter schools, choice, and vouchers) and focusing on redesigning the organizational structure of existing schools (Kowalski, 2003).
Both market-based concepts (e.g., forcing public schools to compete for students) and organizational restructuring concepts (e.g., stressing the need to change counterproductive school cultures) make PR more essential. The former increases the need for marketing and imaging; the latter increases the need for civic engagement. Discussing the pursuit of school restructuring at the local level, Wadsworth (1997) concluded that reaching public consensus was essential—and that attaining this goal required a shared vision, a plan, leaders who listen, diverse participants, choices, and productive communication. Scholars who have studied change in organizations generally (e.g., Schein, 1999) and in schools specifically (e.g., Fullan, 2001; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Hall & Hord, 2001) conclude that new ideas are likely to be rejected if they conflict with prevailing cultures. Thus, reform becomes more probable in situations where stakeholders collaborate to state and test their values and beliefs about education.

Communication

In this rapidly changing world, information and integrated communication programs are essential in all organizations (Caywood, 1997). In schools, they are necessary to identify and correct problems that deter student learning. This point is especially relevant to understanding how school culture and communicative behavior are connected. Some communication scholars view this relationship to be reciprocal. Conrad (1994), for example, wrote, “Cultures are communicative creations. They emerge and are sustained by the communicative acts of all employees, not just the conscious persuasive strategies of upper management. Cultures do not exist separately from people communicating with one another” (p. 27). Axley (1996) described the connection this way: “Communication gives rise to organizational culture, which gives rise to communication, which perpetuates culture” (p. 153). In this vein, communication is a process through which organizational members express their collective inclination to coordinate beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes. Put more simply, communication is the act that people use to give meaning to their organizational lives by sharing perceptions of reality (Kowalski, 1998, 2008). A negotiated order evolves from both internal and external interactions among individuals and groups, and this interplay occurs in the informal as well as the formal organization. When viewed from this social system perspective, communication is a process that shapes, transmits, and reinforces a socially constructed culture (Mohan, 1993).

If administrators are to lead others in reshaping school cultures, they must know how others perceive reality, and they must use this information to create mutual understandings about a school’s purposes and practices. Those who restrict the open debate of values, discourage conflict, or limit access to information are unlikely to do these things (Deetz, 1992; Sarason, 1996). Nor are they likely to communicate effectively across racial and economic lines (Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2001). Communication is both the backbone of a successful PR program (Newsom et al., 1989) and an indispensable tool for organizational development (Hanson, 2003). Within districts and schools, communication facilitates accurate understandings of culture and change; outside of districts and schools, it expands community involvement and political support (Kowalski et al., 2007).
Reflective Practice

The concept of reflective practice is predicated on the fact that professional knowledge is different from scientific (or technical) knowledge (Sergiovanni, 2006). In his enlightening book *The Reflective Practitioner*, Schön (1983) observed that the latter, consisting of "theory and technique derived from systematic, preferably scientific knowledge" (p. 3), is often insufficient to resolve problems of practice. Yet, technical rationality is the foundation for most professions where practice evolves from a positivist philosophy (Schön, 1987).

A school administrator's practice, however, is neither totally rational nor highly predictable. Thus, theory is a valuable, but fallible, guide for practice. Administrators, like all other professionals, occasionally confront situations that do not fit neat textbook examples. A problem's contextual variations are multifaceted; they may be environmental (i.e., conditions outside of the organization), organizational, or personal (Kowalski, 2008). Even slight contextual variations may diminish the effectiveness of technical knowledge. Reflective practice is a concept used by professionals to deal with problems of practice, especially those problems that defy textbook solutions. Given the nature of school administrative work, the process is anchored in a rationality that promotes reasonableness in learning through practice (Hoy, 1996). Reflection, then, is an acquired skill that allows you to synthesize professional knowledge (what you think will occur) and experience (what actually occurred). The process is especially valuable when outcomes do not meet expectations.

For the reflective practitioner, unexpected results trigger both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action; that is, you think about the causes of the unanticipated outcomes both as they are occurring and later, after the heat of the moment has dissipated. The current event is compared with similar past experiences, and the similarities and differences in contextual variables are assessed and evaluated (Kowalski, 2003).

The open-ended case studies at the beginning of each chapter provide opportunities for you to reflect. By assuming a decision-making role, you have opportunities to meld the professional knowledge presented here with your professional and personal experiences. In so doing, you should be able to plan and test alternative responses to the problems presented in the case studies.

SUMMARY

This chapter explored the meanings of PR. Multiple perspectives were reviewed, showing how definitions differ based on two primary foci: process versus outcomes and real versus normative behaviors. Virtually all PR descriptions, nevertheless, are framed by three recurring themes: administration, organization, and publics (Gordon, 1997). Public relations also was identified as both an art and a science, and it was broadly defined to include goodwill, public opinion, community interaction, two-way communication, employee relations, and planning and decision making.

School PR was defined in this chapter as an evolving social science and leadership process utilizing multimedia approaches designed to build goodwill, enhance the public's attitude toward the value of education, augment interaction and two-way symmetrical
communication between schools and their ecosystems, provide vital and useful information to the public and employees, and play an integral role in planning and decision-making functions. The value of PR to modern school administration was premised on the following assumptions:

- The two-way flow of ideas and accurate information is essential to school improvement.
- School administrators are accountable to the public.
- The public has a right to information about schools.
- In a democratic society, the publics served by a school should participate in making critical decisions.

Also discussed were possible obstacles to school PR, which were broadly categorized as barriers to understanding, barriers to accepting, and barriers to acting. The current importance of school PR programs was linked to changes in the social, political, legal, and economic framework of American society. These evolving conditions have made key facets of PR (e.g., public opinion, information management, and communication) integral to leadership and school renewal.

Last, four themes pertaining to the application of school PR were summarized. They include an information-based society, school reform, communication, and reflection. The first two address contextual issues of practice; the last two address normative leadership behaviors.

QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

CASE STUDY

1. Using the three categories of barriers discussed in this chapter, what do you find to be the primary reason for the board's reluctance to approve the superintendent's recommendation?
2. Do you believe the board members are sincere when they say they support strong school–community relationships, but oppose the deployment of PR? Why or why not?
3. Should the superintendent have involved persons other than the principals in drafting the PR plan? Why or why not?
4. If the school district has a positive image, are the board members correct in suggesting that a PR plan may be unnecessary?
5. If you were the superintendent, what would you do as a result of the board's decision to table the recommendation to approve the PR plan?

CHAPTER

6. Definitions of PR and school PR are broadly categorized as descriptive or normative. What is the difference between these two types of definitions?
7. This chapter discussed barriers to implementing PR that are based on understanding, accepting, and acting. What is the nature of each barrier?
8. How has school administration been affected by the development of an information-based society?
9. Although it is widely recognized that technology expands communication opportunities, how might technology negatively affect relationships?

10. Four models of PR based on symmetry and communication direction were discussed in this chapter. Which is the most and which is the least desirable for the modern school administration?

11. Why has the pursuit of school improvement at the local level increased the need for school PR?

REFERENCES


